



**SERMON YOM KIPPUR MORNING:
MATIR ASURIM**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Wednesday 19 September 2018
Beit Klal Yisrael

- 1 Just before I left for university, a Jewish friend told me, “You might keep kosher now, but I bet you’ll give that up as soon as you’re living with people who don’t. You’ll wake up, smell them cooking bacon, and cave in.” (I should probably have put a trigger warning – ‘Contains traces of food’ – on this before reading it on Yom Kippur!) But I didn’t cave in. There was no easy way to get kosher meat in Brighton, so I remained rigidly vegetarian.
- 2 I used to like a pasta bake on occasion, using that pasta bake sauce with the little guy in a bowler hat on the jar. They make two versions, a vegetarian one and a bacon one. One time, I ate my pasta bake, but left the washing up until the next morning. When I went to the sink, I found an empty jar of the bacon sauce. Now, I didn’t know for sure that I’d made that mistake; my mind immediately thought, “Hmm, it did taste a bit odd last night...” but then there’s nothing like the human brain for suggestibility. I had no way of finding out whether it was my bacon jar or a flatmate’s. But I had sleepless nights over it for more than a week. Sleepless nights over having maybe (I still wasn’t sure) accidentally (it clearly wasn’t deliberate) transgressed a commandment that, in the grand scheme of things, has no real ethical value and isn’t the most important. Yet even today I shudder to think about it.
- 3 Guilt is a powerful thing.
- 4 There’s a wonderful book which has been out of print for most of the last hundred years – *Lord Cammarleigh’s Secret*.¹ In the opening scene, a young



out-of-work actor, on the edge of starvation, is walking through London when he sees Lord Cammarleigh, an influential Cabinet minister. Recognising his Lordship, Anthony the actor realises that this is his one chance to escape poverty. He marches up to Lord Cammarleigh, taps him on the shoulder, and declares, “I know your secret!” Poor Lord Cammarleigh spends the rest of the novel as a nervous wreck, subjugated to Anthony’s total power, blackmailed for every penny and every last shred of influence he has.

- 5 Of course, Anthony didn’t know Lord Cammarleigh’s secret at all. It was a bluff. And a bluff that paid off because Lord Cammarleigh was going about his life with years of guilt layered onto him.
- 6 At the start of this morning’s Yom Kippur service, we recited the traditional morning blessings together. One of them was **מתיר אסורים**, to give thanks to God who frees the captive.² This blessing appears in every shacharit service, but in the *Forms of Prayer* machzor, for the High Holy Days, Rabbi Jonathan Magonet added a preamble for each blessing. For **מתיר אסורים**, the preamble is: “When I am caught by old guilt or destructive habits, release me from the prison of my past.”³
- 7 Lord Cammarleigh was undoubtedly trapped in the prison of his past. Even if the enterprising Anthony hadn’t come along, what a miserable life the minister must have led – fearing exposure at every moment, wracked with all-consuming guilt for we know not what. Lady Macbeth, Bill Sikes... one can think of countless examples of well-known characters suffering the same fate.
- 8 The reason that incapacitating guilt is such a recurrent theme in literature is that it’s a basic human experience. Whatever the magnitude of our sin, whether it was a serious crime or a cross word with a loved one, we can so



easily become trapped in the prison of our past – some of us in the prison of the distant past, as I once again relive the moment I found that bacon jar.

We've all done things since last Yom Kippur of which we are ashamed. Now I've told you about Anthony's trick, we might be proof against an Anthony-style sting – if someone comes up to you later today and declares, "I know your secret!", you may not fall for it – but nevertheless, we all have secrets.

- 9 Thinking more carefully about the language of the morning blessing – its meditation said, "Release me from the prison of my past," but the actual words of the blessing itself are **מתיר אסורים**. The verb **להתיר** can indeed mean 'to release', but it can also mean 'to loosen' (as in, to loosen shackles) or 'allow to break free'.⁴ It's a causative conjugation. So we could read the blessing as normally translated – God, who frees the captive. Or, we could read it as referring to God who loosens the captive's shackles, or God who allows the captive to break free.
- 10 In days of old, atonement would be made on Yom Kippur with, of all things, goats. One would be sacrificed, and the other would be sent into the wilderness⁵ (some interpret this as a reference to Abraham's two sons: Isaac was [nearly] sacrificed, and Ishmael was ejected into the desert). But it's the goat that was thrown out of the community that was the important one. The people would transfer their sins to this goat – hence the expression 'scapegoat'⁶ – and it would be shooed away, leaving the people, formalistically, blameless.
- 11 I didn't really need to include the word 'formalistically' in there. Obviously it was formalistic. Theatrics with goats does not, in and of itself, soothe the troubled spirit or eradicate the effects of a wrong. I threw the jar of bacon sauce away; that didn't help. Smashing or sacrificing the jar wouldn't have



helped either. Maimonides wrote about the ram ceremony as being purely figurative: “Sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress people with a certain idea, to induce them to repent, as if to say, we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible.”⁷

- 12 That is stage one: cleansing ourselves of the immediate, physical manifestations of wrongdoing. This includes making amends and doing what we can do eliminate the practical effects of what we’ve done wrong, and seeking to make peace with the ones we’ve wronged to ensure that they do not come back seeking reparations at a later stage, and remind us of what we did.
- 13 The actual verb ‘to atone’, לכפר, which is of course what gives Yom Kippur its name, literally means ‘to cover up’: Noah’s manual for building the ark instructed him to לכפר its inside with pitch.⁸ In other words: a fresh start. Not so much a cover-up, but a chance to put things right and then wipe the slate clean, without our past being held over us.
- 14 But wiping the slate clean requires a stage two: after making amends and discarding the physical reminders of sin, how do we go about freeing ourselves from the mental and emotional manifestations of wrongdoing?
- 15 This is a modern Yom Kippur’s function in the modern Jewish calendar. It allows the captives, us, to break free. Nobody frees us: it’s not a magical, automatic route to a clear conscience. Instead, Yom Kippur is a time when our shackles are loosened. We’re exempted from our normal daily duties – eating, washing, turning up to work. We’re presented with a whole day of



liturgy. We're given pre-scripted confessions and silent space for personal confession. We're given every opportunity to break ourselves free from the shackles of guilt, but we are not actually freed. The window has been left unbarred, we've been smuggled a file baked into a cake, the gates of repentance are open⁹ – the stage is set for our escape from the prison of our past – but the final and crucial steps through them, into the freedom that lies beyond, must be ours.

Check against delivery.

GW 19.09.18

¹ Roy Horniman. *Lord Cammarleigh's Secret* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907). Fortunately it is available online: <<https://archive.org/details/lordcammarleighs00horniala>>

² Borrowed from Psalm 146:7.

³ Assembly of Rabbis of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain. *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship: Volume 3 – Prayers for the High Holydays* (London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1985): 348.

⁴ David J A Clines (ed). *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew: Volume 5* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press): 817.

⁵ mYoma 6

⁶ Jonathan Sacks. "The Scapegoat: shame and guilt" (20 April 2015): <<http://rabbisacks.org/the-scapegoat-shame-and-guilt-achrei-mot-kedoshim-5775/>>

⁷ Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:46

⁸ Genesis 6:14

⁹ Lamentations Rabbah 3:15