

Wellesley Tudor Pole

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Plagues often bring out the soothsayers and those who predict the end of days. Why else is Nostradamus still popular? Every culture has its unusual characters who see things ordinary mortals do not. Our own wise fools like to examine our holy texts for proof that the bible predicted all this.

England too has a long tradition of eccentrics – people who defy the established conventions and attitudes of aristocratic and ecclesiastical life. Wellesley Tudor Pole was one of them. His name will be familiar to aficionados of English history.

His family traced its history to Edmund De la Pole, 3rd Duke of Suffolk who was briefly, heir to the English throne and to Owen Tudor, grandfather of Henry Tudor. Wellesley's father was a Christian Theosophist. Theosophy was a movement founded by Jakob Bohme in the seventeenth century. It combined Christian Spirituality with the Kabbalah. A century later, a controversial Ukrainian occultist, Madame Blavatsky, succeeded in turning Theosophy into a fashionable movement amongst the uppers classes wanting to communicate with other spirits and souls.

Wellesley was born in 1884. As a teenager, he became interested in exploring mysticism and the supernatural. After a serious illness, he started to have visions. He held seances and claimed to be able to foresee the future. He earned a reputation for having unusual powers of perception, prediction, and mind-reading.

He met with well-known mystics from all different religious traditions. Including Kabbalists and early Zionist leaders in Safed and was sympathetic to their aspirations. He also met Abdul Baha who founded the Bahai Religion, and Abdul Baha's grandson, Shoghi Effendi. Pole became an enthusiastic supporter of Bahai.

After the First World War, he returned a decorated veteran. He gave up his family business and became the Secretary of the Bahai community in London. In March 1922, Shoghi Effendi gathered senior devotees from multiple countries, including Pole, in Haifa to discuss the expansion of Bahai. The Bahai Temple was built on Mount Carmel overlooking the port of Haifa.

But there were strains. Pole did not regard Bahai as a separate religion but rather as a movement or sect. And, unlike them, he was a strong believer in reincarnation. In the end, he described himself as an “assistant of the cause as a non-member.”

Above all, Pole remained a Christian mystic and went on to advocate for silent meditation. He published *The Silent Road* in 1960 and died in 1968. Several biographies exist – the latest being 2010’s *The Two Worlds of Wellesley Tudor Pole* by Garry Fenge.

You may well wonder what this has to do with me – or rather my father, with whom he maintained a friendship and correspondence during the final years of his life. I was aware of the lengthy letters that passed between them and often overheard conversations but it was from mother, after my father died, that I learned more of the details.

After he saw my father commenting on television on the Eichmann trial in 1960, Wellesley Pole contacted him. Pole had been very much concerned about the horrific stain of the Holocaust on what was a Christian European society and he was trying to find some degree of reconciliation through his mysticism. He wanted to explore the Jewish reaction and ideas of repentance with my father. Then, he discovered my father’s interest in Indian mysticism and they went on to discuss the various connections and similarities between Jewish mysticism and other approaches – including the Bahai.

In 1960, my father had a serious fall from a boat on the River Thames which led to a serious decline in his health. Wellesley told my mother that he had foreseen the accident and knew my father was not going to have long to live. My father died in 1962 at the age of 48. Knowing how opposed my father had been to fortune telling and skeptical about predictions (especially if coming from a religious source – Jewish or not), I asked my mother whether he had taken Tudor Pole’s prediction seriously. My mother said that my father had been intrigued by Tudor Pole and respected him. But he held firm to the idea that everything was in the hands of God. Predictions, like astrology, might occasionally be right but that one should not let them affect one’s life and were not to be taken seriously.

I remember my father saying that if one did know one’s life on earth was coming to an end, one should ask oneself if one was living the right life or whether one ought to change anything before it was too late. In our secular world, we are pre-occupied with bucket lists – the things we felt we missed out on and wanted to see or do before we die. Although in 1960, the doctors told my father his days were numbered, he said that there was nothing he

wanted to change. He went on doing the things he loved – his teaching, running his school, and his way of life.

Outside of family, there were two people who gave my father some comfort during his last days. One was Wellesley Tudor Pole and the other was the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Wellesley told him he would die and the Rebbe that he would live. Wellesley was correct. Of course, afterward, the Rebbe's devotees claimed that the Rebbe meant the next world. Were they both right?

Wellesley was an interesting man. He and my father had a lot in common – spiritually and intellectually. My father always had an enquiring mind and a desire to understand other ideas and ways of life. But nothing could challenge his deep commitment to Judaism – both rational and mystical. There was no room in his life for supernatural predictions, superstition, miracle workers or religious visions. I am proud to say I feel the same way.

What we are experiencing in this pandemic is a challenge, a natural phenomenon, but we will survive as we always have by doing our best to improve our lives and society. This not the arrival of the Messianic era neither is it the end of days. So let us not make any bucket lists.