



**SERMON TOL'DOT:¹
THE TOLERANCE OF THE WOMB**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 18 November 2017
York Liberal Jewish Community's annual interfaith service

This sermon consists of the minister's own views. It does not necessarily represent the views of the congregation to which it was delivered, or those of any other institution with which the minister is connected. It is © Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber 2017, and the author has asserted his moral rights.

- 1 Just before the summer, I moved to Golders Green. Having grown up in south London, where for most of my schoolfriends I was the only Jew they knew, it was something of a revelation to me to move to a famously Jewish area where you can't walk five yards without overhearing a conversation about a bar mitzvah, or bumping into a rabbi, or buying a bagel.
- 2 And appropriately enough for a rabbinic student living in Golders Green, my nearest neighbour, right across the road, is the thriving Centre for Islamic Enlightenment, which opened at about the same time as I moved in. I've so enjoyed glancing out of my window, seeing people of faith of all ages going happily in and out and having their spiritual needs fulfilled. I'm always delighted to see any religious enterprise get off the ground so impressively!
- 3 The smiles this brought me made my revulsion all the more acute when I saw the reaction to my new neighbour from certain sections of the Jewish community's far-right. These people are a tiny, tiny minority – I really do stress that – but the sheer amount of bitterness and hatred that this minute pool of extremists has managed to generate is deeply distressing, deeply shaming, and a little bit terrifying. And the gist of their objections? 'It's a



Jewish area. We have a monopoly round here; it's ours; it can't support Jews and non-Jews; go find your own neighbourhood.'²

- 4 When I moved to Golders Green, I found it to be 'a Jewish area' in the best sense of that term: a place where there was kosher food, a large choice of synagogues nearby, a general atmosphere of kindredness and familiarity. It never occurred to me that the phrase 'a Jewish area' had a dark side, a strict side, an exclusionary side.
- 5 If these protestors are this upset by the notion of two ethnic groups having to squeeze into the same London suburb, what must they have thought of our twins of the week, Esau and Jacob? Even from before they were born, God was warning their mother Rebecca: "Two nations are in thy womb."³
- 6 Of course, the dispute between those two nations didn't come to a head until the drama in this Shabbat's parasha – and while I don't know how dreadful it was for you all to sit through, I thoroughly enjoyed myself interspersing today's leyning with a Dr Seuss-style translation,⁴ because the episode we read today is quite simply really fun. It's a crime story; it's a farce. It's got people dressing up in silly clothes. It's got twins who get mistaken for each other.⁵ It's got the world's first recorded instance of identity theft. I can't read it and not be light-hearted. What's not to like?
- 7 Arguably, what's not to like is that its subject matter is a nasty, manipulative crime that ruined the lives of everyone involved in it, perpetrators and victims alike. Except... who are the victims?
- 8 Two chapters earlier we read, "Va-yim'kor et b'cho-rato l'Ya'akov" – 'and Esau sold his birthright to Jacob'.⁶ That was deceptive of him: Esau had no intention of giving up his birthright, he was just so hungry and desperate for



the soup Jacob was offering that he'd have said anything to get it. Identity theft or no identity theft, I find it difficult to see Esau as a victim.

- 9 Of course, Isaac could be the victim: poor, blind Isaac being duped by his son and left to die in the knowledge that his two boys were at each other's throats. But on the other hand, although we can hardly blame him for his poor parenting skills after the example he grew up with,⁷ Isaac did rather create the 'twins at each other's throats' situation by refusing to divide his estate and insisting that the entirety of it would go to one, and only one, of his sons.
- 10 The notion of property, bequests and birthrights grew out of the notion of land and agriculture.⁸ As a dynasty of tent-dwellers, Judaism's First Family was dependent on hunting and foraging and trading, and what it managed to accumulate was a prized possession of the family – or, more precisely, a prized personal possession of the head of the family, its eldest male. Once the notion of property took hold amongst men who typically had several children by several women, probate disputes on their death became inevitable.
- 11 And so we come back to Golders Green. Just as it was a sadly short step from 'I have some land' to 'I have sole right to this land and there's no room for sharing or compromise', so too is it a sadly short step from 'lots of members of ethnic group X live in this neighbourhood' to 'ethnic group Y: you're on our patch, go away'.
- 12 Yet the two nations in Rebecca's womb lived together quite happily for nine months, getting the start they needed in life to grow into two strong, healthy men. It only went wrong – the brothers were only truly driven apart – when



they were born into a world dominated by their father's fixation with primogeniture and an undivided estate.

