

# Helen Suzman Sermon

Beit Emmanuel – 3 November



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*As many of you know, we are in the midst of celebrating the centenary of Helen Suzman's birth, and these celebrations culminate with the memorial lecture on Tuesday 7 November, when we launch the commemorative issue of the stamps in her honour, followed by former President Kgalema Motlanthe's lecture on *The Spirit of Generosity: Power and Privilege in politically uncertain times*.*

The celebrations began this morning with a joint initiative of the shul, the Holy Family Convent next door, and the Helen Suzman Foundation – three institutions connected to Helen at various stages of her life. And I want to pay special tribute to Rabbi Sa'ar and Dr Mark Potterton for initiating these celebrations. The Helen Suzman Foundation is proud to be part of this initiative.

We began this morning with a plenary session, where the principle guest speaker was Terror Lekota, one of the original four Delmas Treason Trialists.

Helen was a constant presence at the trial, and, I know, an important link between the accused and the outside world.

Terror's speech this morning is a remarkable testimony to her role as a witness to these events, and to the support, moral and otherwise, which she provided.

But this support was not an isolated moment in Helen's life as a public servant. It was the hallmark of a life dedicated to public service. I will return to this theme later in my address.

But I would like now to thank Rabbi Sa'ar for the opportunity to address the congregation this evening.

As the Director of the HSF, you do the HSF a great honour.

At the Personal level I am not only honoured, but moved, by the invitation to talk this evening. I thank you!

I am also mindful of the fact that this is the Sabbath, and it must be commemorated.

I do though admit that I come here this evening realising my deficiencies – the most glaring of which is that I have never before delivered a sermon anywhere or to anyone.

So the honour Rabbi you have so generously bestowed on me is also a burden, but – remembering the Prophet Isaiah – a little one.

Likewise, I am reasonably sure that no-one whose background is Lebanese Maronite, part of whose family are Sephardi Jews, has ever before, addressed this congregation.

And if that is not sufficient, this week marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. So for completeness, I also recall that Lutheran branch of my Mother's family.

In thinking about this evening's sermon, I reflected on some of the great addresses and sermons which I have read or heard.

Without doubt, the most compelling lecture I think I have ever attended was delivered by Professor R.J Werblowsky on “Jerusalem”. He was the successor to Gerschwin Scholem at the Hebrew University and, as expected, that lecture shed light and clarity, not only on the place, but the idea behind the place.

The most compelling sermon I have ever come across, was that delivered by Bishop Colenso in March 1879, two months after the defeat of the British at Isandlwana.

And I would like to reflect on that sermon this evening and its relevance not only to Helen Suzman, but to our time.

*“What doth the Lord require of thee. To seek justice, to act mercifully and to walk humbly with your God”*

When I was appointed to the position of Director of the HSF. I had been clear that I didn’t see the HSF being turned into a shrine to Helen. Rather, we would use the values which informed Helen’s life and the example of her dedication to public service, as our guiding lights. In that way, we would both commemorate Helen, and be inspired by her. That I

believed, and still believe would, be paying appropriate tribute to Helen’s life and memory.

How, then, do we bring together a nineteenth century Bishop from Natal, whom some regarded as schismatic and Helen Suzman, who I think would have somewhat relished at the idea of being schismatic?

In this beautifully and forcefully constructed sermon the good Bishop used the test from the Prophet Mica VI, 8:

*“What doth the Lord require of thee. To seek justice, to act mercifully and to walk humbly with your God”*

The Sermon is actually an excoriating one, in which Colenso spares no one.

The Colonial authorities, the imperial and the colonists all come under his scrutiny. And on the occasion when the Governor had called “for a day of prayer and humiliation”, Colenso reviews the behaviour of all, and points out just how far from the Prophet’s injunction all had fallen.

John Clarke writes: “So ended that memorable address, long to be remembered by those fortunate enough to hear it. Many of his listeners were indignant, some were saddened, a number accepted the castigation, and a few were admiringly antagonistic, but whatever the reaction to his words, such was the overall effect exercised by Colenso’s strong and sincere personality that he was heard through to the end in silence.”

