

## Shylock in the Twenty-First Century

By Christopher Nagle

“Oh God of Israel! Why have you deserted us? What have we done to deserve such affliction and annihilation? Where is the Lord God of hosts who delivered us from Egypt, who gave us manna from heaven, who brought us through the wilderness to the walls of Jericho and in a single blast of horns destroyed them? Oh Lord God where is our Covenant now except in the surety of death at the hands of our enemies?

Is this your idea of cleansing? Are you trying to see how far you can go to break your people’s faith? Or is it some terrible divine joke I cannot possibly fathom? Answer me Lord, damn you! Do not make me suffer in such utter silence; such despair!

After all these centuries of wandering in the Diaspora and faithfully observing your Laws and Commandments, you have kept rewarding us with pogroms and continuing exile from the land you promised us. And now your people have been harvested like so much wheat; scythed down as they waved goodbye to life, hope and you oh Lord. Now Abraham’s fields are nothing but burnt stubble and ash! Is this what we were chosen for?

What more can you do to punish what is left of us? Is it even your punishment? Were you ever there to punish or even reward us? Was our belief that we were your especially chosen just a tribal conceit that has brought down the wrath of our neighbors upon us? Speak to me Lord! Tell me it isn’t true.”

One of the clearest memories I have of my youth is a ‘Time’ magazine article written shortly after the 1967 ‘Six Day War’ between Egypt, Syria and Jordan on the one hand, and Israel on the other. The by-line was, ‘The Shortest Day’ which was a reference to the 1962 Normandy invasion WWII film, ‘The Longest Day’. It was a gleeful account of the Arab’s humiliating performance on the battlefield as opposed to the speedy brilliance of the Israeli forces and the outstanding generals who deployed them.

It was a high point for the Jewish settler-occupiers of Palestine; probably the all-time high point in the history of their control of the territory that they won by creeping migration, leveraging the British during a very critical time in World War 1, gaining a ‘sympathy vote’ UN mandate and winning a war in 1948.

In the process, they have become not only the most vehemently hated people in the Middle East, but the entire Muslim world; so much so, that the violence this has spawned is now spreading back to the

people and institutions whose support makes possible Israel's continued existence as a state.

While they still dominate through overwhelming military power, the process of maintaining that dominance has turned into something much grimmer and more attritional, as asymmetrical warfare modeling has developed, and the specter of innovative new uses of weapons of mass destruction stalks them and their supporters.

The 'Jewish Problem' did not end in the holocaust and the very proper contrition that followed it. It was exported from Europe to the Middle East in a gesture that was as cynical, guilt ridden, spineless and ideologically indulgent as it was an honest attempt to 'do something' for a people who had been treated in ways too dark to come to ordinary grips with.

Shylock, Shakespeare's Jewish character from 'The Merchant of Venice', is no longer a helpless victim of abuse for being a 'Christ Hater' or having to suffer the contempt of hypocritical Christian borrowers who have excluded him from most occupations other than that of the despised money lender, or endure the impositions of legal systems that systematically discriminate against him.

Nor can anyone arbitrarily and at their whim deport him or murder him, his family, community and his people, en mass, even though there are now millions of the 'Other Semites' who would dearly love to have a go at the first opportunity, if not at Shylock, then his supporters.

Now he controls a Jewish state that dictates to his neighbors, makes up laws and administrative arrangements that suit him and doesn't hesitate to use his new found military hardware to extract not merely 'pounds of flesh', but tons of it, whenever he feels it necessary.

What is revealed in this transformation of Shylock is that the problematic roots of Jewish relationships with neighbors are not merely a function of the latter's' prejudicial defects, but something that is also problematic in the tribal politics of Judaism, whether it's being kicked or doing the kicking.

And that is not only a very long and old story, but one that is sure to be unpopular with interest groups who like to put it about that everyone else bears the blame for all the terrible things that have happened and undoubtedly will continue to happen to this extraordinary, unique and often fraught group of people.

Anyone who has been on the wrong end of genocide deserves justice, amends and the cutting of a lot of slack. But that does not mean giving them territory that no one had the right to 'give away' in the first place and that only a Jew would consider theirs by right, in the second. Nor does it mean giving their subsequent occupation of Palestine a permanent moral holiday from normal judgment that would be

applicable to anyone else.

Perversely, the UN mandate decision on Israel was the last of the colonial land grabs by a small immigrant settler community. It had all the hallmarks of a Cecil Rhodes takeover of Zimbabwe, or the Dutch/British takeover of Southern Africa. Everywhere else, this wave was ebbing back, as people questioned the legitimacy of foreign invasion and takeover of weaker societies, or the expropriation of land from native peoples.

Zionism was always a bare faced colonialist enterprise and the UN gave it its imprimatur just as it was starting a process of European decolonization that was to dominate the headlines for the next thirty years.

It was no wonder that the Israelis and the Apartheid regime in South Africa had so much in common and co-operated so well for so long.

What was particularly aggrieving for those displaced by settler Jews was that the white South Africans were regarded as pariahs, but not the Jews of Palestine.

They could be forgiven for thinking that there were some double standards at work here.

I am a marginal 'sufferer' of Asperger's syndrome (a form of autism), which has made me an outsider for much of my life. I was particularly unpopular at school, but I have had to accept some responsibility for the undoubtedly malicious and unconscionable things that were done to me by some of my school peers.

There are social defects in my character that can antagonize people who do not know me well, because I am just so much into my own head, I do not read other peoples' emotional sub-texts at all well. And while knowledge of the issue and learned remedial behaviors help me avoid too many faux pas these days, it is still a learning edge for me. While I will never be much good at it, it is incumbent on me to keep making an effort to improve my game in this respect.

It took my English boarding school peers over eighteen months of mercilessly harassing me to come round to the view that I was not so much an unpleasant person as a socially incompetent one. I just needed to be taken in hand and told what to them were the obvious appropriate behaviors, for me to 'fit in'.

However, as a New Boy, once I had been designated as 'unpopular' and fair game, it took a long time for that judgment to be revisited. That was never going to happen quickly because the negative interactions I kept getting were further marginalizing me. I kept being made to look even worse, more

vulnerable and isolated in the eyes of others who already had a poor opinion of me.

The main trigger for re-assessment of that view came with the news that I was to become an international traveler by migrating from England to Australia.

The prospect of my departure made peers feel easier about reviewing their opinion of me. And I was leaving for somewhere far away and romantically glamorous, which turned me into something of an instant celebrity. So they were more inclined to indulge me and perhaps feel they had gone a little far in their disapproval.

Those who had bullied me the most were the ones who sent me off with well meant gifts and mementos. There is nothing odd about this, for it is nothing more than the nature and workings of ordinary social judgment and the prejudices that flow from it.

It doesn't take much to lose social standing and once it is lost, it is very hard to recover. How much harder would it be for an entire group to escape the poor opinion of others, once it is formed, particularly if they keep doing the things that first offered offense or irritation? Even if they change, how long must they suffer the accumulated dislike and distrust, before they get some credit for making an effort to meet the other side half way?

Worse, what if these changes introduce new leverages for the original dislike?

So when someone tries to suggest to me that their social problems are entirely a function of the defects and unwarranted prejudices of others, I treat them with a grain of salt. Others may well be unfair and malicious towards them, but they have had to have done or not done things that put them in that position in the first place.

Unpopularity, at least initially, is never arbitrary or a one way process, and to pretend that it is, is not only disingenuous, but denialism of the deepest and most disabling kind. It guarantees perpetual negative replays, as it relieves 'the victims' of the responsibility to examine some pretty big fat 'prejudices' of their own.

I remember as a fifteen year old, studying Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice with something of an odd sensation.

Even as an insensate adolescent in the early nineteen sixties, I knew that the overt anti-Jewish sentiment that suffuses the play was not cool. I had heard of The Holocaust and knew what it meant. And yet here was a play by the father of English language drama, working this cultural theme unabashedly in ways that would be completely out of the question for a modern playwright.

Even then, I had the vague question in my head as to what this play was doing in the school curriculum.

It was clear that my Australian English literature teacher, who took me through it, was so much in awe of *The Bard* that he saw the work transcending the subject matter, which was after all, the product of another era. And I was in no position to either question or assess that for myself until much later.

The question mark was there though, whenever questions arising from matters relating to Jews arose.

The ambiguity of this went much deeper than that to substrates in my upbringing which were sometimes so subtle that it wasn't until much later in life that they properly surfaced.

My parents did not carry obvious anti-Jewish sentiment in their cultural baggage and yet it was there, even in muted form.

My father-shortly-to-be, who was a professional soldier in the British army at the time, was enjoying a lunch break in the King David Hotel Jerusalem, on 22nd July 1946, after a morning's cricket against a Palestinian Police team, when he was given the dubious honor of being blown across the dining room by a bomb planted by the Zionist terrorist group, the Irgun. He was cut and bruised, but otherwise unscathed. However, most of his fellow cricketers and a fair number of others inside the hotel weren't so fortunate.

Ninety-one were killed and forty five were injured in the explosion.

The Irgun was led by Menachim Begin, a later Prime Minister of the state of Israel.

Whenever Father heard or saw Israeli spokespeople condemning Palestinian terrorism, he would react with a low key combination of bitterness and derision.

I remember my mother mentioning that at least up until after the Second World War, Jews were excluded from British Social clubs because they were not generally considered socially desirable people. And even if individual Jews were 'OK', having even one in the place would simply act as leverage for more of them to come in.

My Jewish uncle married my mother's sister. He was a secular Jew of orthodox parents who married a 'goy' (gentile), but never told them. They never had contact with their grand-children. He knew it would distress his parents and cause them to disown him and them. Marrying outside the faith and the Jewish community just wasn't acceptable.

This sense of just how hard line religious Jews could be was added to when I got to know some

Jewish girls at university, and one, who I was rather attracted to, had to play a bit of a double game with her parents. They were obviously not going to be happy if they found out that she was 'seeing' a non-Jewish boy.

On a more humorous note, my uncle got occasional pleasure out of needling his father-in-law, my Grandfather Bethell (my mother's maiden name). He would have almost certainly subscribed to the pre-war no-Jews-in-my-club set. He had been a British imperial mandarin of the old school.

Uncle would suggest that Bethell was really the Jewish name Bet-El and the old boy would get really flustered and annoyed. One could tell that it wasn't the error of this suggestion that upset him as much as the suggestion itself.

My Uncle enabled my father to break into the Australian fashion business back in the nineteen fifties, which was then almost an entirely Jewish enclave. Without his tutelage and protection as a partner, the ex-professional soldier would have surely ended up as Goy meat.

Uncle also taught Father never to trust anyone in business, including him, by charging him (father) prohibitively for business input supplies that he only found out about when he accidentally saw an original invoice. Father promptly moved supplier and resolved that from then on, nothing would ever get between him and a dollar, even if it were his own family.

My Jewish Uncle came from a family that had been in the fur business in London for generations. He understood the industry well, but also had that extra layer of flair that made him an Australian merchant prince. He was a brilliant marketer and salesman, a fashion style leader, an inspired risk manager, demand reader, negotiator and deal clincher, generous to a fault, charismatic with the truth, good in a tight spot, a patron of the arts, good food and wine, and he understood money.

I could never separate the Jewishness from the rest of him. All great entrepreneurs have had these qualities. Yet there was something utterly Jewish about this very secular man; something very intense, like the old adage about the men from Soviet State Security; that you can take the man out of the KGB but not the KGB out of the man.

I can only surmise that Jewish orthodoxy has such a powerful matrix of ritual, habits of life and mind that they dominate the character and outlook of all who pass through the halls and passages of its mighty and very ancient mansions.

He had also been a British military security official stationed in Vienna after the war, doing de-Nazification work before he was demobilized and came to Australia. Naturally he really loathed the Nazis

and had a whole library of books on the subject of them and the holocaust. I read quite a few of them which in some measure stimulated my lifelong interest in the nature of evil and the historical processes that drive it.

Some of the most hideously obscene things I have ever read were in that library.

The only other source of attitude to Jews came through the schoolyard. At school, if someone were mean and ungenerous, they were 'a Jew'. There was a noxious weed entrenched in the river flats below my school grounds that was known as 'Wandering Jew' because it spread very aggressively and took over, suffocating everything else.

Historically, in the case of European Diaspora Jews, the unpopularity dynamic had become so bad, it developed a deep self-reinforcing cycle that required something really awful to happen to snap everyone out of it.

That this turned out to be something as ghastly as being a centerpiece casualty in an albeit much larger trauma of World War, says something about the extent of the poisonous accumulated pustule that had buried itself into our culture.

No matter how bizarrely irrational the Nazi assault on European Jewish populations was, it did not arise out of a vacuum.

Hitler did not invent anti-Jewish feeling or pogroms. He just amplified existing crank Jewish conspiracy theories, exploited and exaggerated those feelings, supplied a pseudo-scientific rationale for them and applied industrial methodology and systems to their conclusions, on a scale that made speedy continent wide 'ethnic cleansing' possible.

Most importantly, the mass murder of Jews has to be put into the context of a concurrent and much larger process of mass slaughter, by both German and Japanese Fascist forces, which led to the deaths of anywhere between sixty and eighty million people worldwide.

This was a period of extraordinary violence.

The mass murder of Jews was a special case, but they weren't the only 'sub humans'. Twenty million Slav 'subs' also 'got it', as well as Gypsies and the intellectually disabled. Jewishness was just one of many murder leverages open to the Fascist killing machines that preyed on anything and anyone, from opposition to those who had the bad luck to get in their way.

Jews are not so special a case that we have to give them permanent immunity from critical examination as to why there has been such an exploitable wellspring of bad feeling and periodic violence

against them.

The racist Nazi Jewish murder fetish cannot be used indefinitely as a brush to tar everyone who has ever disliked or hated Jews.

It is time that we all started to revisit our post-World War Two 'Prejudices'.

My remarks are aimed at the more conservative and religious Jews, because they are (and always have been) the keepers of the cultural traditions of Judaism. Without them, Judaism would probably have blended and disappeared long ago, especially during the Hellenistic period before the Romans took over North Africa.

Liberal and secular Jews like my late Uncle, insofar as they identify themselves with that ethnic tradition, are really 'freeloaders' on it, in the sense that it is the perpetual religious ritual and effort in all matters large and small that maintains the flame of survival and gives Judaism its cultural signature.

But what Uncle et al have always really lacked is the ideological 'self-esteem' and profound self-isolation of the most rigorously obedient and faithful of 'The Chosen People', who have been especially selected by a wrathful and jealous God. At worst, that would make them the insufferable servants of an insufferable deity; at best, aliens whose participation in non-Jewish society is a strictly businesslike economic association.

How easy is it to befriend people who will not share food or genes with non-Jewish neighbors? Even converting to Judaism is a major exercise that can take years, and years more than that to become a fully trusted member of the devotional community, if ever.

The Jewish ideological zeitgeist has long combined both fear of offending the deity (so many rules, so many potential infractions; six hundred and thirteen commandments in the Torah) and contempt for or cheerful indifference to the gentiles who are by definition offending the Laws of the Almighty constantly.

Jewish apologists claim that we gentiles are not being punished like Jews for our many and grievous transgressions of the Laws of the Torah because our unelected-non-closeness reduces the impact on the divine sense of humor. Thus Yahweh requires the not-so-chosen to only observe the basic seven rules of Noah to avoid His Wrath.

Being a religious Jew is a bit like being admitted into the court of a despot. The privileges of being in the inner sanctum are offset by being in dangerous proximity to absolute power. Rigid decorum and elaborate etiquette are the only defense against it.

Being a devout Jew is a bit like belonging to one of those nearly impossible to join gourmet clubs

that have such a stupendous set of eating conventions that only the children of the members can sufficiently imbibe them to be able to meet 'the standard'. The average knife and fork types who can't join the club (or can, but only with great difficulty) are only expected to meet the most ordinary requirements of decent eating to qualify as non-finger licking barbarians.

This ideologically exclusive clubbiness is then compounded by the ultimate in Real Estate deals: 'The Promised Land'. Vendor: God. Buyers: An exclusive and especially selected tribes of Israelites. Price: Unconditional loyalty and worship. Terms and conditions: Obedience to a long list of dos, but mostly don'ts. Tenure: Forever, at God's pleasure.

Today this pits the Children of Israel against another child of Israel; Islam. The latter has inherited all of Judaism's hard line and absolutist attitudes and then added some of its own. No Christian freebie forgiveness of sins and absolution industry there.

Islam is a warrior religion of conquest, empire and defense against nine Christian crusades to wrest back the Holy Land. This makes the gesture of giving it 'back' to the Jews one of the most extraordinary lapses of judgment in the history of international relations. It could only mean protracted religious war.

In the Middle East, the name of that war shifted from Crusade to Jihad; and all for the sake of a tiny group of around thirteen million worldwide, of which a minuscule five and a half million actually live in the state of Israel.

Something the relative size of a cockroach has been allowed to build a home for itself right up the nose of a giant that just hasn't got the tools to get it out, but is going berserk trying to do so.

To imagine that the temporary weakness of Islam in the Post World War II/Post-Colonial period would lead to its compliant acceptance of a Jewish state created in its midst, ensconced on top of some of its holiest sites, clearly indicated a profound misunderstanding and underestimation of this party to the emerging conflict.

European Colonial authorities had always known that Islam was dangerous and went to considerable effort to ensure that the Imams were kept busy with religion and domestic regulation, and out of 'politics'; anything to keep the beast asleep. In this they were on the whole, very successful.

On occasions when the beast did wake up, as in the revolt of the Mahdi in the Sudan, they showed a ferocious militancy. At the battle of Omdurman, just before the turn of the twentieth century, the Muslim forces took twenty-five thousand casualties to the British five hundred. The Muslim soldiers never flinched and died like flies. Better armed and led, they would be a serious problem.

In one stroke, in 1948, all that colonial pacification work was thrown out the window. Since then, for Islam, the religious politics of pious domesticity, stability and ideological modesty have been progressively undermined by the politics of rage, hate and revenge.

On top of that, post-colonial failed states have also thrown the Mosque into the political center stage as the sole standing intact and uncorrupted institution capable of articulating moral rigor, enforcing its imperatives and having a hopeful vision of a better world and after life. This has politically leveraged not just the local discontents, but anger at a corrupt and unfair world which has also conspired with a temporarily successful tenth crusade against their holy sites in the 'Islamic' holy land

Even though the worst of this is on the margins, it has thrown Islam into a slow motion convulsion that is as dangerous to its own main stream as The Infidel. Mosques are just as at risk of being bombed by Muslim sectarians as churches or synagogues.

The failure of Arab nation states to dislodge the Jewish invaders has meant Islam has had to reach down into its roots to find the resources to keep fighting, and they didn't have far to look. After all, besides being God's Messenger, Mohammad was also an outstanding general and insurgency leader.

Going back to these roots has meant a process not unlike the Christian Protestant Reformation, whereby hard line puritans went back to the original texts of Christianity and cleaned away the ideological 'barnacles' that had accumulated over the previous thousand years.

The Taliban and Hamas are just like the Protestant Puritans. They may not be a pretty sight, but as insurgent ideological fighting units, they don't get any more formidable. And whatever they do is done just the way they think The Prophet would have liked it, to the letter. No compromises, no adjustments, no updating, no fudging; just the way he left it in the seventh century, or else.

For me the clinchers on these issues are the following two questions: First, would any other tribe, ethnic group, nation or religious faction be able to pursue a two thousand year old territorial claim without either making fools of themselves or becoming the object of outrage? I don't think so.

Second, if anyone else treated its dominant minority population as second class citizens and 'ethnically cleansed' opposition non-citizen populations into refugee camps in the way that the Israeli's have done, would they be allowed to morally get away with it? I don't think so.

'Ethnic Cleansing' isn't just about murder and rape, but the forced removal of populations by military action or even the use of legal and administrative stratagems to remove unwanted 'aliens' from their homes in strategically 'sensitive' Real Estate Locations.

Even the Interwar period of Jewish immigration and Real Estate buying and consolidation in Palestine was regarded almost universally by non-Jewish observers as not even a covert means of pushing existing Arab populations out, or at very least positioning themselves to do that at an opportune time. The fact that there was contemporaneous Arab immigration (some of which was probably counter immigration to the increasing Jewish presence) simply makes the whole scenario sound even more like the South African one, whereby the whites claimed that black Africans were 'just' competing migrants for 'unoccupied' lands.

Paradoxically, the creation of the state of Israel in the wake of the Holocaust has acted as a release valve for Jewish communities in the Diaspora, to send their most culturally chauvinistic and atavistic tendencies to their 'natural' home. This has meant that those who have remained on the outside have tended to evolve into just one of the many rich veins in the multi-cultural fabric of cosmopolitan societies, where their contribution is regarded by virtually everyone as benign and altogether welcome.

In their turn, these societies have become radically secularizing, commercially aggressive, competitive and open. The synagogue is therefore no longer the center of Jewish life it once was and more of its population is melding into the reproductive melting pot.

When it comes to sharp business practice, Jews are now just a small part of a multi-ethnic market free-for-all, where credit provision, at least until a year ago, was a prestigious and extravagantly paid pastime, boasting equally extravagant and enthusiastic borrowers, who can no longer tell the difference between a loan and a savings plan.

Besides, intolerance of anti-Jewish and racist feeling is one of the very few intolerances allowed in Liberal democracies, which is as understandable as it is admirable in its intent.

Shakespeare probably never actually saw a Jew in the flesh. They had been expelled from England 300 years previously, so except for one or two very small and extremely retiring Christianized Jewish 'Marrano' convert groups and possibly some discreetly hidden financiers, there was nothing much for The Bard to go on, but an accumulated popular tradition of anti-Jewish sentiment and caricature.

