



**SERMON DEVARIM:<sup>1</sup>  
THE ISRAELITES AND THE RISING PYRAMID –  
OR, CAPTAINS WHO SING**

Gabriel Webber, Saturday 29 July 2017  
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Last week, I saw a headline on the BBC News website which read: “Queen touched by Governor-General of Canada.”<sup>2</sup>
- 2 At first I assumed it must mean that she was touched emotionally; that he had said or done something that moved her. But it turned out, no: he literally touched her. I watched the video of him holding her elbow as she walked across a red carpet and down a flight of stairs, and wondered what all the fuss was about. But apparently – I had no idea of this – it is considered a ‘breach of protocol’ to touch Her Majesty.
- 3 My immediate reaction was that that rule can only be a ridiculous remnant of centuries gone by when the monarch was universally regarded as God’s chosen representative on earth. How can we be expected to connect with a figurehead these days, I thought, if they are so remote that even when amongst their people they cannot touch them?
- 4 But then I also realised that the rule can’t be much fun for the Queen either. 91 years old, still working hard, privileged to meet a tremendous range of people from the ultra-inspiring to the inspiringly mainstream – and forbidden to have any physical contact with any of them. How isolating it must be.
- 5 Moses was in about the same position at the start of our parasha today. He was incredibly isolated: not just socially, as the outsider who grew up in Pharaoh’s palace; not just emotionally, on account of his stutter that prevented him from



speaking without using his brother as a relay; but he was also isolated physically, because, after returning from Mount Sinai with the tablets of stone, his face glowed with a heavenly radiance<sup>3</sup> that so terrified the Israelites that from then on, through no choice of his own, he could only ever communicate with them through a veil.<sup>4</sup>

6 But ultimately, his upbringing and his stutter and his veil were just three additional problems to the fundamental issue he confronted, which was that he was all but crushed under the weight of his responsibilities. When I first drafted this sentence I referred to this as ‘the age-old problem’ of effective leadership – but then I realised that in Deuteronomy, it wasn’t age-old, it was brand new and daunting and frightening. Moses had to figure out for himself how to be an effective leader and a connected leader when there was too much work to go it alone.

7 ‘Parkinson’s law’ says that “work expands to fill the time available for its completion”. In his essay *The Rising Pyramid*,<sup>5</sup> Cyril Northcote Parkinson went on to suggest that the natural human instinct to want subordinates rather than rivals leads to far more officials than necessary being engaged in doing exactly the same amount of work as was done before they were appointed: “Official E decides that the matter falls within the province of F, who places a draft reply before C, who amends it drastically before consulting D, who asks G to deal with it. But G goes on leave at this point, handing the file over to H, who drafts a minute that is signed by D and returned to C, who revises his draft accordingly and lays the new version before the senior officer, A. A reads through the draft with care, makes some changes, and finally produces the same document they would have written if officials B to H had never been born.”

8 It’s easy to read our parasha and assume that Moses had never heard of Parkinson’s law (not least because Parkinson’s law was created in 1955, but you know what I mean). Sharing the burden of his leadership was perfectly sensible;



but there were only 600,000 Israelites: did they really need more than 75,000 carefully-ranked officials amongst them? It sounds like the reason Moses set up the system in the first place was not for the benefit of the people but for the benefit of himself – even at the unveiling, he somewhat undiplomatically told the Israelites it was all because he couldn't cope with their “bickering”.

9 But there's a subtlety that that interpretation misses. The word the Torah uses for these new officials – *sar* – is variously translated as ‘ruler’, ‘minister’, ‘captain’ and so on. But it consists of exactly the same letters as *shar*, ‘to sing’.<sup>6</sup>

10 There is a long line of Jewish literature which poetically portrays justice as musical, tuneful, and which elides wisdom with melody. King Solomon was famed as a wise judge, but the Book of Kings only mentions this after first revealing that he wrote 1,005 songs.<sup>7</sup> The rabbis advised disappointed litigants who had had money confiscated by a judge: justice has been done, everyone's a winner, so “sing your song and go your way”.<sup>8</sup> Rav Kook taught that every Jew has within them a personal song, a Jewish song, a human song and a global song – and our life's task is to unite them all in harmony.<sup>9</sup>

11 But most significantly for Moses, the word *chazan* (‘songleader’) comes from the same root as *chazon* (‘vision’).<sup>10</sup>

12 So his 75,000 officials were not, really, captains or ministers or rulers. They were not just there to exert Moses's authority over the Israelites: they were *sarim*, at the same time political leaders and songleaders. Each ‘captain of ten’ had the sacred task not only of being a mouthpiece for Moses, but of being a mouthpiece for their ten constituents. Each ‘captain of ten’ had to sing their people's song.

13 Just as Sir Robert Peel told the very first police officers that they were not delegates of the government to the public, but delegates of the public itself,<sup>11</sup>



our ancestors' sarim were not merely there to represent Moses to the Israelites, but also to represent the Israelites to Moses.

- 14 In our modern Jewish world we don't have a network of leaders anything like as complex as the Israelites' sarim. But by abandoning the system's complexity, we also abandoned its harmony. No longer are we all in close touch with visionaries who will sing our song to those in power, sing the perfect cadences that promote justice.
- 15 On the other hand, singing is something that we can all do – whether to opera-house standard or raucously in the shower – and singing is symbolic of a society in perfect tune with the needs of its people. We can all use our chazon, our vision, to become chazanim, songleaders; to play a part in creating a better – and better-harmonised – world.

Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 29.07.17**

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 1:9-17

<sup>2</sup> BBC News: Regal rules: The dos and don'ts for meeting the Queen, 20 July 2017 (online at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-40651179>>)

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 34:29-35

<sup>4</sup> Those who argue that Muslim face coverings should be banned because they prevent effective communication may not be aware that Moses, the greatest prophet in the Bible, managed it perfectly well.

<sup>5</sup> C Northcote Parkinson: Parkinson's Law and other studies in administration, Riverside Press, 1957: pp 2-13 (also available online: <[http://www.berglas.org/Articles/parkinsons\\_law.pdf](http://www.berglas.org/Articles/parkinsons_law.pdf)>)

<sup>6</sup> Matityahu Glazerson: Music and Kabbalah, Rowman & Littlefield, 1997: p 49

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 5:12-14

<sup>8</sup> Sanhedrin 7a

<sup>9</sup> Shmuly Yanklowitz: The Soul of Jewish Social Justice, Urim Publications, 2014: p 69

<sup>10</sup> Zvi Mark: Mysticism & Madness: the religious thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, Continuum, 2009: p 2

<sup>11</sup> Home Office: Definition of 'policing by consent', 2012: para 7 (online at <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/policing-by-consent/definition-of-policing-by-consent>>)