



**SERMON TZAV:<sup>1</sup>  
EVERYTHING FEELS SMALL**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 24 March 2018  
Finchley Progressive Synagogue

- 1 I have a wonderful book called *Schottenfreude*.<sup>2</sup> In it, Ben Schott has come up with what he calls “German words for the human condition”: he’s coined dozens of those ludicrous over-long German compound words to describe things that have never before been describable. For example:  
eisenbahnscheinbewegung,<sup>3</sup> the false sensation of movement when, looking out from a stationary train, you see another train depart (literally ‘railway-illusion-motion’). And leertretung,<sup>4</sup> stepping down heavily on a stair that isn’t there (literally ‘void-stepping’). And vernissageversuchung,<sup>5</sup> the urge to test whether paint marked “wet paint” really is still wet (literally ‘varnishing temptation’).
- 2 I can identify with *Schottenfreude*. I’ve known all those things he describes. I’d never realised that they weren’t just unique to me, and I’d never seen them written down, but he successfully captured a range of experiences that people undergo.
- 3 At the other end of the ‘things I can identify with’ spectrum: “The fat with the breast shall he bring, that the breast may be waved for a wave offering before God.”<sup>6</sup>
- 4 Where do I even start with this? I’ll be quite honest: I don’t know what it means. I don’t know what a wave offering is and I dread to think what waving a breast entails. It’s virtually drivel and part of me resents having to read it at all. If we didn’t know that the religion described in this week’s parasha was



being practiced by our own ancestors, we'd probably use the word 'cult' instead. It is totally unrecognisable.

- 5 The historian Robert Goldenberg has observed:<sup>7</sup> “The Jewish religion, Judaism, emerged out of the writings of the Hebrew Bible, but it is not actually to be found in those writings. Judaism is a religion that worships God through words – prayer, sermons and the like – in buildings called synagogues under the leadership of learned [or maybe less learned] rabbis. The Bible knows nothing of these: it portrays a religion centred on a single Temple, led by hereditary priests who worship through actions – elaborate sacrificial rites and other ceremonies of purification. The transition from that earlier religion to one that modern people would recognise is the storyline of the Jewish people.”
- 6 So how did we transition from the alien rituals of the Temple cult to *Siddur Lev Chadash*?
- 7 If the change is a journey, then this is its halfway point. Because fact of the day: Parashat Tzav contains the precise middle of the Torah.<sup>8</sup> Yet it doesn't sound quite like halfway between our distant origins and our present reality. The very beginnings – the Garden of Eden, Noah's ark – feel familiar because we're used to those exciting and engaging stories, with their rich plotlines and vivid imagery. The tales which come next also feel familiar: the probate dispute, the rivalry between siblings, riches to rags to riches... those are stories of our own lives. Just as Ben Schott picked up on aspects of the human condition that are really recognisable to us all, so did the Book of Genesis lay out themes and circumstances with which we can all identify.
- 8 And then we reach Leviticus and everything's weird. Instead of the two-by-two animals from Noah's ark, now we have to read about bits of animals



being bizarrely mutilated. Instead of the natural human relations, good and bad, between sibling and sibling, parent and child, we struggle to make sense of a caste system where people with a given surname are purer than and senior to everyone else.

- 9 From one angle, this is surprising. The nature of a journey is that we start out far away from our destination and get closer and closer to it. So we might expect that, the further through the Torah we get, the more connections with contemporary Judaism we would find – whereas, actually, it's the opposite.
- 10 But in fact, it's not surprising. Before I get on the train to Brighton, I'm wandering around freely in the fresh air. Then I spend a couple of hours in a noisy metal tube (possibly suffering from eisenbahnscheinbewegung). Then I'm wandering around freely in the fresh air again. Familiar, then unfamiliar, then familiar. The period of travel itself is the most alien part of the journey.
- 11 So I manage my total disconnect with the Temple cult by accepting that it was never meant to last and was just a passing phase in our history – a service-station, if you'll pardon the pun. It served the ancient Israelites' purposes at a particular time in a particular place. Times changed and we changed with them – and, I think, for the better. Nowadays we don't need a priesthood to keep itself in 'pure' isolation from the people it serves, but we expect all to come together as one people. Nowadays we don't cut up animals in order to express ourselves in worship, but do so with our minds and the actions of our lives. Nowadays, we've read the words of the prophet Hosea,<sup>9</sup> and know that God demands lovingkindness, not sacrifices.
- 12 Ben Schott came up with another word: dreikasehochregression<sup>10</sup> – returning to your old school and finding everything feels so small. The same experience can apply to a return visit to one's old house (the furniture might



not be tiny but the same feeling of having moved on and grown as a person is there) or one's old hometown or, I think, one's ancestors' religious practices.

- 13 The blood and gore of Parashat Tzav seems very small to us now. But it seemed big at the time. And it served its purpose. And so we read, however reluctantly, and we remember.

*Check against delivery.*

### **GW 24.03.18**

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 7:22-38

<sup>2</sup> Ben Schott. *Schottenfreude* (London: John Murray, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 7:30

<sup>7</sup> Robert Goldenberg. *The Origins of Judaism: from Canaan to the rise of Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 5.

<sup>8</sup> Depending how we calculate it, obv's: see Menachem Cohen, *On the Number of Verses, Words and Letters in the Bible* (Bar Ilan University): <[http://users.cecs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/codes/StatSci/middle\\_english.pdf](http://users.cecs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/codes/StatSci/middle_english.pdf)>: n 4.

<sup>9</sup> 6:6

<sup>10</sup> *Schottenfreude*, 65.