



SERMON MIKETZ:¹ THE FAT COWS OF REDEDICATION

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 16 December 2017²
York Liberal Jewish Community, featuring the b'nei mitzvah of Esther

- 1 If Joseph's falling-out with his brothers and sale as a slave teaches us anything, it should teach us that picking favourites amongst people or things that are supposed to be equal is not a good idea. So I probably shouldn't practice favouritism amongst the portions of the Torah. But nevertheless, Esther: Miketz is a terrific parasha – how many of them have been made into Broadway musicals? – and it's definitely one of the best.
- 2 I always remember my English teachers telling me never, ever, to end a story with “and he woke up and it was all a dream”, yet it's with exactly those words that you finished your Torah reading. And whose dream was it? We have this kind of instinct, myself included, to think of Joseph as the dreamer: after all, he had the technicolour dream-coat; and, indeed, as an experiment I typed “Joseph the...” into Google and the top suggestion was ‘Joseph the dreamer’.
- 3 But as we heard, in this story it was Pharaoh's dream which drove the action. Not Joseph's. There's no evidence of Joseph even nodding off in Egypt, let alone dreaming miraculously accurate dreams of days yet to come.
- 4 Joseph's role in this parasha, then, was not that of someone with an amazing psychical link to God and/ or the supernatural. Joseph's role came about because he was in just the right place at just the right time. He had dream-
interpreting skills, for sure, but it was only because he happened to be in prison and happened to have made friends with his fellow inmates,



Pharaoh's butler and Pharaoh's star baker, that he was called upon to use his skills and make his name.

- 5 And that's where you come in, Esther. Today is an enormously special occasion, not just for you but for the City of York, because this is the first b'nei mitzvah to take place here for decades. It's not just special; it's historic. I searched a newspaper archive for stories about previous b'nei mitzvah in the region, and the last one to make it into the press was in 1872: "On Saturday last, a ceremony was observed in the Jewish Synagogue, when a youth named Marks, son of Mr Marks, jeweller, was called up to the Law for the first time. Proceedings were of an interesting description. The sections of the Law assigned to Marks were read clearly and unhesitatingly, and the service was gone through with much solemnity."³
- 6 Having b'nei mitzvah is the sign that a community is alive and has a future. When the previous York Synagogue closed in 1975, many people never dreamt that such a sign would ever again be seen in York.⁴ But it has been, and it's you carrying the banner, Esther.
- 7 But, as with Joseph, you're carrying the banner not because you clamoured to, or fought to, or even necessarily wanted to; I know how passionate you are about your b'nei mitzvah, but you've been put in the hot-seat as A Big And Exciting Sign Of The Revival of York Jewry purely because you happened to be born in a particular place at a particular time.
- 8 In 1975, just as the previous York Synagogue was shutting its doors for good, my teacher Rabbi Jackie Tabick was being ordained as the first woman rabbi in the UK. She'd had an enormous struggle to be accepted into rabbinic college, to persuade people that she was serious about her career. And her struggle succeeded and she made history – but when she eventually wrote



about her experience, she entitled her essay ‘I never really wanted to be first’.⁵ Like you, she just happened to be in a particular place and time that made her the first.

- 9 But she rose to the challenge that life thrust upon her. So did Joseph. So have you. And that’s to your great credit.
- 10 We’re not just marking your b’nei mitzvah today though. Tonight is the fifth night of Channukah. This Torah portion, Miketz, is always read during Channukah – not for any particular reason, it’s just the way the calendar falls. But it’s very appropriate to today’s occasion, because what does ‘Channukah’ literally mean? It comes from a root, chet-tav-chaf, with two meanings. One, the Channukah one, is ‘dedication’: the Maccabees regained control of the Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it as a place of worship. The other meaning is ‘training’ or ‘education’.
- 11 Both of those interpretations resonate with Joseph’s story: he used his special skill, interpreting dreams, to establish himself in Egypt and help build a home for the Israelites in a new and previously inhospitable land.
- 12 And, I think, both interpretations resonate with us here and now. Preparing for a b’nei mitzvah is hard work. Esther has read a 4,000-year-old story from a piece of cow-skin handwritten over a century ago in Biblical Hebrew. Don’t let yourself be fooled by how well they read – ‘clearly and unhesitatingly’, as we’d have said in 1872 – into thinking that it was easy. But all that learning and training was put to good use, because with the York Liberal Jewish Community’s first b’nei mitzvah, the Jewish life of the city has been rededicated, and its sacred flame rekindled.
- 13 Pharaoh dreamt of seven fat cows and seven thin cows. The fat cows meant there would be seven years of plenty; the thin cows meant that that time



would be followed by seven years of famine. I hope the congregation won't take offence when I say that, looking around here today, I see only fat cows. York Jewry has been revived, and there is no famine in sight.

Check against delivery.

GW 16.12.17

¹ Genesis 41:1-7

² I led the service jointly with Rabbi Charley Baginsky. Coincidentally, this Shabbat is the 10th anniversary of the first time I led a service – at Kingston Liberal Synagogue in 2007, covering for Rabbi Charley when she was away.

³ *The York Herald*, 16 March 1872, p 9

⁴ R B Dobson, 'The Decline and Expulsion of the Medieval Jews of York', *Transactions and Miscellanies of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 26 (1974-78): 48-49

⁵ Jacqueline Tabick, 'I never really wanted to be first', in Sybil Sheridan (ed), *Hear Our Voice* (SCM Press, 1994): 44