I don’t suppose anyone here is an expert in particle physics? I’m definitely not. So the name Martin Perl almost certainly won’t mean anything to you, as it meant nothing to me before I came across it a few weeks ago in an obituary. I’m quite drawn to obituaries, to see a description of the shape of a life, to see how much stuff, how much suffering and success and drama is packed into a life, to see the marriages, the awards and achievements, the disappointments, all packaged up in 750 words. A whole life, it could be any of us, the decades unfolding and speeded up, and in less than five minutes it’s over. And we know that the smooth narrative of an obituary is a form of storytelling, fiction-making: it gives us the facts, the outer life, it can give us the flavour of a life – if it is well written – but inevitably it misses the essence of a person, who can never be summed up like this, because we all always more than the descriptions of us can ever contain.

Anyway, Martin Perl, I found out, won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1995 for his discovery of the tau lepton. Which, as the obituary helpfully made clear for the sake of all us non-particle physicists, is ‘a heavy version of the electron’. (I hope you are now much the wiser). His story in some ways is very familiar – born in Brooklyn, New York, son of Jewish immigrants from the pale of Settlement, the Polish part of Russia, served in the American forces in World War II then made his way through college in that huge wave of assimilated American Jewish life that penetrated into every area of achievement in post-War America: in literature and the arts, in all the sciences, and the social sciences, in medicine, economics, linguistics, these second-generation immigrant Jews were everywhere, often transforming their disciplines, or inventing new ones, and the Nobel prizes and Pulitzer prizes duly followed. No area of culture or society was untouched by this phenomenon. It was a particular version, historically-localised, of Jews carrying and enacting the Abrahamic blessing: ‘through your descendents shall all the nations of the earth be blessed’ (Genesis 22: 18).
Experimental particle physics is almost always a collaborative team endeavour and Perl was certainly part of such teams, but he was known as an individualist. His philosophy was summed up by his son who said about his father – and it was this that most caught my eye in the obituary: “He always advocated that you should look at what the crowd is doing and go in a different direction.” This, I think, is sage advice. It can of course lead you into trouble – not least of which is that people might disparage you or just not like you, but iconoclasts have to learn to deal with that; but it can also lead to Nobel prizes. Pushing forward the frontiers of any discipline, in the sciences in particular, but also the humanities and the arts, or in religion, needs that capacity to ‘go in a different direction’ from the crowd.

It was clear from reading the obituary of Martin Perl that he nurtured his idiosyncratic way of thinking about physics not as an affectation (as people’s idiosyncrasies can often be) but as part of a worked-through, thought-through position. And it was highly successful. I often think of this quality of going in a different direction to the majority as something ingrained in Jewishness, which in its origins was counter-cultural – the idea of one God was a radical breakthrough in thinking at the time, the notion of a creative force flowing through life and revealing moral and ethical laws; and Judaism once it developed always fostered dissenting and multiple opinions about its sacred texts, prizing new readings and fresh insights; and historically the Jewish people have until recent times been a community that has chosen to, or has been forced to, go in a different direction from majority cultures, Christian or Islamic; and so on. So, for multiple reasons ‘going in a different direction’ seems part of the Jewish psyche.

And yet nowadays within the Jewish community – particularly in this country - this oppositional stance can be quite hard to maintain. Put your head above the parapet in relation to injustices in Israel, or same-sex ceremonies, or in opposition say to brit milah, or in Orthodoxy to women’s participation in services, or any highly emotive issue (and Jews can be highly emotional about absolutely anything down to how you should pronounce left-over Yiddish words – do we suffer from *tsores* or *tsurus*? and do we deal with it by *noshing* something or *nashing* something, something like a *bagel*, or is it *baygel*?), nowadays if you take up a stance by going in a ‘different direction’ from the crowd, just wait and see what opprobrium you can attract.
I was thinking about this during this week in relation to the art-installation that was set up at the Tower of London to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Great War, which seems to have spoken so directly to so many people: the moat filled with 888,000 red ceramic poppies, one for each of the British and Commonwealth deaths in that long and bloody and in many ways senseless conflict. Millions have visited it over these last weeks — but anyone daring to criticise this project, anyone who has ‘gone in a different direction from the crowd’ has been pilloried in the press for their views. For example Jonathan Jones, an always-interesting commentator on the arts, found this installation ‘fake, trite and inward-looking’ and was concerned firstly that it was too narrowly focused, too nationalistic, because it didn’t acknowledge the huge losses suffered by other nations and peoples; and secondly that it managed to ‘prettify’ the horrors of war, it failed in his view to convey anything of the reality of the mud-and-blood toxic futility and fearfulness and degradation of the trenches. Provocatively, he suggested an installation that filled the moat with bones and barbed wire might have been a more disturbingly eloquent statement than the sentimentalised banks of poppies that people flocked to see.

