



**SERMON EIKEV:<sup>1</sup>**  
**THE HEARTLESS HOTLINE AND THE**  
**EVERLASTING CLOTHES**

Gabriel Webber, Saturday 27 August 2016  
Finchley Progressive Synagogue

- 1 Earlier this month, a radio station in Manchester was censured by the regulator Ofcom for broadcasting a new-format gameshow called *Heartless Hotline*.<sup>2</sup> In *Heartless Hotline*, contestants are promised a prize paid for by the station – tickets to a concert, free cosmetic surgery, whatever they request – but before they receive it, a 'phone line opens for 30 seconds, during which any member of the public can call in and 'steal' the prize for themselves.
- 2 Ofcom was especially upset about one particular episode. The prize was £2,000 which a single mother, Sarah, needed to keep her house and maintain custody of her children after her divorce. And the prize money was 'stolen' by a caller who said: "Well, we've all got a story to tell, but I've got children of my own and I could do with a holiday."
- 3 Sarah was left in floods of tears, and Ofcom decided that the programme "had clear potential to cause considerable offence to listeners: [...] it had been made clear to listeners that the prize would have a significant and positive effect in helping resolve the sensitive issues facing Sarah and her children. It was 'stolen' from her by

another caller. Listeners were likely to have concluded this competition had caused unnecessary distress or anxiety to Sarah.”

4 But I’m not sure I agree. It’s the idea that the distress was ‘unnecessary’ that makes me uneasy. Because the panel is right, of course: Sarah was no doubt distressed and that distress was unnecessary. But who caused it? It was Sarah’s decision to take part in the programme. She knew the rules. The radio station explained to Ofcom just how many times its staff had sat down with Sarah beforehand to reiterate how the show worked and to make sure she was genuinely willing to go ahead. And she was.

5 Sarah’s situation was completely desperate. But she wasn’t entitled to have her financial troubles miraculously solved by a radio station. Countless other single mothers are just as desperate, if not more, and didn’t have even a chance of being bailed out by wealthy benefactors. And that’s what Sarah decided to take: a chance. Not a certainty. I don’t blame her at all. But to complain *ex post facto* that the odds were against her seems ill-graced, somehow.

6 This week’s parasha has been making me think particularly about something-for-nothing offers. It includes the startling revelation, in one throwaway line,<sup>3</sup> that during the whole 40-year wandering-in-the-Wilderness period, the Israelites’ clothes never wore out.

7 Everlasting clothes are maybe the ultimate mystical something-for-nothing offer. The idea has spanned the centuries, from the fairy-tale

of *The Emperor's New Clothes*<sup>4</sup> to the Ealing comedy about *The Man in the White Suit*<sup>5</sup> which repels all stains. But, of course, the Emperor's new clothes turn out to be a total scam, and the white suit disintegrates after just a few days of use. So the only recorded successful example of everlasting clothes is found in Deuteronomy. But were they really successful?

8 A midrash<sup>6</sup> records a conversation between Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Simeon ben Yose. Rabbi Eleazar asked: "Did the Israelite children not grow so that the clothes became too small for them?", to which Rabbi Simeon replied: "When the snail grows, its shell grows with it." Rabbi Eleazar then asked: "Did the clothes not need washing?" The reply: "The pillar of fire rubbed against them and whitened them." Another question: "Seeing that the pillar consisted of fire, were they not scorched?" Rabbi Simeon's response: "As their clothes were of heavenly make, the pillar rubbed against them without damaging them." Rabbi Eleazar was still not satisfied: "Did vermin not breed in them? Did they not emit an evil odour because of the Israelites' perspiration?" But Rabbi Simeon had an answer to this as well: "They used to play with sweet-scented grasses, the fragrance of which permeated the world."

9 So was Rabbi Eleazar being overly picky with his questioning, in the vein of Sarah and her complaint that she didn't get miraculously bailed out of all her troubles? I don't think so.

- 10 What I find startling about Rabbi Eleazar's probing is his scepticism of the inner workings of a direct miracle from God – or, actually, what is startling is how right he is. Everlasting clothes are all very well, but what if they don't grow alongside their wearers? What if they do come to reek in the heat of the Sinai desert? If God hadn't provided for those contingencies, the garments would have been useless, miracle or no miracle.
- 11 We don't know whether the Israelites asked the same questions as Rabbi Eleazar, but they would have been quite right to do so. It's not ingratitude to seek to ensure that a gift will fill a need and not just become another burden, just as donating a valuable painting to a homeless shelter would be a daft idea.
- 12 Rabbi Eleazar's questioning of a miracle was audacious, but serves as an important reminder to any of us who ever give or receive any help or donations of any sort. Which is probably all of us.
- 13 When one receives support of whatever kind, it's proper to ask about what might be possible and how to make it work best. Being given a set of everlasting clothes that retain everlasting stains and stink everlasting smells would have been worse than useless, and Rabbi Eleazar's astute intervention made sure that that didn't happen.
- 14 And similarly, when we're the ones delivering tzedakah or carrying out acts of tikkun olam, it's not rude to ask what the beneficiary needs. This not only ensures against pointless gifts of smelly clothes

but grants them a voice and a role, rather than just assuming them to be a mute recipient of charity.

- 15 And all that sensible giving is a world apart from radio's *Heartless Hotline*. That show is populated by people who are determined to get things they are not entitled to, albeit by audacious and creative means. Sarah from Manchester wasn't entitled to £2,000 and she didn't get £2,000; *c'est la vie*. The Israelites weren't entitled to everlasting clothes, either, but as it happens God did give them everlasting clothes – and, after respectfully confirming that they were useful, the Israelites gladly and gratefully accepted.
- 16 We don't really have supernatural divine miracles these days. And undignified giveaways like *Heartless Hotline* aren't miracles at all. But by considered and respectful giving and receiving of things – money, food, clothes, time, whatever is needed – we can forge our own human-to-human miracles.
- 17 This parasha is an opportunity for us to remember the importance of openness and dialogue in society. Only that can help us help others, and receive help, as one united humankind and as God intended. Kein y'hi ratzon; may that be God's will.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 27.08.16**

<sup>1</sup> Today's reading: Deuteronomy 8:1-5

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<sup>2</sup> <[http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/1607206/Issue\\_310.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/1607206/Issue_310.pdf)>

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 8:4

<sup>4</sup> <[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Fairy\\_tales\\_and\\_stories\\_\(Andersen,\\_Tegner\)/The\\_Emperor\\_%27s\\_New\\_Clothes](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Fairy_tales_and_stories_(Andersen,_Tegner)/The_Emperor_%27s_New_Clothes)>

<sup>5</sup> Ealing Studios, 1951

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 7:11