13 It didn't need to be that way. As Rabbi David Segal has observed,⁹ "It's the responsibility of every member of the human community to ask Esau's question: 'Do you really have only one blessing, father?'"¹⁰ This opens the door to theological pluralism, to the notion that I have my special relationship with God while you have yours. In zero-sum faith, there is always a winner and loser. We have all found ourselves on the losing side of this proposition at one time or another. Isn't it better, then, to throw out the proposition and affirm instead that my God has more than one blessing?"

14 When my thoughts run along these lines, I always think of Edwin Markham's poem *Outwitted*:¹¹

He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

15 We can throw out the zero-sumness of our lives right now. We can draw that second circle right now. Indeed, we are doing so right now: here we are, in a Jewish service, in a Quaker house, joined by friends from all sorts of other faith communities. We're not trying to convert each other, still less run each other out of town. For us, the City of York is Rebecca's womb: it may contain many nations, but it is big enough and strong enough not just to hold us, in all our diversity, but more than that, to nurture us all as well. By continuing to meet together, work together, welcome each other into our communities, we can take a different path than that of the sorry family in Parashat Tol'dot. However much bitterness and conflict there is outside this city – and there



always has been and perhaps always will be – we can continue to foster within the walls of York a womb-like innocence, an atmosphere of tolerance, friendship and compassion. Kein y’hi ratzon, may this be God’s will.

Check against delivery.

GW 18.11.17

¹ Genesis 27:11-19

² See eg ‘Leading rabbi condemns “threatening and misleading” claims made over Golders Green mosque’ (*The Jewish Chronicle*, 19 October 2017): <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/leading-rabbi-condemns-threatening-and-misleading-claims-made-over-golders-green-mosque-1.445937>>

³ Genesis 25:23

⁴ But for all who enjoyed it and found it quite splendid: at the end of this sermon, find a copy appended.

⁵ I believe that some bloke called Shakespeare also experimented with this as a genre.

⁶ Genesis 25:33

⁷ See Genesis 22, sub nom ‘Parenting is all about making sacrifices’

⁸ See eg Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Inequality Among Mankind* (1754): pt 2; and, tracing the principle back to Cain and Abel, Chaim Navon, *Genesis and Jewish Thought* (KTAV Publishing House, 2008; trans David Strauss): 166ff.

⁹ Rabbi David Segal, *Blessing: not a zero-sum game* (Union for Reform Judaism, 2014): <<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/toldot/blessing-not-zero-sum-game>>

¹⁰ Genesis 27:38

¹¹ Edwin Markham, “Outwitted”, *The Shoes of Happiness and other poems* (Doubleday, 1913; repr 1921): 1.

PARASHAT TOL'DOT IN THE MANNER OF RAV SEUSS

The Hebrew to be leyned after each section of rhyme (except the final couplet which is leyned itself)

Jacob was nervous, so he said to his mother,
"Smooth is my skin, and hairy my brother.
"If my father should feel me while we converse,
"Though I'm wanting a blessing, he will give me a curse."

Genesis 27:11-12

But Rebecca told Jacob, "You're faced with a choice:
"If you want sound advice, then hark to my voice.
"Go fetch me ingredients for baking some loaves,
"While I search Esau's room for Esau's best clothes."
She dressed Jacob in finery, and, not being careless,
She covered his hands and his neck (which were hairless).

Genesis 27:13-16

When Jacob had donned both the rough goatskin gloves
She passed him a plate and gave him a shove.
Though the plan was audacious and misgivings were many,
He called out for his father, who called back, "Hineni!"
"I am Esau!" said Jacob, who, ensconced in the skin,
Was hoping that Isaac would think him his twin.

Genesis 27:17-19

"I have brought you the meal that you did request,
"Now sit here, and eat it, and let me be blessed." :

GW 18.11.17