It is a measure of the playwright's capacity to create characters with real depth and place them in their situational context so perceptively that even such an unpromising and weakly based characterization can take on a convincing authenticity and dramatic integrity.

Shylock is not attractive, yet we see his humanity and the forces that make him what he is. We can in some measure identify with him, even though his bitter anger twists him and distorts his judgment.

The Christian Venetians, who are Shylock's protagonists, do not come out squeaky clean in their encounters with him. The use and abuse attitude to the Jew are clearly drawn and one senses that the revenge Shylock seeks is deeply founded on many layers of poor treatment.

Even the way that Shylock is eventually undone by the legal system he tries to use for his vengeance is based on 'legal' trickery and sleight of hand that is itself a clear parody of justice and an unambiguous expression of Christian ideological malice.

Dramatically, the ending for Elizabethan audiences is highly satisfactory because the 'clever' Christians hang the hated usurer Shylock by his own petard, but show some 'mercy' and 'magnanimity' by 'only' humiliating him by forcing him (on pain of death) to convert to Christianity and then asset stripping him.

I responded to the ending much as the Elizabethans did. Shakespeare shows his audience the uncomfortable realities warts and all, but never in ways that might challenge their enjoyment of the entertainment. We understand Shylock's pain, but we don't sympathize with it or him in the end, or question the use of comeuppance as justice; prejudices intact and re-enforced.

Shakespeare only tangentially touches on the reasons for the very unpleasant Christian attitude to Jews. Jews were not allowed into the professions, or government service or even the artisan guilds. Money lending and changing, tax and rent collection, and trading were amongst the few things they were allowed to do in an age when, except in places like London and Venice, capitalist values were considered suspect and its purveyors, low life.

As rent or tax collectors, Jews were given the position of being the 'bad guys' who oppressed the poor on behalf of absentee landlords or royal treasuries. They could be turned upon by both sides if economic distress got too bad.

In particular, money lending in those days was an ugly and risky business. Usury is a word of many meanings, but for the pre-capitalist world, all of them were deeply negative and it simply wasn't allowed between Christians. Borrowing in pre-capitalist times was far more often the product of failure, poor management or bad luck, than leverage for profit. It was seen as a last resort for the desperate and prodigal who would then further compound their difficulties with debt.

It was also frowned upon by Jewish authorities between Jews. In the time of the Nazarene Carpenter, tax collectors and money lenders/changers were all an object of derision and disgust. He used this as an opportunity for alternately offering these despised sinners forgiveness and violently throwing

them out of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Yet there was still the need to get credit and so Jews, who were not co-religionists, filled the vacuum, much to their detriment, as it simply re-enforced the already negative stereotype of 'The Jew'.

Because lending for profit was regarded as a sin and against God's Law, there was no proper legal and regulatory regime for credit. This made the whole process of lending and borrowing even more dysfunctional, risky and expensive.

Thus debt burdens could quickly cause problems for those not used to managing money well. This always reflected badly on the 'greedy' lender, so that from time to time, unsustainable debt was repudiated by socially powerful debtors. This behavior would quickly filter down to the common people who would follow their lead, turning on the Jews and driving them out with their masters' connivance.

This would cause a collapse of credit and financial distress, the blame for which would then be heaped onto the Jews for good measure.

To survive as a usurious lender one had to be as hard as nails, completely insensitive to the misfortunes and contempt of others, make enough to cover the inevitable defalcations and repudiations and have a plan B if things got too hot. One's only 'friends' might be other usurers.

Shylock wasn't just a stock theatrical characterization of 'The Jew'. He was a fair representation of the standing and work of usurers. They weren't nice. It wasn't nice.

By way of contrast, the pre Christian Roman system of credit was organized (albeit discreetly) by some of the most powerful Senatorial (through front companies, for Senators were not supposed to engage in commerce) and Equestrian families in the Empire and they were strong enough to prevent debt repudiations, ensure a proper legal and administrative basis for credit and thus kept its cost within socially acceptable bounds, at least for Roman citizens.

Whatever, the role Jews played in the European financial system of the post classical, but pre-modern world, was guaranteed to bring out the worst in everyone.

None of this however answered the question about why Jews were in this position in the first place.

Christianity inserted itself into a Roman Empire that had become very 'multicultural' and tolerant of religious influence coming from all over the Empire. Christianity never was going to fit in to this mix because tolerance of 'pagan' ideas (or internal dissent for that matter) was not part of its monotheistic repertoire. This is why the Roman state fought Christianity so hard and for so long. They were as

hardnosed and aggressive as each other.

It wasn't just that the extremely conservative Roman ruling class wanted to retain a comfortably workable and long standing status quo. The Christians were claiming far more of their adherents' loyalty that would forbid them emperor worship, make masters/mistresses and their slaves 'brothers and sisters in Christ' and move spirituality into territories that even a millennium later, were causing ructions between Church and State.

Having made a very early and conscious decision to internationalize the Christian message of a Jewish man/God-Redeemer/Messiah out of the Jewish community, they were more than just 'disappointed' at how much of that community had closed ranks against Christian proselytizing.

This rejection was not only very much part of what propelled Christianity out of the Jewish heartland and into more fertile territories, but it was a black mark that pagans would use against them. "Even his own people think this so called Messiah is a fraud and pretender who either never rose from the dead at all, or paid off the local Governor for a mock execution."

It was hard enough clawing their way into Roman society already, without that particular knife sticking in their backs.

Christianity came out of Jewish society and needed its concurrence that indeed Christ was a Jewish Messiah as predicted in the book of Isaiah and it was refused. They didn't like being accused of idolatry for the use of the cross as a symbol. They didn't like being accused of apostasy by trying to split the Godhead into two and then three, and the denial of the sacred character of the Redeemer or his virgin birth. They didn't like to be accused of in effect lying about the Resurrection.

Christians regarded the Son of God status of Christ and all the rest of their Christological claims as self-evident and simply weren't going to understand Jewish 'obduracy' in the face of the blindingly 'obvious'. Wasn't the inclusion of large parts of the Jewish religious testament verbatim into the Christian canon enough for those ingrates!?

Essentially this meant war to the finish. It became a turf war that was of its nature fratricidal and all the more bitter for that.

Everyone was playing for who was going to represent the one true God and the one true revelation of his nature and historical purpose. Only one could be right. The rest had to be impostors. And the Jews had the advantage of being in first possession of this ideological ground which meant they had to be pushed off it.

The whole notion of the 'Christ killers' was never just about a Jerusalem rent-a-mob that shouted to the somewhat bemused and mystified Roman Prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, for the release of the criminal Barabas rather than the Nazarene, but the wholesale attempt to 'murder' the Christian message as well.

The fact was Judaism was every bit as tough as its Christian counterpart. It had all the Covenants it needed with God already, brought to them through the line of Abraham. They didn't need to be part of a world movement that made spurious claims about fulfilling Jewish Messianic prophecies and blasphemous attempts at turning a man into a piece of God.

But even this level of explanation as to the makeup and status of Shylock is not enough. We must go back further.

The Prophet Abraham (or at least the priest-scribes who put the words into his mouth) stumbled over something that must rate as one of the most radical, awesome and terrible discoveries in the history of thought. The idea of an abstract, omnipotent, omniscient and infinite God, against whom any other competing claims are blasphemous, embodies all the most ideologically absolutist possibilities open to a human mind.

The Jews were not the first to come up with a monotheistic God. The Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton forced an increasingly 'severe' monotheistic version of sun worship on his people, but it was only for his lifetime and its claims were still vested in a physical object. The Zoroastrians had a singular God, but they did not go the final absolutist step of completely excluding all other possible deities.

The Jews were in a unique position of being THE people who first carried this giant idea into history in a completely unexpurgated form and quite naturally they thought it was all about THEM. Being first in meant the priestly class had a completely free hand to be as creative as it liked. And their theological documentation of this enormously powerful message was so dramatically engaging, their successors have borrowed it wholesale. They brought to the world the authority of 'THE BOOK', 'THE WORD', 'THE LAW' and 'THE DEAL WITH GOD'.

Unfortunately for them, the monotheistic idea was never going to be about just them for very long. This small group of tribes had stumbled over a 'ring' (pardon the Tolkienesque reference) of infinite power that would amplify everyone who touched it, but at a terrible price of absorbing an abstract totalitarian vision of the Cosmos and an all or nothing view of their special and immortal place in it.

Judaism tried to construct this colossal ideological power around itself through Covenants,

labyrinthine rules and elaborate ritual to lock it in as its exclusive tribal device, to lock in its minuscule tribal Real Estate Claims and to lock out anyone with the temerity to not just want to muscle in for a piece of the ideological action, but take this monster idea onto the world stage.

The problem for the Jews of 'owning' such a cultural artifact is that it requires the development of proselytizing or military clout that would give an outward and visible confirmation of its power. All powerful ideologies demand this symmetry.

Monotheism is such a super massive artifact that if the carriers fail to deliver that symmetry, it perversely over amplifies and extends them. It turns them into 'eccentric', fetishistically ritualistic, socially isolated and stand offish, sometimes dangerously spiky, heroically brave and stubborn, often intellectually and creatively gifted people, who are blighted with an inappropriately large ideological self-esteem that is bound to eventually rub their neighbors and rulers up the wrong way.

It was a package so overwhelming for them and uncompromisingly confronting to everyone else, that unless it grew faster than its potential enemies, it would be continuously under siege.

The Jewish sense of having a unique, special and preferred place in the eyes of God, combined with a very limited territorial focus, meant their large sense of themselves was limited in its geo-spiritual expansion capability/ambitions. This would condemn them to being an on balance inward looking tiny minority that couldn't/wouldn't take sufficient ideological initiative, by converting, invading and absorbing enemies and allying themselves to those closest to them (like the Samaritans for instance), as part of an ongoing process of building an ever larger Judaic 'Empire'.

Their dogged tribalism doomed them to forever being 'outgunned' by larger forces that did have imperial ambitions and the drive to make them happen.

This is not to suggest that Judaism was somehow a uniform and unified entity. Like any other movement, it has always been rich with tendencies. But however fissiparous they were, a core of traditionalist keepers of the faith would always intervene, no matter what the cost, to honor the covenants with their God and maintain the tribal roots.

They would never compromise or tolerate internal 'deserters' and backsliders, let alone outside religions or attempts at forced conversions. How can anyone desert a wrathful and unforgiving God whose demands brook no compromise at all? And yet it was their hard line lack of compromise and lofty ideological self-esteem that eventually provoked their Greek and Roman rulers to 'show them' who was boss.

Gibbon, in his 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' noted the extreme turbulence of the orthodox against the Hellenizing Jews within the cities of the Seleucid Greek Empire and the extraordinary but ultimately doomed Orthodox Maccabbeean military successes against it.

Successful, but religiously traditionalist Jewish generals could not turn local success into an imperial enterprise like the Romans did, who after all, started as small as the Children of Israel. They were really good at delivering wars of resistance, but not wars of expansion in the tradition of Joshua, when the Israelites originally invaded The Promised Land.

If the Hellenistic Jews had had a Macabean style leadership that could have repackaged Judaism for the Greeks, they may well have been able to take over much of Greek North Africa. That could well have made them strong enough to take on the Romans militarily, as the Persians did. And even if they were unable to invade the Roman Empire, they could still proselytize their religion into Rome through its Greek connections.

Zeus and Yahweh would have become conflated. Mount Sinai would replace Mount Olympus. The Greek pantheon of other gods would become informally and selectively tolerated as cosmically downgraded and Jewish renamed 'angel' interceders between man and the one and only God Yahweh/Zeus (much in the same way that Mary mother-of-God is treated in the Catholic Church). Simplified and proselytizer friendly Jewish canon would be imported across en bloc and subsidized with appropriately compatible Greek philosophy (as happened with later Christian philosophers).

Judao-Greek armies and missionaries would have done the rest, building a new Jewish testament as they went. It would have created a permanent large scale ideological fixture and neither Christianity nor the later Islam would have ever got past first base.

Jewish soldiers would have made sure the Nazarene carpenter heretic and his disciples had been stoned to bloody, broken and very permanently dead pulp, and left for the vultures and wild dogs to feed on. Mohammad would have been a Jew, or else.

Today there would have been billions of Jews in the world, even if a bit nominal in the industrialized world and perhaps still struggling with the inevitable schisms that come with entry onto the world stage.

It would have been a no brainer can't lose bet because monotheism unleashed onto the world stage had to be a winner for anyone who had the imagination and wit to make the investment in the biggest thing ever until Copernicus and Galileo started to upset the apple cart, sixteen to seventeen

hundred years later.

This, of course, was never going to happen. So there was always going to be a glaring discrepancy between the Jews' massive ideological pretensions and their political clout, which would annoy everyone.

Added to the lack of clout was the fact of theocracy, which is what Judaism then was. It was always going to be a threat to foreign rulers who in those days were rather fond of deifying themselves, if not in life, certainly in death. The Jewish God and his priests were nose thumbing at much more powerful political competitors.

Unfortunately for the temporarily victorious, but tiny group of Jews of the late Greek period in Northern Africa, the by then enormously powerful Romans quickly succeeded the defeated Greeks as the major power in the region. They were used to getting their way, especially with small and insignificant peoples and didn't appreciate traditionalist Jewish defiance of their fiat.

Nor could they get over the fact that the arrogance of these subjects matched their own; the actual rulers of the then world vs the rulers in their own minds. This finally precipitated a showdown about whose writ was going to go down in Jerusalem.

Jews who had tried to co-operate with the Romans eventually lost out to the traditionalist fanatics, who were subsequently methodically destroyed by Roman legions. This unfortunately included the leveling of Jerusalem and the permanent exile and/or enslavement of all who were left alive in the former Jewish territory.

The last stand of the Judean Jews against the Romans at Masada ultimately involved the defenders all killing each other rather than surrendering.

Never give in. Never give up. An iron will to follow the way of Yahweh no matter what. And admirable as that might be, it is a hard thing to live alongside if you aren't Jewish and intolerable if you are as arrogant in your ideological claims as they are.

The orthodox tough guys forced all their co-religionists into a catastrophic collective punishment that took nineteen hundred years to make good. Thanks a lot for nothing! It was so comforting to know that it was all the Roman's fault. It was always going to be someone else's fault.

