



SERMON RE'EH: OF MAGES AND SAGES

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- 1 Last week, Channel 20, a religious TV station in Israel, was fined over £20,000 after investigators found it had systematically and totally excluded all non-Orthodox Jews from its coverage. The broadcasting regulators reviewed Channel 20's coverage throughout the whole of April and May, and found not a single reference to Progressive or Conservative Judaism, in breach of a licensing requirement that it should give a platform to all denominations.²
- 2 In response to an earlier warning, the TV station said: *"We don't think it is right for us to give air-time to attempts to divide and split the people of Israel. There are fake Rolex watches and Adidas shoes all over the world. Let's not counterfeit Judaism too."*³
- 3 Behaviour like that is so self-evidently wrong and offensive that there is no need to explore why it is objectionable. But, reading and hearing this week's parasha, one is left with the uncomfortable feeling that Channel 20 could find a fair amount of support in it: *"If there appears among us a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, we must not hearken unto their words – and that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death."* A fate worse than exclusion from a national television channel!
- 4 It is a little ironic that this passage, which we – as 21st century humanitarians with an aversion to slaughtering religious dissidents – might be tempted to omit, is the very one which warns us: *"Neither add to the Torah nor take away from it."* But these verses have some intriguing features which make it well worth our



while to retain and read them, even if we don't immediately reach for the gravel to stone people to death after doing so.

- 5 For instance, the commandment is predicated on a false prophet promising “a *sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder coming to pass*”. We could be forgiven for assuming that a person who predicts a wonder which then actually happens is not a false prophet but a true prophet. But the rabbis of the Talmud warn us⁴ against being overly credulous: “*A blind man could find a skylight, but only by chance and not because he could see.*” Their conclusion⁵ – that “a wise person is greater than a prophet” – is the important bit.
- 6 It's very easy for us to be wowed by big flashy signs and wonders, whether they're the Pharaoh's magicians aping Moses's snake-charming,⁶ or politicians promising £350m for the NHS.⁷ The thing about big, meaningless deeds is that their big-ness is great enough to hide their meaningless-ness. Just because someone can make a river flow backwards⁸ doesn't mean they're an infallible source of knowledge on every topic.
- 7 This difference between false prophets' sorcery and wise people's rationality – the difference between mages and sages⁹ – is what underpins the gulf between Orthodox and Progressive in Israeli society. You only have to glance at Liberal Judaism to realise that we are not portending signs and wonders; we don't seek to build support with eye-catching but empty gestures. What we have is rational, considered, heartfelt. It is also radical, controversial, debateable.
- 8 This is why we deserve a place on Israeli television: not because we are undeniably right but because we are undeniably worth talking about. If Channel 20's core audience watches a programme about the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism and thinks, “*What a load of old nonsense*”: great. They've learned that their belief system really is for them, rather than just something they adopted by default. I take that as positive result – and it's certainly not the



one that Channel 20 is afraid of. They are, presumably, afraid that, by giving airtime to views like ours, they will make it possible for an Orthodox viewer to say, “*You know what? There might be something in this Reform stuff after all.*”

- 9 I don’t know how likely that is. But if it happens, does it count as a false prophesy whose instigator must be killed? Of course not. Progressive Judaism is, like Orthodox Judaism, the product of generations of thought by minds of great wisdom. Wisdom is not the same as cleverness:¹⁰ with cleverness, there is a right and a wrong, a true and a false; but wisdom can guide people in different or even opposite directions, none being any more correct than another. Mages have cleverness – they know how to draw a rabbit out of a hat, or how to walk on water – but sages have the wisdom to craft ideas that persuade, compel, inspire.
- 10 Being a sage while surrounded by mages is not always easy. But it is (almost) always better. No gravel required.

Check against delivery.

GW 19.08.17

¹ Deuteronomy 13:1-12

² *Ha’aretz*: Israeli TV channel fined for keeping conservative, Reform Judaism off screen, 8 August 2017: <<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.805837>>

³ Arutz Sheva: TV station fined for not interviewing Reform movement reps, 8 August 2017: <<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/233614>>

⁴ Bava Batra 12b

⁵ Bava Batra 12a

⁶ Exodus 7:10-12

⁷ *The Independent*: Vote Leave chief who created £350m NHS claim on bus admits leaving EU could be an error, 4 July 2017: <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-latest-news-vote-leave-director-dominic-cummings-leave-eu-error-nhs-350-million-lie-bus-a7822386.html>>

⁸ Bava Metzia 59b

⁹ Quite pleased with that one (in case you can’t tell)

¹⁰ See eg *The Devil and the Corner Grocer* by Margaret Mahy, in *The Chewing Gum Rescue*, Overlook Press, 1982