There are many points of contact or of intersection between what Colenso was trying to do and say, and Helen’s life.

Let me immediately say that the idea of Helen walking humbly, may strike many of us as somewhat incongruous, to say the least. I have no idea what she is saying or doing in the afterlife. It is not for one to speculate. But if there is an afterlife, I have no doubt that she will be asking all the difficult questions.

Helen’s life was a life dedicated to seeking justice.

She stood up in Parliament and opposed Apartheid unequivocally. For 13 years, she was the only MP to do so. She took on every Apartheid bill and subjected it to criticism of the most penetrating, detailed and coruscating kind. Utterly fearless and devastatingly articulate, she confronted the scores of Nationalist MPs and bullying

Ministers. She took them on, time after time, in speech after speech. Suzman was unwavering in her support for a Bill of Rights and the principle of the Rule of Law - defining features of our current liberal constitutional democracy.

It is a matter of public record that she not merely vociferously opposed the use of violence by the Apartheid regime, but repeatedly exposed in Parliament many of its worst instances.

Indeed, one of Helen Suzman's most important contributions was to use her Parliamentary position to highlight the injustices and violence of Apartheid and bringing to light facts that would otherwise have been covered up. She did this by posing question after question in the House, thereby evading the censorship that then existed and bringing numerous iniquities to light. When told by a Minister that her questions were an embarrassment to South Africa, she famously retorted that it was not her questions but his answers that were the cause of the embarrassment. She also famously and repeatedly called for Nelson Mandela's release - as for so many other political prisoners. This is all recorded in Hansard.

*Mandela writes: 'It was an odd and wonderful sight' he wrote, 'to see this courageous woman peering into our cells and strolling around our courtyard'.*

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she used her Parliamentary position to assist the many victims of Apartheid. With her famous expression "go and see for yourself", she purposefully went to see what was happening, and she acted on what she saw - often with crucial implications for people's lives. In particular, she played an unparalleled role in visiting prisons and improving conditions for political prisoners.

It is this last point that I wish to reflect on.

The Prophet Micah urges us to act mercifully.

Inevitably, we think that this injunction applies to those who rule over us. This is no doubt correct.

But this is where Helen used her authority as an MP to act in such a way, that the lives, especially of those incarcerated, were in so many ways improved.

*Mandela writes: 'It was an odd and wonderful sight' he wrote, 'to see this courageous woman peering into our cells and strolling around our courtyard'. Suzman reported back on the inhuman conditions... Soon afterwards... conditions began to improve. The prisoner's saw Suzman's visit as a turning point: had she not come, wrote Neville Alexander, 'there is no saying what might have happened'*"

Her all-important visits to Robben Island, and the improvements in the prisoner's lives that derived from them, were just the tip of the iceberg. She visited the banned and the banished. She fought to obtain amnesties and passports and exit visas for countless political (and non political) prisoners. She pleaded for scores and scores of individuals who were victims of the pass laws and group areas and racial classification. She took up the causes of literally hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals. She used her powers of persuasion and threats of exposure with ministers and officials to obtain redress. Her desk was a veritable harvest of the seeds of Apartheid and she worked tirelessly to try to help every one of those that sought her assistance, black, white or coloured, rich or poor, famous or unknown.

These are, I believe, all acts of mercy, carried out by a woman who understood what needed to be done, and who used her authority wisely with great effect.

So I take leave of the Prophet Micah, but not of the matter of the Prophecy.

There really was something Prophetic about Helen.

Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that Helen was a Prophet. But that resolve to carry out her what she truly believed in, and what she believed would come about, goes beyond sheer determination and hard work and courage.

And I believe that no-one realised this more than Madiba.

On the day that he signed our Constitution into law, she accompanied him to Kiptown at his insistence, to witness that historic moment at his side.

If I can be so bold, I would say that that was their finest moment: the realization of their hopes and aspirations for our country.

It is our task to ensure that that moment is not lost or squandered.

That is our challenge. That is what the Prophet Micah enjoins us to do.