At the very same time, Romanized Jews were already repackaging the monotheistic blockbuster message with easy and user friendly redemption rituals, adding a spectacular claim for a sacrificial dying and resurrected human-God messiah, plus the very Roman sense of disciplined organization and militant ambition, combined with some aggressive network marketing that turned it into a religious battering ram

and relentless winner of hearts and minds.

No matter how ruthlessly the Roman state tried to crush this 'Jewish' religion, they just kept losing ground to it. All attempts at traditional uses of force simply ended in martyrdoms and more converts. As the Empire moved into the fourth century of the modern era, it was forced to face the fact that not only couldn't it stop the spread of this movement, they needed its help against mounting internal and external threats.

Christianity had become so thoroughly Romanized it couldn't be rooted out as a foreign threat, so part of Roman life that it was too numerous to root out and so politically tailor made for becoming a loyal quasi imperial instrumentality, that it would bolster an increasingly besieged Imperial state.

And above all, Christianity was an extremely powerful conversion tool for Romanizing increasingly threatening barbarians.

In the meantime, those orthodox Jews now exiled in the Diaspora formed into tight knit communities with a view to keeping the flame of Judaism alive until the day God would bring them home. The contrasting fortunes of militant and imperial Christianity and bunker Judaism couldn't have been more pronounced.

And anyone (except a Jew) looking to discern the will of God could see that Christianity had the nod and Judaism didn't. Christianity bore the marks of symmetry between its ideological pretensions and its place in the world. Judaism didn't.

All the features of Jewish society that would keep the tribal traditions going did their job, but at a terrible price of being forever the archetypal outsiders, having to live alongside a massively successful, equally totalitarian, intolerant, unforgiving and aggressive bastard child of their own tradition, that was always going to resent, hate and do them down.

The failure of Judaism to turn its enormous monotheistic idea into either a geo-political or spiritual empire that matched the power of their 'Chosen People' status was the root of their troubles. This fundamental lack of symmetry in their thinking was bound to get up other peoples' noses and the fact that Jews did nothing about this meant it would turn them into permanent outsiders and ready made scapegoats for the dominant herds they scraped along with.

Big ideas and parochiality are a deadly mix.

'Even' Islam, which on the whole has not had a reputation for consistently monsterring its Sephardi Jewish communities, still imposed fairly severe sanctions on non-Muslim subjects (dhimmis) by way of

discriminatory taxation (Jizya), legal and social disability provisions and sumptuary (dressing) laws that kept them as easily identifiable second class peoples living at the mercy of their Muslim rulers.

Their treatment of Sephardi Jews varied from benign and relaxed tolerance to hard line forced conversions, expropriations, pogroms and mass expulsions, but mostly just a hum drum second class subject people status and treatment.

On the whole, Islamic culture from quite early in its history to around the sixteenth century C.E., was far more sophisticated and cosmopolitan, and less xenophobic than Christian northern Europe. Jews were able to participate more diversely in economic, public service and intellectual life. More, urban economic infrastructure was better regulated, more institutionalized and diversely capitalized, which meant that usurious and poor lending/borrowing practices were less common. And Sephardi borrowed from Islamic lenders as much as the other way round.

This in its turn made Sephardi populations much more culturally integrated, urbane and socially 'attractive' than their European Ashkenazim Jewish counterparts.

Had a Muslim Shakespeare modeled his Shylock character on a Sephardi Jew in Spain during the 'Golden Period' of Muslim occupation, it would have been a far less brutally drawn plot of abuse and revenge and perhaps more comedic, along the lines of 'Yes Minister'.

The big difference between Islamic and Christian treatment of Jews was that Islam was not only a latecomer on the religious scene, but a geo-political-military force that rapidly conquered territories with large Christian, Zoroastrian and Jewish communities already in place. Some degree of working toleration was a means of absorbing these non-Islamic populations into the new social fabric.

Islam recognized Christianity and Judaism as being 'of the book' which is the common Abrahamic tradition. It did not have the protractedly problematic conflict that Christianity and Judaism suffered in the break off of Christianity.

The break between Mohammad and Jews, after his initial optimism for an easy spiritual continuity between them, quickly degenerated into military suppression and massacre, after Jewish rejection and ridicule of his claims to be Judaism's latest prophet.

(The Prophet hadn't done his homework. His Jewish protagonists ran intellectual rings round him, which, at his leisure, he answered by running military things through them).

Jews had tried to do the same to Christ and the Christians who followed him, but they (the Christians) had not had, for several centuries, the means to establish such absolute hegemony over

Judaism. Mohammad got their cowed silence in five years. It made all the difference to subsequent 'better' relations.

From then on, constant public and institutionalized deference to Islam (and Islamists) and its claims to supersede previous Abrahamic Covenants through its prophet Mohammad, was its condition of toleration. Jews and for that matter Christians, could privately harbor whatever ideological pretensions they liked, as long as no one else ever got the hear, see or read about them outside the confines of existing pre-Islamic congregations and places of worship.

And as long as they 'behaved' and had a bit of useful talent, they could scrape along reasonably comfortably most of the time and in the end not notice the daily humiliations.

Everything would run smoothly as long as the Dhimmis knew their place. If they forgot too often, or the authorities had become a bit slack for too long, or external military or economic pressure demanded a clearing of the decks, this would bring out the hardliners and bad stuff would happen; rather like the arrangements with Negroes in the Deep South of the US after the Civil War.

The politics of conquest under Islam and the politics of bitter alienation under Christendom had roughly similar long term effects. It was just that for Muslims, there was no need to spit on the gabardine of a Jew, if he respectfully and humbly deferred to them at all times, in all matters in the public domain.

The other strategy that the Prophet employed to deal with the Jews was to recruit the Arch-Angel Gabriel to dictate to him a 'new version' of the Jewish Canon that repackaged what 'Allah' thought were the essentials and 'correcting' the 'corruptions' of the Jewish Version.

As part of the rewrite, he made the prophet Abraham, whose act of complete surrender to the will of God when He tested him, by ordering him to sacrifice his son to his Lord, the first Muslim.

Mohammad took complete control of the Jewish canon by making it His. He didn't 'owe' Judaism anything other than an inspirational acknowledgment. He didn't need Jewish approval or confirmation or legitimizing. And they weren't going to openly contradict him.

Even as late as 1858, there was an internationally notorious case in the Papal States of the judicial kidnap of a Jewish boy of Orthodox family who had been emergency baptized (completely unasked) by a Christian servant girl when he was (temporarily) gravely ill. The papal authorities, under the personal imprimatur of Pope Pious IX, decided this made the child 'Christian' and under statutes that Jews could not parent Christian children, took him away and raised him as a Catholic.

There were outraged protests in relation to this case across Europe, including from Britain; a

budding hotbed of liberalism that only allowed Jews to take their seats in Parliament in that year and whose leading Protestant university of Oxford had deigned to accept its first Jewish undergraduate student two whole years before.

This was the tail end of a long religious persecution, but unfortunately it was not the end for Jewish problems. As the force of religion declined in the face of secular industrialism and science, a pseudo-scientific offshoot of Darwinism produced an intellectual aberration that went under the name of 'racial biology' or 'eugenics'. Jews were declared inferior racial types that, if allowed to mix with 'Aryans' would cause racial 'degeneration'.

'Scientific' racism was mixed with traditional Christian and new socialist anti finance capital thinking and conspiracy theory that led straight back to Jews, who were still heavily represented in this industry sector.

