



SERMON TERUMAH: THE OTHER HEAVEN

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 17 February 2018
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 The oldest Jewish gravestone in the Commonwealth is in Chendamangalam, in south India. Not far away is what used to be the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Cochin. Now – or at least when I visited in 2011 – there are sacks of fish food in the ark, rows of fish tanks along the pews and a generally rather fishy vibe to it. Its caretaker, more or less the last remaining member, decided that in the absence of fellow Jews he might as well use it as a warehouse for his tropical fish shop, and so it continues to serve the whole of the Jewish community, just in a slightly unusual way.
- 2 In Morocco, almost all of the Jews upped and left to Israel in a very short period in the 1950s, leaving the shuks and antique shops strewn with religious artefacts, and synagogue buildings left empty with children's Hebrew exercise books still sitting there to this day (though the 'children' themselves must be getting on a bit by now).
- 3 In Lithuania, the tiny remaining Jewish community camps out in small corners of the vast and ornate synagogues that were, once upon a time, full of vibrant Jewish life, until it was extinguished during World War Two.
- 4 And, in York, we're all here in a Quaker House. India, Morocco and Lithuania: buildings without Jews. York: Jews without a building.
- 5 The Torah reading we just heard created kind of an in-between situation: neither a building without Jews nor Jews without a building. The Israelites



were wandering and homeless, yet created a home for themselves in the form of the Tabernacle, an amazing feat of IKEA-style dismantle-able astonishingness. (The fact that its outer tent, if we believe the standard Jewish translation, was made of “sealskin”,² in the middle of the Sinai desert, elevates the story from being astonishing to being, perhaps, not-entirely-plausible.)

- 6 And this state of affairs carried on, until suddenly it made King David feel ashamed – “I live in a house of cedar, while God has to live within nothing but curtains!”³ – and determined to build something more permanent. He clearly considered that, once the Israelites had become stable enough to settle down in sturdy houses of their own, their religious life too needed a stable, physical home.
- 7 But not everyone agreed. God felt perfectly able to cope, living in a tent (I really love the idea of God cramping into a tent with a sleeping bag and a lump of Kendall mint cake), and instead God felt that the Israelites needed yet more stability, security from their enemies and the chance to build a new and successful nation, before worrying about major infrastructure projects. For God, a solid Temple was an optional extra. Trying to construct something, of his own volition, so magnificent that it was worthy to house God, was impossible, vainglorious and a breach of King David’s duty to his own people.
- 8 In any event, buildings come with their own problems. Firstly, the building project itself is time-consuming and often controversial: ‘What colour shall we paint the walls?’ ‘Do we want one big hall or two smaller ones?’ Once, I ran an activity for a group of children where I asked each person to design their own synagogue. Inevitably, they were all completely different. One had



a bowling alley, another a swimming pool. One child actually remembered to include a room for prayer, while another insisted that the entire structure be made out of cheese... and they even had a “cheddar” in which kids could learn Hebrew, which I thought was rather witty.

- 9 But even once we agree on the decisions necessary to go ahead and build, once it's there, we are then faced with the task of, financing them, maintaining them, filling them.
- 10 These are all the difficulties that the Jews of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue went through. They must have sketched, designed, fundraised, navigated India's labyrinthine planning permission system, hired builders, painted, decorated, recruited caretakers, fixed the roof, repainted, repointed... By the time they had the building they had dreamt of, it must have been their pride and joy. And how many of them would ever have imagined that it would, one day, be a tropical fish shop, maintained by the last of their number?
- 11 I'm not saying that buildings are a waste of time or money. They're valuable and once a community reaches a certain size and level of development, they're crucial. But they're also one of the least important parts of what makes a synagogue. The Hebrew name for a synagogue is 'beit kneset', a house of meeting. A place of meeting can be anywhere. The bricks and mortar are an optional extra; without a community we have nothing. Our ancestors created our whole religion in a tent in the desert. But they had each other – and so do we.
- 12 Aside from the parallel between us and our ancestors, there's one other equivalence in this parasha. The rabbis believed⁴ that everything in Heaven had an analogue on earth. So, in Heaven, God would sit between two cherubim; so, on earth, God must sit between two statue-cherubim. In



Heaven, the angels would drape their wings over the ark; on earth, curtains cover the ark. In Heaven, above God would hover two seraphim; on earth, above God's seat were two boards of acacia wood.

- 13 So even though the rabbis called it a precise parallel, it wasn't really that precise. Cherubim become statues of cherubim. Celestial wings become a velvet curtain. Seraphim become planks of wood. This 'reduplicated' version of Heaven on earth is very much the *Blue Peter*, do-it-yourself version.
- 14 In Steven Millhauser's short story *The Other Town*,⁵ he wrote of a town which, for a historical reason that nobody could remember, had a mirror image. Another, identical town, without residents, was built next to it, and every two hours an army of "replicators" would note down every single change that had occurred in the original town and reproduce it in the other town. Packages left on doorsteps, stained coffee cups, mud splatters on cars, all were painstakingly copied over.
- 15 "If a window is broken in our town, we rush to have it fixed, we can't rest until the damage is repaired. But in the other town we note with pleasure the skill with which the pattern of broken glass has been imitated. The value of the other town is the way it permits us to see our own town more clearly. Preoccupied as we are with domestic and financial cares, we pass through our lives noticing little of what's really around us; in the other town, our attention is seized, we feel compelled to look at things closely, to linger over details."
- 16 The overwhelmingly precise instructions for building the tabernacle in this week's parasha remind me of the work of the replicators. 'In Heaven there is X; on earth imitate X as closely as possible, so as to help the inhabitants of earth come to a closer and clearer understanding of the Divine.'



- 17 But does the imitation not also work both ways? God told King David about years of dwelling in the tabernacle:⁶ not of dwelling in a Heavenly palace that was inaptly duplicated in the earthly tabernacle, but in the actual physical tabernacle that the Israelites built. Ramshackle and imperfect as it was, God adopted it as a home.
- 18 So, out of Heaven and earth, which one was, in the end, ‘the other town’? Which one was the master from which the other was replicated?
- 19 Every month, this community sets up our tabernacle. Just like our ancestors, we unroll the sealskin, fit together the wooden slats, position the cherubim. This, here, is the space where God chooses to live. Just because something is an imperfect copy does not mean that it itself is imperfect. Our community’s home is God’s home, and it is wherever we are.

Check against delivery.

GW 17.02.18

¹ Exodus 25:10-22

² Exodus 25:5: Jewish Publication Society translation

³ 2 Samuel 7:2

⁴ Exodus Rabbah 33:4

⁵ Steven Millhauser. “The Other Town.” In *Dangerous Laughter: thirteen stories* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2009): 133-44.

⁶ 2 Samuel 7:6