



**SERMON SH'LACH L'CHA:¹
THE WILDERNESS OF MIRRORS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 9 June 2018
York Liberal Jewish Community (on tour in Leeds)

- 1 The Okhrana, the secret police of Tsarist Russia at the start of the 20th century, were desperate to prevent a Bolshevik uprising. They began to insert double agents into radical organisations, not so much to spy on them, but rather to “cultivate quarrels and clashes amongst the revolutionary groups, and [this is where it gets really confusing] to attempt to discredit revolutionary leaflets and groups by suggesting that they may be the work of police provocateurs.”²
- 2 These strategies seemed to work, because the Okhrana soon stepped up their operation, and started creating fake revolutionary groups of their own. Entirely fictitious political parties, trade unions and student societies were set up, staffed and maintained for slightly obscure tactical purposes, and unsurprisingly, agents were turned into double agents, turned further into triple agents, and things became impenetrable. Nobody could tell what was real and what was not. Everyone was circling around everyone else. Informants in deep cover forgot who they were supposed to be answering to. One officer, embedded into a band of revolutionaries, ended up working with them to plant a real bomb under his boss’s car – and another secret policeman literally assassinated the Prime Minister, Pyotr Stolypin, in order to show his comrades his ‘true’ revolutionary colours.³
- 3 This bizarre atmosphere where everything false was true and everything true was false set the tone for the following decades of politics and espionage in



the region. James Angleton, America's spy chief during the Cold War, found himself knee-deep in a tangled web of deception, friends pretending to be traitors pretending to be friends. He called the whole thing "a wilderness of mirrors":⁴ whatever direction one turns, a subtle mix of reality and illusion presents itself, and they're impossible to tell apart.

- 4 With this analogy to the lawlessness, emptiness and unpredictability of the wilderness, James Angleton has neatly brought us back to the disinformation put about by Moses's 12 spies on their return to the Israelite encampment.
- 5 Why did they lie? Because it definitely was a lie. They'd seen for themselves what the truth was – that the land was conquerable and that the Israelites were perfectly safe to move into it – but they deliberately came back and gave a false account. They didn't see giants – they just didn't – yet they said that they did. And in doing so, they instilled confusion and panic, mistrust and rebellion: "The entire community raised up their voice and poured it out, and the people wept that night, and they grumbled against Moses."⁵ They must have known that would happen. Why did they do it?
- 6 Their wilderness may not have been full of mirrors, but it was full of mirages: possibly literal mirages – spectres of water visible in the desert when the light falls in just the right way – but definitely emotional mirages. It was a strange place. The unwavering heat. The same, wearisome landscape, as far in the distance as the Israelites' eyes could see, and as far back as their memories could stretch. Their destinies in the hand of a slightly capricious God who was leading them on a circuitous route and denying them any agency.
- 7 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch felt very sorry for the Israelites. He picked up that their lives in the desert were worthless and without meaning or



compensation. Even their food, the manna, miraculous as it was, was painfully repetitive: he imagined the Israelites crying out, “The complete monotony, the unvarying sameness of our food makes it unbearable.”⁶

- 8 And in this febrile environment, in which the 12 spies had spent years with nothing to do and no power or control over their own lives, they suddenly found themselves given a vastly important job. It was like being roused from an unpleasantly deep sleep and immediately having to start a day’s work despite the mind not being fully awake. Not quite in the zone, it only took one of the men to see some unexpected movement in the corner of their eye, and to nudge the man next to him, for a feedback loop of rumour and terror to begin. In the wilderness of mirrors, a shadow can appear like a giant – like a whole tribe of giants approaching from every angle.
- 9 Even though we’re out of the Sinai desert now – and, indeed, out of Tsarist Russia – there’s a new wilderness of mirrors for us to contend with. Fake news has not vanished from our world with the end of the Cold War. Today, falsehoods spread more easily and more quickly than the 12 spies could have imagined, than the Okhrana could have dreamed of. Photos can be re-captioned, videos can be edited, headlines can be misleading, and stories can be literally fabricated out of nothing.⁷
- 10 But we’re in a better position than the Israelites. We’re not trapped in the desert boring ourselves into a stupor; and we’re not wholly reliant on 12 fallible spies for our information. The same structures that make it so easy for fake news to spread empower us to do our own research. Instead of hearing one account and using that as a basis to grumble, we can strive to inform ourselves and shatter the mirrors that would otherwise keep us in a wilderness of bewilderment.



- 11 When Rabbi Hillel stood on one leg to sum up the entire Torah,⁸ he said: “Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to yourself. The rest is commentary: go and learn.” We could take that as distilling it all into one rule – ‘Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to yourself’ – along with a disclaimer that the remainder is unimportant – ‘the rest is commentary to be studied at leisure’.
- 12 But I prefer to read it as two, imperative rules. Imperative 1: ‘Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to yourself’... and Imperative 2: ‘Go and learn.’ Go and study. Inform yourself. Interrogate what you hear. Don’t take things at face value. Be able to answer questions.
- 13 Then we’ll be out of the wilderness of mirrors.

Check against delivery.

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¹ Numbers 13:23-33

² Andrew Wilson. *Virtual Politics: faking democracy in the post-Soviet world* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005): 2-3.

³ Ibid, 4-5.

⁴ David C Martin. *Wilderness of Mirrors* (New York: Harper, 1980).

⁵ Numbers 14:1-2

⁶ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Numbers 11:1, 6

⁷ Claire Wardle has a helpful typology of fake news in her Medium.com article “Fake news: it’s complicated” (16 February 2017): <<http://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79>>

⁸ bShabbat 31a