A little bit of the old with a little bit of the new, in such measure as to turn hate and resentment, periodic tolerance and occasional violence into a detached and methodical justification for the elimination of 'bad seed'; mass murder as a final solution to the threat of miscegenation. And this prospect was becoming more real as secularization brought more Jews into mixed marriages.

In what must rate as one of the most tragic ironies (irony seems hardly an adequate word), the threat of Jewish integration, as a result of religious relaxation, was what finally undid them in Germany. It was as if God was playing a malicious game with his people; persecuted for being outsiders who clung to their Covenants and then allowing them to be eliminated because they really were starting to come in from the cold.

At the time Shakespeare was writing, Jews across Europe were also going through a particularly terrible time. Christendom was busy blowing itself to bits in what was to be euphemistically known as 'The Reformation'.

This wasn't just ordinary religious infighting between Christians, but also part of the birth pangs of the modern world. It produced new ways of thinking and institutions, sometimes acts of heroic courage, but mostly a dark flowering of the most vicious behaviors, whose echoes were still being felt in Northern Ireland until quite recently. The fanatical struggles and wars that arose from it were templates for the despotisms and violence that blighted the twentieth century.

It was a period of unusually high threat and acute intolerance of even small religious differences. The Inquisition had become a large scale police/security apparatus resonant of the later Gestapo. People

who were suspected of heresy were routinely rounded up, tortured and if found guilty, burnt alive. While the Catholic Church was particularly notorious for these practices, their Protestant enemies were doing it too.

Christopher Marlowe, a contemporary playwright of Shakespeare's, (who also wrote 'The Jew of Malta' which was an especially lurid and defamatory attack on Jews) was accused of the potentially capital offense of atheism, shortly before he was murdered in somewhat suspicious circumstances, probably at the hands of royal security agents. Atheism was said in the same breath as treason, heresy, sodomy, witchcraft or any of the 'low vices' that might indicate dangerous non-conformity.

How much worse would it be for an entire people who, as his most proximate fellows and co-religionists, denied not only the Christ Messiah and his message of redemption, but his divinity as well?

Jews were always going to be especially targeted in disturbed times, even if the English had to make do with mostly theatrical ones. Shakespeare's play is one of several that had done the rounds, possibly stimulated by the public hanging, drawing and quartering (the standard fare for treason) of Queen Elizabeth's personal physician, for allegedly trying to poison her as part of a Spanish assassination plot (The Spanish tried to invade Britain with a naval armada six years before). He was one of the very few Jews in England, but a notoriously prominent one; a Christianized 'Marrano' convert who had been forced to flee the Portuguese Inquisition because his faith was considered suspect.

Shakespeare, like all good playwrights, had a good eye for a topical theme. He picked up on the general paranoia of the time and that aroused in particular by the Dr Lopez execution, and then put it into a context that was sufficiently 'historical' (late Medieval) and 'foreign' situated (Venice) for it to be 'safe', both for him as a playwright (potential censorship/audience disapproval) and his audience (its values/tolerances/threat thresholds).

Given the times, it was going to be tricky to persuade an audience to entertain a Jewish character as anything but a one dimensional demon caricature. If there was the slightest hint that he was being 'soft' on Jews, he risked accusations from the audience that he was a 'Jew Lover'. Elizabethan audiences had a reputation for being 'demonstrative' with anything they had to hand, if they didn't approve of the production. And then there would be the inevitable official 'questions' about his religious attitudes. On the other hand, he was far too good a playwright to merely copy Marlowe's easy and safe stereotyping.

'The Merchant of Venice' runs a very fine line through a dangerous minefield.

While on the face of it, the ending of the play confirmed the audience world view, they came away

with new perspectives that just might make them see that Jews were real people with real grievances rather than just figures of grossly distorted myth. Yet he allows the play enough flexibility to be acted according to the agenda of the players, their directors and the social dynamics informing them.

Shakespeare holds a mirror to his subject that as easily disarms as it re-enforces existing thinking. His ambiguity allows theater makers and goers to freely and unconsciously interact with their prejudices.

Some have played or seen Shylock as a vicious, money grubbing, unconscionable misanthrope and clown, others as an unjustly abused and betrayed, but flawed hero, who tried to strike back at his tormentors. Shakespeare's art is such that both are 'right'.

And there is nothing wrong with the love story for which Shylock is the foil, or the fascination of a social and legal thriller in which the woman saves her man from the villain in a nick of time, in a denouement worthy of a cross between a courtroom soap melodrama and a Judge Judy show.

As an entertainer, Shakespeare knows the limits of his medium and what he can and can't exploit within it, when dealing with a highly charged subject. Generally it takes something akin to an earthquake to get people to review their prejudices, let alone change them. However, even the most hostile rendition of the Shylock character can for a short while hold them partly in suspension, and maybe, in some cases, quietly lead their holders to reflect on the Jew's situation, character and motives.

The interpretive latitude of The Bard's work invites everyone to an after party where the entertainment can go on working over a drink or a meal, as it is debated, dissected and replayed in the imaginations of those who have participated in its rich and multi layered dramatic ritual. Its open ended characterization encourages a process that is hopefully as self-revealing as it is an elucidation of the play.

In an age of blind, rigid faith and increasing social violence that would see theater itself eclipsed for nearly a generation, Shakespeare's attempt to come to grips with 'The Jewish Problem' is an honest and morally uncluttered examination of a subject seething with negative energy and dangerous implications.

And after all the time that has passed since the play was written, its theme is just as dangerous, harder to be honest about and more than ever pregnant with moral hazard, whether it is performed in Tehran or antipodean Melbourne. When it comes to Jews, all the prejudices, without exception, are fat, juicy and likely to be toxic.

And that includes the bleeding heart liberal humanitarians who continue to perversely support the old lie that Jews have been purely the victims of heartless scapegoating and oppression by blindly

prejudiced and irrational dark forces.

Four hundred years later, Shylock is victorious, but still besieged and traumatized by the living memory of horrors, even as he inflicts a few of his own on the Gaza Rialto. We understand his pain and anguish, even as we judge him for his vengeful lashing out against a cunning and evasive enemy that spits upon him, constantly snipes and relentlessly tries to pull him down.

As always, he is a tiny island besieged by a sea of enemies, for there is only one thing worse than ideological pretension without clout and that is punching ludicrously above one's real weight because one has very big and powerful friends.

During the Yom Kippur war in 1973, Israel was kept alive by a massive infusion of American equipment after its disastrous losses early in the war. Operational units of the US armed services were stripped to maintain this supply in a suitably speedy fashion.

The Soviet backing of the Arab cause was also massive, but second rate and unable to provide anything like the proportional leverage that the Israelis were able to get from their sponsors. Once the element of surprise was gone and Arab armies were outside of Soviet surface-to-air missile cover, they were still no match for the resupplied Israelis.

Israel is able to maintain a military that is far larger and higher quality than its economy could possibly sustain on its own because of large and powerful friends; particularly the US, which has a very well organized, well-funded and powerful Jewish lobby that rivals the legendary National Rifle Association for its ability to twist arms in high places. Amazingly, Israel's armed forces are rated in the global top ten.

Its economy, which has few natural resources, is able to perform at a far higher level than it could possibly sustain alone as a result of enormous Jewish international aid and aid from sympathetic countries. Israel is the biggest recipient per head of US economic foreign aid and second overall. Depending on the measure, Israel, with a population of seven and a half million people rates between the forty-ninth and fiftieth largest GDP in the world, which rates it alongside Hungary, Denmark, Ireland and Bangladesh

By 1973 Israel had a nuclear arsenal that it actually seriously considered using to defend itself in the war of that year. What was a tiny country with a minuscule population doing with nuclear weapons?

What could possibly better feed and give credence to all the lurid crank Jewish conspiracy theorists and end-of-the-world Middle East eschatologists than the possibility of a Masada styled nuclear Gotterdammerung?

It is a measure of just how extreme the anger and frustration with Jewish occupied Palestine has

become that a highly unattractive, unstable and aggressive Jew Hater and holocaust denier like President Ahmadi Nezhad of Iran can get away with leading a thoroughly incompetent rogue regime into a nuclear armaments program with an open agenda to wipe out the Zionist enemy. All we can hope for is that there are enough left of the forces of reason in that benighted country, to if not stop him altogether, slow him down.

What could possibly more effectively provoke three hundred million Muslims in the Middle East and one point five billion of them worldwide, than a heavily armed mini-state that has conned and muscled its way onto several of its holiest sites and supported in doing so by the world's leading armorer? And then the armorer wonders why it was eventually on the wrong end of a civil aircraft missile attack!

Shakespeare sends his regards to Shylock, but warns against Portia. This time she may be armed with more than just legal arguments, strapped under her modest over garments. He suggests he search Antonio's ships very carefully, for they may be carrying parts for something dreadful being assembled somewhere in central Tel Aviv or an allied city. Or they may have already been converted as missile launchers for re badged Korean or Iranian medium range missiles.

The mastery that Shylock has is provided by a technology that allows one man to kill a hundred, or even a million. His enemies know that human numbers cannot beat him. But they are learning to turn the tables with the very same type of technology, albeit homemade, delivered by anonymous front organizations that have no state connections to take vengeance against.

No fortress is impregnable and neither is Israel. It is presently all powerful, but under siege from enemies that prefer death to countenancing its legitimacy. It is a pariah state. They will wait as long as it takes for it and its sponsor's power to wane. Time is not a friend to Shylock, for he is too busy with tribal business to be advancing a world historical movement that is demonstrably part of the divine providence.

Permanent defense is never going to work for long. Conventional military invasion and occupation is completely unsustainable for such a small population. The only thing that can save them in the long run is a religious counter-attack on Islam with a view to fighting it on its own turf.

Do to Islam what it did to Judaism originally. Rip off the best bits of it, repackage, re-badge and incorporate them into a new and stripped down proselytizer friendly Jewish testament. The Arch Angel Gabriel can be persuaded to come out of retirement to lend some ideological gloss and then release it amongst the poor and downtrodden peasantry of say adjacent bits of Lebanon.

Be prepared to be as completely ruthless with lack of co-operation as Mohammad was, in the

name of the almighty Yahweh, who has been kicking his people around for the last two thousand years because they had not heard correctly the first time: It is not enough to say that Jews are the only Chosen of God and the rest are frauds and impostors. They have to package that message in a way that can take the world, if necessary, by storm. And if not by storm, by subversion.

If they can't do it this time, then Jerusalem will become the New Jericho, because without that large agenda, Israel will never be seen as anything but the creation of a tribal statehood that was founded on an opportunistic trick for which its neighbors will never forgive it, or the perfidy that made it possible.

God never forgives people who think small in his name! And for those who do think big enough, no matter how terrible their methods and suspect their claims, all will be forgiven and smoothed over.

Will Mohammad or The Inquisition ever be held to account for their crimes against humanity? I don't think so. Will the Taliban fighters ever be anything but heroes and martyrs who humbled the Infidel in the name of The Prophet? Too right! Aren't those who call them 'terrorists' simply history's losers?

When the next expulsion of Jews out of the 'Promised Land' occurs, let us hope that Shylock has learned some ideological humility; that he isn't one of 'The Chosen' and that God doesn't really do special favors for anyone; especially not for small time players with small horizons.

That way, when boatloads of Jewish refugees appear on our shores and we do what we should, which is take them in and settle them as decently as possible, they will eschew restarting the awful negative cycle of the last three and a half thousand years between Jews and their neighbors.

It would be nice to think that their children and ours will become part of the great melting pot of a history that keeps reshaping us all in an ever changing geo-political landscape and cultural milieu, just like my half Jewish cousins have.

No tradition, no matter how venerable or dearly held is indispensable. Neither is Jewish Biblical memory or monotheism itself. Perhaps we have reached a point where we must create new forms of existential capital and cultural testament that are less lethal and aggressive than their predecessors, more in touch with the realities we have discovered through our science and technology, address the sensibility of a more secular and environmentally challenged world, and at the same time clean up the corruptions of liberal thought and consumerist ideology that have turned self-indulgence into not just a social and economic principle, but a human right.

Failure to do that may well risk the possibility of a return to the barbarisms of the past. Religious fundamentalisms are not defeated. The terrible power of monotheism won't go away anytime soon

despite the fact that it has arguably been the source of as much grief and misery as anything else. It energizes the worst part of itself through conflicts like the one playing out in the Middle-East and now globally. The cult of the suicide bomber is its apotheosis. If the Jihadis get their hands on nuclear weapons like the Israelis have, civilized life will start to disintegrate.

That we should be bound thus to the fate of a tiny, stubborn and pugnacious little tribal group that won't go away, is an irony (and the word seems quite sufficient in this context) that is as perplexing as it is intriguing as it is profound. For all my analysis I still cannot fathom how they have managed to make the rest of us hostage to their destiny.

If we could somehow conjure William Shakespeare to write a modern sequel to 'The Merchant of Venice', it might still be set in the tourist town of that name. Portia might be an angry Palestinian journalist and Al Q'aida operative. Antonio is a cynical Russian Mafioso buccaneer who cannot resist Portia or the deal she offers. Shy Ben Yossarion is a desperate Israeli Mossad agent who has to maneuver them into trying to kill each other to take the deal he has on offer, to prevent a final batch of enriched plutonium reaching its destination, inside the heart pacemaker of a suicide courier, who will likely be either Portia or Antonio. Shy must get that pound of flesh.....before the others do.

And if that sounds like a lame airport blurb on a book cover that is more thickly embossed than the plot, you are probably right. But then we are living in times where the truth is often even more bizarre and unlikely than fiction.

Shakespeare would be overwhelmed by the extraordinary dramas of Modern Times. Even his genius might have difficulty upstaging the evening news. He might not be willing to even try when he finds out that there is already a cast of thousands who can readily manufacture the psychological filler that is modern entertainment. It might take him a while to twig just how densely and unconsciously totalitarian the business of communication has become. Then he would do the only possible thing, which is to go into the finance business with an old Jewish mate of his, from way back.

"It's Bill Shakespeare. Remember me. We used to walk along the Rialto Plaza and see who could spit the furthest....and trying not to spill the blood from the meat we'd 'borrowed' from that butcher Antonio, in case he followed and caught us. Remember we had to throw it to Mrs Portia's dog coz it wasn't Kosher or it was pork or something. Let's have a drink for old time's sake. Do you eat pork these days? Still lending lunch money to those losers from the public housing block?"

© 2012, Christopher Nagle