



**SERMON RE'EH:  
THE BATS HAVE A BALL**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 11 August 2018  
Finchley Progressive Synagogue

- 1 I've been doing a Modern Hebrew evening class this week – because the problem with studying a lot of Biblical Hebrew is that if you go to Israel you end up sounding like Shakespeare – and each evening we start with a story from an Israeli news website chosen by the teacher. On Wednesday, the story<sup>2</sup> was about two very elderly men who managed to escape from their old-age home in Germany and were found hours later in a different city... בפסטיבל מטאל, at a heavy-metal festival. The organisers of the festival gave a wonderful quote: “אין גיל מבוגר מדי”, there is no age at which one is too old... לרוקנרול – to rock and roll!” What a wonderful made-up Hebrew verb. But the fact that that was the top story on Israeli news for a day indicates that the summer silly season has spread to the Middle East.
- 2 The silly season must have infected me slightly, as well, because when I read through Parashat Re'eh my eye was immediately drawn to that most important of commandments, which appears just ahead of the passage we read today. What is that important commandment? We're not allowed to eat bats.<sup>3</sup> 'Oh, no,' I thought, 'that's my lunch plans ruined.'
- 3 In Parashat Re'eh, bats come at the end of a long list of birds. They're not technically birds themselves, but nevertheless the prohibition on eating them follows on from prohibitions on eating the owl, the stork, the heron, the hoopoe...



- 4 Jewish tradition has a surprising amount to say about the bat. Surprisingly little of it bears even the slightest relation to reality. The Talmud<sup>4</sup> tells us, “A male hyena after seven years transforms into an insect-eating bat. An insect-eating bat after seven years transforms into a herbivorous bat. A herbivorous bat after seven years transforms into a thistle. A thistle after seven years transforms into a briar. A briar after seven years transforms into a demon.” (The precise edition in which I read this has, at the bottom of the page, a helpful note from the editor<sup>5</sup> telling us, “It would appear that the Talmud here is not referring to a transformation that is recognised by modern science.” No way!)
- 5 I recently downloaded the wonderful Sefaria app on my 'phone, which contains virtually every Jewish text ever written. In the last year at Leo Baeck College, I've barely scratched the surface of the content to which Sefaria gives me ready access, but those I have been lucky enough to study cover a huge range. Being honest, a lot of them fall into the same category as the one where the bat turns into a thistle, ie a category called Totally Ridiculous. There's a passage of Talmud where the rabbis make a series of animal noises;<sup>6</sup> a bit in the Book of Kings where some children tease Elijah about his baldness, to which Elijah reacts by releasing two bears which massacre 42 of the poor kids;<sup>7</sup> and the wonderfully-named Rabba bar-bar-Chana who told tall tales including one of the time when he landed his boat on a grassy island only to discover that it was, in fact, a giant sleeping fish.<sup>8</sup>
- 6 I've also come across texts that are unexpectedly or touchingly inspiring. One of them is the Torah reading we just heard, setting out in the strongest possible Hebrew terms God's expectation that we should look after our fellow citizens in their time of need, open our hand to them, and not split hairs or act against the spirit of the rules to evade our responsibilities.



- 7 How do we rationalise a religion with such a rich corpus of texts which contains both the beautiful ethical messages of Parashat Re'eh, and also the drivel about the island-that's-actually-a-fish?
- 8 I think, the same way we rationalise having a silly season in the news. Our media does a lot of very important and valuable work, exposing injustice, informing us about vital matters that affect our lives. And it also runs daft stories about kung-foo fighting llamas and chunks of cheese that look like Jesus.
- 9 Why do newspapers insist on telling us about kung-foo fighting llamas? There are two reasons. One is that they need to sell copies, so they need to balance the serious hard news that interests some people with the lighter stories that interest others; if they go bankrupt there'll be a huge gap in our society. Secondly, it's a summer break for the journalists too. They've had a long hard year and want to let their hair down and have a bit of a laugh.
- 10 Both of these reasons can apply to Judaism's mixture of the sublime and the surreal. We need something a bit titillating to make us sit up and say, "Wow!" – even if our next reaction is to say, "That's ridiculous." We need something a bit quirky that we can show the kids in Ivriah to make them smile and feel that synagogue isn't just a boring place where they come to study a foreign language and some bland morals.
- 11 And similarly, the rabbis of old, and the student rabbis of new, could do with a laugh from time to time. After wading through the list of kosher and non-kosher birds, trying in vain to discern any sort of pattern, keeping an eye on the grammar and the roots and all the other things my teachers discipline me to do when reading Torah, it was fun and therapeutic to Google 'bats in



Judaism' and come across that weird shtick about how bats are actually all transformed hyenas.

- 12 The laws of treating our fellow citizens well are important. The fun bits are important too.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 11.08.18**

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 15:1-11

<sup>2</sup> 'שני קשישים נעלמו מבית אבות בגרמניה, ונמצאו שעות לאחר מכן בפסטיבל מטאל', *Ha'aretz*, 7 August 2018: <<https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/europe/1.6359459>>

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 14:18

<sup>4</sup> bBava Kama 16a

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

<sup>6</sup> bPesachim 112b

<sup>7</sup> 2 Kings 2:23-25

<sup>8</sup> bBava Batra 73b