I’m not taking sides in this, but his dissident view has helped me think more deeply into this question of memorialising loss, and how we do it. Cultural products that are ‘fake, trite and inward-looking’ often do have mass appeal. The Nuremburg Rallies would be a good example. It is easy to stir the emotions of groups by appeals to nationally-sanctioned stereotypical images, or lofty words, or stirring music. Here, the red poppy has been an established part of British culture since its adoption by the Royal British Legion in 1921. So was the use of the poppies in this latest art-work a manipulation of an image, a way of deflecting attention away from the brutal ugly reality of war by substituting a lyrical, aesthetically-pleasing field of flowers to distract from the jarring horrors endured by those who died; or was it a way of conveying something of the overwhelming nature of the event that was both a mass historical event but one participated in and suffered by so many individuals, each unique yet each part of a shared human reality? So many individual deaths – and this is what it adds up to, countless suffering as far as the eye can see, yet still each one, counted.
It does open up the question about loss and how we face it. We had a poignant example of this in our Torah portion. After the long description of the negotiations that went on to find Isaac a wife, they finally meet and in the 67th and final verse of the chapter we read that Isaac takes Rebekkah into his mother’s tent, and she becomes his wife ‘and he loved her and Isaac was comforted acharei imo, after his mother, for his mother’. We might expect ‘after the death of his mother’. But no, the word ‘death’ is absent. We know this is what it means - but the artists who composed the text have chosen to hide the word: they make us think about it through its absence. Is this saying something about Isaac’s wish to deny the reality of death? The fantasy that if you don’t mention something it’s as if it hasn’t happened? Or is it a way of speaking about how the loss was healed – the missing comfort he had received from his mother morphing into the new comfort he found with Rebekkah?

We have no description in the Torah, not even any hint, of what the death of Sarah, his fiercely protective mother, meant to Isaac. But we sense in this final verse how present she was for him as he takes this young woman firstly into his mother’s intimate space, her tent, and through the intimacy with her – ‘and he loved her’ – thereby also assuaging the loss he has suffered. More human connectedness, more closeness, more intimacy – this is one way of managing the feelings of loss, dealing with the feelings of absence. We almost don’t have a good enough, rich enough, vocabulary to talk about what we do with the experience of loss. I just used the words ‘managing’ the loss, ‘dealing’ with the loss – but that is too business-like, too bureaucratic a language to evoke the powerful and subtle stands of feeling that death evokes in us. Some people want people around them, so want to be left alone. There is no right or wrong ways about this.

One thing I do know, and here I do go in a ‘different direction from the crowd’, is that the modern jargon of talking about ‘closure’ after a death – and the idea is now prevalent in the aftermath of any injustice or painful event – I think this can be a very coercive and unhelpful idea to expect for oneself, or to have others expect of you. ‘Have you had closure yet?’ has become a modern mantra but – talking of trite and false ideas, this is one; because it promotes an illusion. It’s come into contemporary thought from American social psychology – actually it originates from Arie Kruglanski in a 1993 paper about people’s desire for a clear and definite answer to their life questions and an aversion to ambiguity.
So he developed what became known as the ‘Need for Closure Scale’ but this concept of closure was gradually transformed from something descriptive of what people wished for into some kind of ideal of what they should have. Whereas psychological health is actually about being able to manage ambiguity, not-knowing, uncertainty – without collapsing into the straitjacket of false certainties.

Maybe in 1993 Arie Kruglanski thought he was going in a ‘different direction from the crowd’ but what his work has spawned is I think a pseudo-solution to a universal problem, a flawed notion that assimilating grief and losses and death into our lives is a process that can be closed, finished with. Whereas Jewish tradition recognises that losses are real, and lasting: they will happen to you and me, they happen to all of us, and the work of mourning can last a lifetime. We have to learn to live with our sadness, our regrets, or sometimes with our lack of sadness, or our relief, or whatever it is that emerges in the wake of a loss.

Sigmund Freud once wrote a condolence letter in which he put his finger on something crucial. His own daughter Sophie had died in 1920 when she was 27, and nine years later, on what would have been her 36th birthday he wrote to a colleague Ludwig Binswanger whose son had just died: ‘we will never find a substitute [after a loss]. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be, it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.’

And there was a man who looked at what the crowd were doing and went in a different direction.