

Jewish Preaching in Times of War 1800-2001 by Marc Saperstein.  
Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation 2008.

The sermon is a powerful weapon in the clergy armoury and can be deployed to great effect: in few circumstances does it come into its own better than in times of international crises, when congregants look to their faith leaders for guidance, direction, encouragement and focus.

Professor Marc Saperstein, a rabbi himself and the son of a rabbi of considerable homiletic prowess, Harold I. Saperstein, is probably the world's greatest expert on Jewish homiletics from the medieval period onwards. In *Jewish Preaching in Times of War* he edits sermons written between the early 1800s and the early 2000s, covering conflicts such as the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian conflict, the first and second World Wars, Vietnam and the Falklands campaign; and he concludes with three sermons given in the aftermath of the disastrous al-Qaeda attacks on the United States in 2001.

In his wide-ranging preface, Saperstein discusses the dilemmas that confront speakers when they feel called to address contentious issues, the variation in length and level of discourse of the sermons under consideration, and the way in which the historical background to the texts has infused their words with meaning and power long after they were delivered. He also explains the reasoning behind his choice of author and text and the broader purpose of the book.

Following a magisterial introduction come the sermons, each one introduced, explained and discussed, as well as sensitively and helpfully annotated. The selection is acute and the sermons themselves potent and highly readable, even many decades after they were first delivered.

The quality of Jewish preaching has often been remarked upon, and *Jewish Preaching in Times of War* demonstrates precisely why rabbis have acquired their reputation for homiletical excellence. This is a text which may be read in its entirety at one time, or in parts at different times, and can then serve as a source of study, inspiration and material. There is also a comprehensive bibliography at the end of the text. Saperstein notes that he has not included any sermons about Israel in the current volume, but I would encourage him to make such a volume his next project, coupled with sermons written by rabbis about the two Gulf conflicts.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh