



SERMON KI TISA: DEATH THREATS AND MELTING MOBS

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 3 March 2018
Wimbledon Synagogue

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- 1 There was a period about three years ago when I got a lot of death threats.
- 2 It all started with an article I wrote for the *Times of Israel*. It was critical of something that some people supported. It was also pretty mild, yet even though I knew not everyone would agree with it – who writes for an Israeli newspaper and expects universal admiration? – I was massively taken aback by the sheer magnitude of the wall of anger and hatred that I received in response.
- 3 I woke up to literally thousands of nasty, abusive messages, mostly anonymous, calling me all sorts of names and telling me that “Progressive Judaism isn’t real Judaism”. There were multiple complaints made to my employer – how could they continue to employ someone who said something some people didn’t agree with? – but then things got a bit darker when the threats of violence and the threats of death began rolling in. (Actually, one of the death threats was combined with a legal threat, which I kind of feel cost its sender the moral high ground.)
- 4 When I reported all this, a police officer came round to take a statement. And two things that this nonplussed-looking Surrey policewoman said, sitting in my front room, have stuck with me: the first was her total bafflement, “So



you're Jewish... but they're Jewish too? I don't understand that." Clearly she'd done training on responding to anti-Semitism but none on Jew-against-Jew incidents.

- 5 But the second thing that stuck with me was how weary she was about having to deal with another online death threat. Her attitude screamed out, "Oh dear, everyone's typing out death threats these days."
- 6 And she's right. Reading almost anything on the internet that's been written by an anonymous commenter is like staring into a horrifyingly violent sewer. Anyone who raises their head above the parapet is invariably met with a huge array of jeering, abuse, threats. I always wonder, "Who brought these people up? How can they possibly think it's appropriate, let alone proportionate, actually to type out a message to another human being threatening to kill them?" It's bizarre, isn't it?
- 7 But also, it isn't bizarre. Because when people join a baying mob, whether online or in the streets, it's oh-so-easy to dissociate one's own personal contribution from the collective force one has created.
- 8 That's why the iconic episode from this week's parasha is so powerful. The Golden Calf is a beautiful allegory for what happens when people form a mob. And what's the key word in the parasha? Masechah, molten.¹ The Israelites handed over their jewellery to Aaron, but it was melted down before becoming the forbidden idol. Melted beyond recognition: nobody would or could look at the Calf and say, "Oh, there's my bit, I'm responsible for that bit." And melted into one great collective: the outcome was a single crucible of liquid gold, everyone's contribution intermingled and – for their consciences – deniable.



- 9 A midrash² tells us that, when the Israelite men begged Aaron to make them an idol, he told them to bring him all their jewellery, in the expectation that the womenfolk would have been far too sensible to take part in the scheme, would have said no, and that that would have been an end to the matter. And the womenfolk were sensible, and did say no³ – but the men were so crazed in their desperation for an idol that they ripped the earrings out of their own ears and produced enough gold to make the Calf. Aaron had underestimated just how far the baying mass would, collectively, go. And it went so far, in its hysteria, in the knowledge that the outcome would be one solid piece of gold, with each person’s specific earrings indistinguishable from all the rest.
- 10 The French writer Gustave Le Bon founded the study of crowd psychology with his 1895 book imaginatively titled *The Crowd*. Le Bon’s theory was that gatherings of people are not only less rational than individual people, they are literally uncontrollable. As he put it, “By the mere fact that he forms part of a crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, of primitive beings. He allows himself to be induced to commit acts contrary to his most obvious interests and his best-known habits. An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.”⁴
- 11 Being on the receiving end of the baying mob was a tough time for me. I got through it with help from those who stood against the crowd and didn’t get carried away. I had support from family and friends, and even strangers: at one event I was at the week after it all started, someone I’d not spoken to before came up to and said, “You’re Gabriel, aren’t you? I just wanted to say that I really enjoyed your article.”



- 12 I'm sure that each individual who could only handle the pain of disagreeing with a newspaper article by sending abuse felt reassured that they were treading a well-trodden line and that their individual contribution was so minimal as to make no real difference.
- 13 And I'm sure that each Israelite man, putting his earring into the furnace at the foot of Mount Sinai, could convince himself that his donation of precious metal to the Golden Calf was an inconsequential part of something very big that would have been much the same with or without his participation.
- 14 Both assumptions are very understandable, but still very wrong. We were all created in the Divine image. We all have power. Everything we do changes the world. That's a huge burden, but also a huge privilege.
- 15 As Rabbi Israel Mattuck put it,⁵ "When we do something which shows some moral weakness, the act is frequently condoned by the comment: 'It's human.' But there is another side to our nature. It is not only human to feel temptation, but it is also human to resist. Every day, people make sacrifices. By the power of the spirit they overcome the force of mere instincts. Their victory is the triumph of the human over the human. It is human to be weak; it is also human to be strong."

Check against delivery.

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¹ Exodus 32:4

² Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 19:3

³ Numbers Rabbah 21:10

⁴ Gustave Le Bon. *The Crowd* (London: Ernst Benn, 1896; repr 1930): 36.

⁵ Quoted in *Siddur Lev Chadash* (London: Liberal Judaism, 1995): 356.