



SERMON SHOFTIM:¹
I THOUGHT OZ WAS A TERRIBLE BEAST!

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 18 August 2018
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion each saw the Wizard of Oz differently.² Dorothy saw a giant head, the Scarecrow a beautiful woman, the Tin Man a terrifying beast, and the Lion a ball of fire. But even though they all saw Oz in different ways, the same command came through loud and clear to each of them: kill the Wicked Witch of the West. They never questioned the genuineness of the instruction and, despite their unhappiness about being sent out to kill, they set off for Winkie Country. After all, they'd been commanded to by a real wizard... hadn't they?

- 2 We'll return to them shortly, but turning now to the United States – not to Kansas, actually, but to Louisiana – in 1934, the Louisiana State Legislature passed a law which said that parties to a lawsuit were permitted to try to dent their opponents' testimony "in any unlawful way".³ So if an angry litigant wanted to encourage a hostile witness to change their story by making them walk on hot coals, or torturing family members in front of them, that would be fine... Except that wouldn't be fine, and the 1934 law very obviously meant to say that parties could dent their opponents' testimony in any lawful way. The 'un' was a basic typo that somehow made it into the final version. But everyone was mature and sensible and read the legislation as its authors had intended. Nobody tried to make their adversaries walk on hot coals.



- 3 The Torah contains typos too. The Masoretes, 8th century scholars who pored over the un-vowelled text we find in a Torah scroll and wrote in the vowels, added in a few corrections as they went. This device is called K're-and-K'tiv: it's said like 'this' even though it's written like 'this'.
- 4 Most of the changes really are very minor spelling alterations – a mistaken vav swapped for a yud⁴ or a surplus silent hey deleted.⁵ But sometimes they went further. There are a few occasions where a whole word is substituted for another word; the Talmud⁶ tells us that this is to ensure that bits of the Torah written “in a coarse manner” are publicly read out only “in a refined manner”. These changes function a bit like English euphemisms: ‘and so-and-so lay with his wife’⁷ instead of... what we actually know it actually means. The Masoretic scholars were clearly delicate sorts!
- 5 But these wholesale amendments – rare, but wholesale – to the actual language of the Torah go far wider than simple correction of errors. So now we've seen two things that the Masoretes did: their first strategy was to correct basic errors, like the Louisiana courts which did their own K're-and-K'tiv by reading 'lawful' instead of 'unlawful'; and their second strategy instituted outright changes to reflect the sensibilities of the Jewish people at the time.
- 6 I think the sensibilities of the Jewish people in our current time probably blanch at some of the commandments we read this morning. Particularly: “In the towns which the Eternal One your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive.”⁸ This casual instruction to commit genocide somehow seems all the more chilling in light of the commandment literally two verses later reminding the Israelite army to look after local fruit trees while slaughtering the townsfolk.



- 7 How do we as modern Jews deal with such a nasty, bloodthirsty text? We could borrow the Masoretes' second strategy and paper over the cracks by substituting less objectionable language: perhaps we could accept what's written but, when saying it out loud, swap the genocide for, "Deal with the townsfolk."
- 8 This would still leave a couple of problems though. Firstly, we'd be going far further than the Masoretes ever did: they'd exchange one word for another, one word in a few thousand, not delete and replace whole sentences.
- 9 But secondly and more importantly, we'd still be accepting that the horrible first version was written in the Torah. We'd just... not be reading it out. Those reading out the euphemistic 'he lay with his wife' know full well that what's actually inscribed in the scroll is different; they concede that the raunchy language is genuine and simply choose not to use it themselves.
- 10 That's not good enough for me. I don't want a holy book that tells me to engage in indiscriminate slaughter. Whether I read that page or not, I don't want it there at all. I don't want to carry it when I put a Tanach in my bag. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to connect such a horrific message with the beautiful and uplifting and inspiring God that gives me a beautiful and uplifting and inspiring Judaism.
- 11 So what's the answer? I think it lies in the Masoretes' first strategy. And in the Louisiana example. This isn't about adjusting language we accept as genuine, to suit our modern sensibilities. It's about accepting that the language is not genuine. It's about correcting an error. God didn't say, "In the towns which I am giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive." The Torah claims that God said it. The Torah is wrong.



- 12 If I was in an Orthodox synagogue right now, I'd be very unpopular. (Maybe I'm very unpopular here too but hopefully that's just coincidence.) So unpopular, in fact, that, slightly tongue-in-cheek, I've given this sermon the subtitle *Now I'm in trouble...*
- 13 "The effrontery," an Orthodox congregation would be huffing (and perhaps many in Progressive congregations might huff with them), "the effrontery of declaring that the Torah is wrong! Of course a commandment to commit genocide doesn't sit well with us, but then again it is in the Torah. Think what a risk we'd be taking by declaring that part of the Torah is wrong!"
- 14 To which I can only respond... think what a risk we'd be taking by refusing even to consider that possibility. It's the same risk. Striking out a genuine line of Torah would be bad, certainly, but no worse than keeping in a false one. If the Torah is wrong and God didn't command us to commit genocide, then God is going to be pretty narked off if we go on attributing such a nasty sentiment to Divine influence for years to come. (And Heaven forbid anyone should actually follow the commandment and commit genocide in God's name but against God's will.)
- 15 If an army officer receives an order from their general to do something questionable, and they have doubts about the order's genuineness, they should seek to verify it rather than act straight away. While questioning an order might look disrespectful, on the contrary, it pays true honour to the general. In fact, to carry out a dubious order without a second thought risks doing exactly what the general doesn't want; that would not be deferential at all – in fact it would risk serious disobedience. Similarly, if the courts of Louisiana had seen the 1934 law, shrugged their shoulders and thought, "Well, it says he can torture the witness's children; it's not for us to



intervene,” they would be ignoring the genuine (and obvious) wishes of the politicians who sought to prevent such a thing from happening, in favour of a plainly mistaken text which said the exact opposite. That would not be deferential.

- 16 Likewise, it is incumbent upon us, as committed Jews coming across a questionable patch of Torah, and seeking to do what God wants, to ask the question: is this right? I’ve already shared my answer: no. Now let me share my reasoning.
- 17 We know God’s voice well: rich and sonorous, God’s is the voice that desires lovingkindness, olive branches, justice, friendliness to stranger, compassion to orphan.⁹ Indiscriminate genocide seems a bit out of character. We can reject one particular statement attributed to God without rejecting God altogether; perhaps this is such an occasion. So my first reason for suggesting that God didn’t really give the commandment in Deuteronomy 20:17 is that it doesn’t sound like God’s voice.
- 18 My second reason is that it does sound like a human being’s voice. There is a distinctly human flavour to the whole notion of slaughtering people just because they inconveniently insist on living in in the town that we want to live in. Rabbi John D Rayner considered a similarly questionable commandment – the rule against intermarrying with any Moabite for generations to come¹⁰ – and concluded,¹¹ “The motive is all too human! It is implacable vindictiveness towards an entire race on account of the alleged misdeeds of their remote ancestors.” Implacable vindictiveness... now who does that remind me of more: God, or humankind?
- 19 So could it be that, like Dorothy and her friends in the throne room of the Emerald City, we’ve discovered that the brash belligerent booming of



Deuteronomy chapter 20 verse 17 is, in fact, no God great and terrible but “a little old man, with a wrinkled face, making believe”¹² for base human motives? I think so.

- 20 This makes me a lot more happy about carrying an uncomfortable page of Torah around in my bag. It’s a record of a blip in Israelite history, a time when our ancestors let their natural human instincts override their Divinely-granted faculties of love and compassion.
- 21 The story of the Louisiana typo is, looking back, a rather fun one (at least I found it amusing) and it’s as well that we remember what happened, rather than expunge it totally. Treating the dark and violent passages of the Torah in the same way can be a good way forward for us too. That is why I calmly sat by on the bimah as we read from the Torah an incitement to commit genocide.

Check against delivery.

GW 18.08.18

¹ Deuteronomy 20:10-21:9

² L Frank Baum. *The Wizard of Oz* (Chicago: George M Hill, 1900): 126-35.

³ 1934 La Acts 115, section 1. Quoted by Michael S Fried in *A Theory of Scrivener’s Error* 52 Rutgers L Rev 589.

⁴ Eg Genesis 8:17

⁵ Eg Genesis 27:3

⁶ bMegillah 25b

⁷ Eg Deuteronomy 28:30

⁸ Deuteronomy 20:17

⁹ Can’t be bothered to cite these, but the Tanach is a good read, why not check it out yourself?

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 23:4

¹¹ John D Rayner. *Jewish Religious Law: a Progressive perspective* (London: Bergbahn Books, 1998): 57-58.

¹² L Frank Baum, *ibid*: 183-84.