



**SERMON VAYIKRA:¹
BREAKING THE SPIRAL**

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

- 1 Don't tell anyone I said this, but Leviticus is an annoying time to be a rabbi. Week after week of detailed rules about how and when to sacrifice how many of what sort of animal... even if we were the sort of Jews who went in for that sort of thing, it would hardly be easy to draw modern themes out of that material for sermons.
- 2 And yet...
- 3 I was in a doctor's waiting room recently, and as one does, I ended up transfixed on Channel 5 on the grainy screen in the corner. It was showing a programme called *Can't Pay? We'll Take It Away*, and to my shame I went home and binge-watched several more episodes back-to-back.
- 4 I'm not so ashamed of the binge-watching, but more of having been so mesmerised by the programme at all. It's what's sometimes referred to as 'poverty porn': the entertainment value comes from gawping at people in less fortunate situations being put through difficult times.
- 5 *Can't Pay? We'll Take It Away* follows a team of bailiffs as they go about their job of evicting families from their homes, extracting debts from small business owners and so on. In a typical episode, two of the men (they're all men) will attend a debtor's premises – accompanied by a camera crew, naturally – and demand immediate payment. The viewer is then spellbound by the inevitable stages of denial ("That's not my name, they don't live here



any more...”), resistance (“I don’t have £3,000!”), aggression (“Why don’t you just f*** off and get a proper job?”), the arrival of the police and, eventually, submission (“I can ask my brother if he’ll make me a loan...”).

- 6 I noticed very quickly that, while almost all of the bailiffs are white, almost none of the debtors are. And, indeed, when we occasionally see a white debtor, they’re always portrayed as a good guy who’s fallen on hard times, whereas the black or Asian families are shown being confrontational, argumentative, evasive. It was transfixing and yet I realised that a lot of it must have been staged.
- 7 So I was not at all surprised to read a couple of weeks ago that one of the debtors had fought back. Shakir Ali, was evicted – on camera – from his house in Essex in 2015. He sued Channel 5 for breach of privacy, and the High Court agreed and awarded him and his wife £10,000 each in damages.²
- 8 Reading the judgment made me really ashamed of having sat and watched the series for entertainment. The judge’s distaste was dripping from every paragraph, and he’s quite right. Addressing the impact on Mr Ali’s family, he said: “The programme showed them at their lowest ebb, being evicted without prior notice, in a state of shock and very distressed, and being repeatedly taunted by their landlord. Thus it caused them significant loss of dignity.” And, of course, the taunting was orchestrated and encouraged by the bailiffs, who were thoroughly enjoying their moment in the limelight, and determined to provoke a confrontation and thereby produce ‘good television’.
- 9 The abuse of power is horrifying. A poor family – yes, defaulting on one’s rent is wrong, but being thrown onto the street with young children isn’t nice either – not only at the mercy of somewhat malevolent bailiffs, but being



forced to go through the whole ordeal on film for broadcast to the nation?

They weren't asked to consent to being filmed. They were being filmed, like it or not, and were told to complain to Channel 5 after the event if they didn't like it.

- 10 The bailiffs would probably have been less taken by this week's parasha. Instead of being able to zoom round the country collecting cheques, jewellery and cars, they would have been expected to recover debts in the form of rams (or, in the case of deceptive business transactions, a ram plus 20%).³
- 11 And yet, there are similarities to the way that debt can cycle insolubly on today. The Talmud tells us⁴ that someone who engages in a deceptive business transaction, and so becomes liable under the 'plus 20%' rule, who then tries to evade paying the extra damages, then becomes liable for an additional 20% on top of the 120% they are already paying. If they evade again, their now-144% debt increases to over 170%.⁵
- 12 This might seem fair in purely legal terms, and in stark moral terms – if you lie, it costs you – but to people who are genuinely in a tough situation it offers no way out. Nothing but a spiral of deeper and deeper misery which, given the conflation of civil wrongdoing with religious sin, causes theological problems as well as financial ones. Anyone caught out by Leviticus chapter 5 verse 15, who genuinely doesn't have a ram to offer, finds themselves tossed on the horns of a dilemma.
- 13 The Torah is very keen on justice. In fact, we're told: 'tzedek, tzedek, tirdof' – justice, justice, you shall pursue.⁶ Even more than the Torah is keen on justice, the rabbis are keen on over-analysing it, and so the repetition of the word 'tzedek' got up the curiosity of my ancient predecessors. Why is it



there twice? Ah, of course: because the Torah must mean two different things. And so, the Talmud concluded: the first reference to justice refers to strict law, and the second refers to a compromise.⁷

- 14 In recent years, British society has seemed relentlessly focussed on policing those who are less fortunate. Some responded to Grenfell Tower to ask: how many of them were illegal immigrants? The British state spends more money scrutinising those who claim disability benefit to check that their claims are genuine than it saves through the fraud thereby prevented.⁸ Three men were scavenging discarded food from the bins round the back of a supermarket, and the police decided there was a “significant public interest” in prosecuting them for theft.⁹ And that’s not to mention the current trend of vigilantes and the right-wing press seeking out and ‘outing’ so-called fake beggars,¹⁰ though strictly speaking that’s hardly a new phenomenon because there’s a Sherlock Holmes story all about it from 1891!¹¹
- 15 And yes, illegal immigration, benefit fraud, food theft and ‘fake begging’ are all wrong. But in the grand scheme of things, are they so very wrong that society should be focussing its attention on them and not on the underlying problems of global poverty, domestic poverty, disability support and unemployment? Is the family’s late rent so heinous an issue that millions of viewers should voyeuristically tune in to watch their pain and shame on national television?
- 16 And is the strict approach to monetary damages in our Torah reading really a reflection of how we want our civilisation to look? I don’t think so. And yet we’re commanded, not only by God but by Liberal Judaism as well, to read this parasha. What can we take from it that’s good? Well, tzedek, tzedek tirdof. The first ‘tzedek’ is for the strictness and the inflexibility.



- 17 The second tzedek: people who do something wrong should make amends – that seems like a valid principle, in the spirit of compromise – and then they can make atonement. The Hebrew word ‘to atone’ is ‘y’chaper’, which literally means ‘to cover up’: Noah’s manual for building the ark instructed him to ‘y’chaper’ its inside with pitch.¹² In other words: a fresh start. Not so much a cover-up, but a chance to put things right and then wipe the slate clean, without our past being held over us, whether on Channel 5 or otherwise.
- 18 That, I think, is a fitting message from our parasha.

Check against delivery.

GW 17.03.18

¹ Leviticus 5:14-26

² *Ali and another v Channel 5* [2018] EWHC 298 (Ch)

³ Leviticus 5:16

⁴ bBava Metzia 54b

⁵ I could go on but I can’t do the maths so I won’t.

⁶ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁷ bSanhedrin 32b

⁸ Martha Gill. ‘Benefit sanctions cost more than they save’ in *The Huffington Post*, 30 November 2016: <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/benefits-sanctions-cost-more-than-they-save-report-finds_uk_583db145e4b090a702a66859>

⁹ Amelia Gentleman. ‘Three charged with stealing food from skip behind Iceland supermarket’ in *The Guardian*, 28 January 2014: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jan/28/three-charged-vagrancy-act-food-skip-iceland>>

¹⁰ Ben Quinn. ‘Homeless charities slam “open season” on street people’ in *The Guardian*, 3 March 2018: <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/03/homeless-charities-slam-open-season-street-people-crisis>>

¹¹ Arthur Conan Doyle. ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip’ in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (London: George Newness, 1892): 127-155.

¹² Genesis 6:14