

Commemorating Queen Elizabeth II

In our Jewish mourning tradition, we have 7 chief mourners – parents, children and siblings – the most immediate of our families. It has always interested me that we do not count grandchildren as chief mourners, as the death of a grandparent is a seismic shift in the life of both the entire family and for the grandchild themselves.

One visitor to Buckingham palace who had travelled to pay her respects, explained to Radio 4, that she saw Queen Elizabeth II as the grandmother to the nation. Perhaps that says more about the age of this visitor, in her 20s, as the Queen represents so many different generations to us all – indeed many of us here are grandparents, great-grandparents and contemporaries to the Queen.

Yet the analogy of the Queen as grandmother to the nation is helpful – I am sure we all have our own memories of our grandparents or parents – indeed the death of the Queen brings the deaths in our own family more deeply into focus. Families are often surprised at how deep the grief is on the passing of someone who has led a full and good life into their 90s. ‘Should I be this upset?’ they say. ‘Their death was not unexpected but I’m in shock’. The Queen, like our grandparents and great-grandparents even, have, usually, always been in our lives. Whilst we intellectually understand they will not be around forever; their passing seems shocking because we have only ever known them to be in our lives. This is a statement that has been repeated about the Queen.

Queen Elizabeth’s reign symbolised stability through its longevity and through her style of leadership which was one of consistency, strength, and honour.

Seven (also the number of mourners, and the number of decades the Queen reigned for) is a special number in Judaism – representing completeness and holiness. And 70 – the years of Her Majesty’s reign – also represents holiness and righteous leadership. In *Pirke Avot*, the Sayings of the Fathers, all the years are listed by decades, and for this decade it reads – ‘at seventy, fullness of years’. Indeed, there is a midrash – *Bereshit Rabbah* – which says that there are seventy modes of expounding the Torah – seventy faces of the Torah. A powerful statement that at once underlines that 70 as a number represents fullness and that there is no one way to interpret the Torah or to be in this world.

The numbers 7 and 70, therefore, represent fullness – plenty and diversity. And certainly within 70 years so much has happened globally and nationally within the queen’s reign. It is quite something that the Queen’s coronation took place as our building here at Jackson’s Row was completed and her passing takes place in the last few months of our time in this building. As we reflect upon her 7 decades as sovereign we may also end up reflecting on our time as a community over these past 70 years – the changes seen from post war; to Beatle mania; the world’s first commercial jet service beginning in 1952; the Apollo II moon landing in 1969; the end of the Vietnam War; the long-awaited decolonisation of Africa and the Caribbean in the 1960s and 1970s – paving the way for Britain’s entry into the European Community; the Fall of the Berlin Wall; the creation of the European Union; the creation of the World Wide Web; the end of Apartheid in South Africa; the 9/11 attacks; Brexit; the

pandemic; and a general culture shift in dress, art, language, legislation and the acceptance and celebration of our diverse society here in Britain.

70 years and so much has changed. We too, here at Jackson's Row, during these 70 years in this building have lived through so much and seen such changes in culture, leadership, language. Our services have changed from top hats and the formality of the time to today – from women excluded from carrying the Torah to today – to celebrating and officiating at same sex marriages and wedding blessings for Jews and their non-Jewish partners – to recognising Jews whose fathers are Jewish (patrilineal descent) – to new prayerbooks and tunes. We as Reform Jews seek to be reforming rather than reformed. By living our Judaism, being open and curious and generous in mind and spirit we keep the Torah and our traditions alive.

Whilst we mourn for the Queen and celebrate her full life, we say to her and the Royal Family – may her memory be for a blessing. And in addition to that we hope that we may be a blessing to her memory as we, like she showed in her leadership, navigate the changes in front of us with dignity, strength and remaining true to our values – in service of this community and the divine.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – and may this be God's will. Amen.

**Sermon – Ki Teitzei
10 September 2022/14 Elul 5782
Jacksons Row
Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen**