



**SERMON SHAVUOT:  
A TALE OF TEN COMMANDMENTS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 19 May 2018  
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 A long time ago, before I even thought of doing this as a career, I heard a rabbi say that sometimes, an event comes along which means every minister of every religion has to rip up the sermon they'd prepared for that week, and start afresh.
- 2 That's what this week has done for me. I had a nice sermon all written out, about holy time and how the giving of the Torah happened outside of a chronological narrative. It would have been great. (And it might well be next year...)
- 3 And then I switched on the TV on Monday morning.
- 4 The news from Gaza has been desperately dispiriting. Online commentary has veered between the far right lusting for Palestinians' blood and the far left lusting for Jews' blood. And America, so keen to act as the world's policeman, has for some reason morphed into the world's agent provocateur.
- 5 And amidst all the violence and the politics and the rage and the righteousness, you know who I feel most sorry for? Lo Tirtzach. The commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.' It's been a really crap week for her.<sup>1</sup>
- 6 Lo Tirtzach was always the runt of the litter. Ten Commandments and she's the smallest and shortest – and yet she's the one who always has to bear the brunt of humankind's excesses. Now, on Shavuot, the anniversary of her



enactment by God, on her birthday, this poor commandment is sitting, weeping as she looks down at the Middle East. She's not just weeping at the IDF. She's weeping at Hamas. She's weeping at Trump. She's weeping at the parents who send their children out with knives. She's weeping at the commanders who decide to use live ammunition instead of tear gas or rubber bullets.

7 And, of all the commandments living in her house, she's the only one in tears.

8 Lo Tachmod, 'Thou shalt not covet', isn't concerned. He's alright today: nobody's going to envy their neighbour's lot when their neighbour's life is just as fraught and terrifying and full of the stench of death as their own. He just sits by smugly (ironic as that is).

9 Lo Tignov, 'Thou shalt not steal', is counting his blessings. The odd stolen bottle is an annoyance for him but if it's being made into a Molotov cocktail then it's a matter of killing and becomes his sister's responsibility, not his. He wipes his brow in relief - this isn't his fight - and gets back into bed with Lo Tin'af, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'.

10 Cabed etAvicha, 'Honour your father and mother', is grinning broadly. This is his day. Ethnic strife is never a pleasant business but nobody could accuse the participants of not honouring their fathers and mothers. It's only because both peoples are so committed to the idea of the Land as the ancestral property of both their sets of parents that the fighting's happening at all. Cabed etAvicha is satisfied that he's done his job, and goes back to designing cards for Father's Day.

11 Lo Ta'aneh, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness', isn't bothered about anything much these days. The post-truth era forced early retirement onto him - if there's no truth and reality is just a series of narratives, then there's no lying



either, and false witness is just a different story – and he’s enjoying every minute of his life of leisure. He looks up at the sky, draws a breath, and continues swinging his golf club.

- 12 Zachor etYom-haShabbat, ‘Remember the day of Shabbat’, doesn’t care either. This is his day off. He flips through a siddur absently and stirs his pot of cholent.
- 13 Lo Tisa, ‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Eternal One in vain’, is in bed with a headache. He can’t make head or tail of what’s going on: everyone is loudly announcing that they’re acting in God’s name, and while at least some of them must be wrong, presumably that means some of them are right. He reaches for his earplugs and turns off the light.
- 14 Lo Yih’ye-L’cha, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before Me’, looked down at the synagogues and the mosques, and sighed. Sometimes he wished people would have other gods. It would stop the eternal bickering over this one. “It’s so typical of humans,” he thinks to himself. “Give them an omnipotent God who’s all loving and all benevolent, with enough goodness to go round and then some, and what do they do? Argue!”
- 15 Sitting outside on the steps, Lo Tirtzach was beginning to despair, to think that she is truly alone, the only commandment out of ten to care – perhaps the only commandment out of ten to have failed – but then she looked up. Anochi was there. ‘I am the Eternal One your God’: her oldest sister.
- 16 She didn’t see so much of Anochi these days. Always out making long speeches... and then there was that big argument not so long ago. All nine others had ganged up on Anochi, told her she was the odd one out. “You’re not a commandment at all!” they’d jeered. And they weren’t entirely wrong. People disobey Lo Tignov by stealing, and Lo Tachmod by envying. But how



do you disobey 'I am your God'? You can't. Anochi just didn't fit in. And after the row, she'd just drifted away. She was the oldest. She could do that sort of thing.

- 17 But now, here she is, sitting down tenderly next to the weeping Lo Tirtzach. She hands Lo Tirtzach a tissue. The younger commandment dries her eyes. "Why's it always me?" she demands. "It's always me. I'm the most important – lying isn't the end of the world, nor is the odd graven image – and yet they just can't stop themselves killing. I'm the one they're disobeying. It's all my fault!"
- 18 "No," said Anochi. "You're not alone. Why do you think I left? Every time anyone disobeys any of you, they're also disobeying me. Even now, you're hurting from all the killing, but every death down there is killing a little bit of me as well. I'm the one who proclaims God: I'm the one who tells everyone alive that they have a little spark of God in them. And when they try to kill each other, they extinguish their own sparks.
- 19 "Your job isn't just to protect humans, Lo Tirtzach. Your job is to protect me." She held out her hand to her younger sister. "Let's go back inside."
- 20 And so the shortest commandment and the longest commandment, Lo Tirtzach and Anochi, 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'I am the Eternal One your God', linked arms and went forth to change the world.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 19.05.18**

<sup>1</sup> The midrash that follows is broadly inspired by Lamentations Rabbah, prologue 24