

Tutorial 3

"Walls can be both a sign of strength and also of weakness and exposure." - Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis



This week, Jews around the world will celebrate the festival of Purim, the anniversary of our deliverance from the ancient Amalekites who sought to annihilate us.

Uniquely, there are two dates for this festival: in most places Purim will begin tomorrow night, but in walled cities like Jerusalem the festival will begin one day later.

When visiting the great walls of ancient cities, one cannot fail to be impressed by a majestic sense of power and strength. However, a fascinating Biblical passage raises the question of where true strength lies.

When sending twelve spies to Canaan, Moses asked them to determine whether the cities were fortified or open. Ten of the spies returned with counsels of despair – they saw fortification as a sign of strength.

But Moses understood that fortification was in fact a sign of vulnerability.

If the Canaanites needed to surround themselves with massive walls, it meant that they could not rely on their own strength alone.

So, walls can be both a sign of strength and also of weakness and exposure.

So it is with society. Parents know that they must use their authority to set certain boundaries. Children thrive on benign discipline, but they also need to be given the space within which to grow and learn how to take responsibility for themselves.

Within faith communities we need to protect our unique identities and strengthen loyalty to the value systems we hold dear.

At the same time, we must have confidence in our own ability to be true to our traditions while engaging openly, listening to others, living with others and learning from our society as a whole.

Recent events across Europe, together with an increase in antisemitic incidents in the UK, have understandably led to heightened tension and concern in the Jewish community.

On the one hand, we need to review our security arrangements and prioritise the safety of our schools, shops, community centres and places of prayer. At the same time, we should never allow intimidation to force us to retreat behind walls. To defeat extremism, we should not be cowed by terror. We need to confront it head-on.

Though physical walls are an unfortunate necessity nowadays, there are other barriers that separate us - such as misunderstanding and mistrust. Tearing down those barriers would strengthen us all. It would express our proud confidence in the free and integrated society that we share and cherish.

- Can you think of any famous walls in the world? What is their purpose? (Berlin wall – used to divide, Wall in Gaza – keep Palestinians out, Hadrian's wall - English built to keep "picts" out)
- Can you think of a religious community that lives within walls? (nuns/monks, Amish community). Why do they do that? (preserve traditions, fear from outside influences)
- Can you think of some metaphorical walls we erect around us as individuals and as a religious community?
- Do you think we should remove these walls? If so how do you think we can?