

RON CASTAN HUMANITARIAN AWARD

Howard Goldenberg Speech.

THANK YOU

Jewish Aid and the Castan family for their moral leadership; Mark Leibler and ABL - for their hospitality and their example; my loved ones - for permitting and forgiving my cumulative absences that total years; my wife Annette, intermittently widowed by a husband who follows his pleasure – in all this thanking and acknowledging I experience no strain, no strangeness in saying what politeness demands and what I sincerely feel.

But to thank the First Owners, whose hospitality we all enjoy, all the time, wherever we go in this country, is still, after all this time, to experience self-consciousness and awkwardness. But I do acknowledge this truth, this primal reality. And I look forward to the time when our children will know and speak it as readily as the Pakeha in New Zealand speak of the Maori.

I am going to make a few remarks about Boat Policy. And to tell you a few little stories.

The first Boat Policy comes from the Talmud, where the sages taught us the imperatives of the lifeboat: *If you take to the boats and you come across one in the water whom you can rescue, you **must** bring him aboard. But if the additional weight of the castaway will sink your boat and cost the lives of those already aboard, you **must not** rescue him.*

Now for a story: Just a few days after the First Fleet raised the British Flag at Botany Bay, a French ship arrived, under the command of Captain La Perouse. Had the winds differed only slightly, La Perouse might have beaten the English here. In that case we might have been speaking French here this evening.

A young Corsican cadet, fascinated by all science, who followed the voyages of Cook, and the flora and fauna described by Joseph Banks, applied to sail with La Perouse but his request was denied. The cadet's name was Napoleon. Had Napoleon and La Perouse arrived before the British, our world might be very different.

In the event, after leaving Botany Bay, La Perouse and his ship were lost at sea. Had Napoleon been lost with that ship, there might have been no Napoleonic wars, no Code Napoleon, no emergence of European Jews into full citizenship, no eruption of Western Jewry into secular culture, into civic life.

Had La Perouse and Napoleon stepped ashore in Australia, would it have made the future different, I wonder, for the *Wiradjuri* in Botany Bay, for the *Wurrundjerri* here in Melbourne?

French or no French I think my ancestors, the Meyer family from Alsace Lorraine, would still have arrived here, as they did - as free settlers - in 1850.

My British ancestors, the Colemans, might not have come - as they did - in the 1840's. As free settlers all these ancestors had a choice.

My father's father would certainly have come here. He had no choice: he arrived here in 1898, a twelve year old

stowaway, fleeing persecution by the Ottoman authorities in Petakh Tikvah. Papa was a boat person and an asylum seeker.

My family story encapsulates the story of whitefella settlement here, of much emigration through history. We leave our homes for opportunity or through adversity. We arrive - in American immigration parlance, as greenhorns - and too often we resent, restrict or criminalise the next boatload of opportunists and refugees for their embarrassing foreignness.

Another little story: Hillel, the sage of the Babylonian Talmud, was accosted by a man who demanded, mocking: "Teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot."

Hillel replied: *Ve'ahavta le'rei'acha kamocho* - "Love your neighbour as yourself. That is the whole Law. All the rest is commentary."

What Hillel knew - but omitted from his reply - were the priestly services and their minutiae, the holy days and their regulations, the sacrifices and their specifications, the rituals, the splitting of split hairs...

He gave the mocker his good-natured reply; and he left us with his simplest of truths: *love your neighbour as yourself*.

In the present climate of antipathy to religion, Hillel's words might well be religion's only defense. *What is the point*, cry

the Old Testament prophets, *what is the value of your fasts and your feasts, if you do not defend the widow, protect the orphan? What sort of Jew turns a hard face to the hungry, what sort of Christian turns back the boats?* “Love your neighbour”, says Hillel, “Love your neighbour or hate his Creator.”

Shaun Tan’s graphic novel, “The Arrival”, is – like any graphic novel – mute. It is also eloquent, poignant and universal. The trauma of leaving, the trauma of arriving, the wonder of arriving, the whole great story of our ever-travelling species is all there. Any child who sees the book, sees all this with child’s eyes. We adults – if we use our child’s eyes - we can see the new arrivals.

We, the Castans and the Komesaroffs, the Flanagans and the Goldenbergs, the Leiblers and the Millers, the Genendes and the Klines – we have all just got off our respective boats.

We step off our boats onto someone else’s land. We step off the boat and we take our choice, to see the later arrivals with a child’s eyes or with no eyes at all.

We choose, too, to see or not to see the First Owners.

Another vignette. When my family arrived in Melbourne from the country, in 1955, I was nine years old. I went to Mount Scopus where they taught little of the Shoah, but sent us out collecting for the Jewish Child’s Day appeal. I knocked on every door in every street, and I received knockbacks that amazed me: People said: *Not today, thank you...*and, quite

often: *I give at the church...*

You can hear a reciprocal response from some Jewish people who question the activities of Jewish Aid: *Charity begins at home*, they say, that ugly little slogan. This is not the response of the little State of Israel, first on the ground after the earthquake in Haiti; it is not the practice of Israel, which is massively overactive in absorbing refugees, often Muslims escaping religious persecution.

In this connection Hillel taught, *Im ani rack le'atzmi, mi ani? If I am only for myself, who am I?*

For three terrible weeks I worked in the Detention Centre at Christmas Island. Every morning I went for a long run; I needed to.

I came one morning to a lonely spot where a tiny dead end street led to the empty sea. No boats, no drowners. Empty, silent, eternal. The signpost at the corner read, *Tampa Street*.

Tampa – the day our leaders failed us. The day we turned away from whatever was within us that led us to welcome so many thousands escaping China after Tien Minh Square. The day my pride in my country began to die.

Surely our boat is not overloaded.

Surely Australia is not about to sink.

A final vignette. Working once in Central Australia, I was accosted by a full blood Aboriginal guy, an elder, who recognised the kippah.

His face lit up: *Do you know Joe Gutnick?*

Yes... slightly.

Is he a friend of yours?

I was unable to give a simple answer: *Well, I hardly know him.*

Well, he's a friend of ours. We've got nickel on our lands. BHP wants to mine it. We don't want them. We want Joe. We know him and we trust him.

Many whitefellas, Jews among them, visit the outback, see the degradation, and, wringing their hands despairingly, they ask people like me, *What can we do? What can anyone do?*

(As if I had the answer.)

Ron Castan saw something different. He saw a people dispossessed, humiliated. He saw a people alienated from their ancestral lands. He saw in the Aboriginal face a familiar face, the face of his own tribe.

When we see in the other simply a reflection of ourselves, we find what we can do.

In connection with "hopeless cases" our sages taught, in Pirke Avoth – *The day is short, the work is great...*

Lo aleicha ham'lacha ligmor, ve'lo atta ben-horin le'hibatel mimenna...

It is not upon you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it...

Aboriginal people know and trust a number of Jewish names. The names of many Jews are on their lips and in their memories.

We are all reminded of this when we visit Springvale cemetery, the place of so much Jewish memory, of our own Dreaming. There, rising massive and golden, is the great stone dedicated by Australia's First People to the memory of Ron Castan. The stone stands, mutely eloquent, saying, *Go, and do thou likewise.*

I sat once in an audience of Jewish doctors as Ron described the course of the recently successful Mabo case. I sat then and I thought; and I learned from Ron a path that can make us better Australians and better Jews.