



The Chassidic Rebbes, Queens and Archbishops

I've had an unusually 'Church-intensive' couple of weeks. On 28th January I was at St Paul's to watch on as Archbishop Sarah Mullaly was 'elected and confirmed' as Archbishop of Canterbury. I got to know the then, Bishop of London, during her time in this dioceses and, in particular, at the exceptional evening on the Terminally Ill (Adults) Bill she spoke at, hosted here at New London.

Then, I spent two days this week as part of the Senior Faith Leadership Programme hosted inside Windsor Castle. Aside from the formal programme, participants were treated to a late-night private tour of St George's Chapel, last resting place of, among a long list of monarchs, Queen Elizabeth II.

No need to worry, my theology and practice remains entirely Jewish, but I was interested in the overlap between one of my favourite Chasidic teachings, the election of an Archbishop and the grave of a Queen.

The tone of the archbishop's election pulled in two directions at the same time. On the one hand there was might and glory, pomp, gold and words designed to bolster a mortal human being into fulfilling a role with – at least according to the Church of England – cosmic significance. On the other hand there was a driving charge; the role is to be a servant, responsible, charged with taking care of the vulnerable and on and on the list went. The gold, the archbishop was reminded in one reading, "is as little as sand."

I felt something similar underneath the dramatic soaring architecture of St George's Chapel. One could feel the history, the power, the Empire and the might. But the small nave where the former Queen lies is unadorned and lined only with bare stone. The gravestone itself is carved with the name "Elizabeth II" and dates of birth and death, but there is no mention of her being "Queen" and no high-falutin' terms of praise.

It all reminded me of the saying of Reb Simchah Bunim of Peshischa. A person should have, in each of two pockets, a slip of paper. On one is to be written, "For my sake was the Universe created." On the other, "I am but dust and ashes." The idea is that when a person feels a little beaten down, they/we/I can pull out the slip which reminds them/us/myself of my absolute value and unique spiritual role in this world. But if we get a little carried away with the pursuit of material gain or a little arrogant in our claims to ultimate significance, they/we/I should pull out the slip which reminds them/us/myself we are all destined to become dust.

It's wise advice for Archbishops, monarchs, rabbis and all of us.

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Jeremy