



**SERMON NITZAVIM:
TORAH WITHOUT BORDERS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 8 September 2018
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 I have a standard travelling-rabbi-kit which I take with me when I'm leading services away from home. A Liberal siddur, a Reform siddur, tallis bag, Strepils, the Sefaria iPhone app containing every Jewish text one could dream of, even sometimes a portable lectern. But my travelling-rabbi-kit has a temporary guest star at the moment: sitting in my flat at the moment is a Torah scroll, which I've borrowed to use when I lead Rosh Hashanah services over the next couple of days.
- 2 Having a Torah scroll in my possession is astonishingly exciting. I collected it from College and carefully strapped it into the back seat of my car (using the seatbelt). When I parked, I carried it round the corner to my front door – this being Golders Green, not a single eyebrow was raised. And now it's sitting there. And I'm so tempted to get it out, look at it, find my bar mitzvah portion, find that bit in Exodus where the words are written like brickwork,¹ gaze at the crowns on the letters... The possibilities for bedtime readings are endless.
- 3 I'm not 100% sure why the physical sefer Torah holds this fascination for me. It's not like I can't read the Bible on my 'phone – and do so with the added benefits of vowels, singing notes, translation, commentary and not having to lug a great big roll of vellum around the country. But I think it's so powerful to have an actual Torah scroll in my home because, unlike any app, the physical scroll feels authoritative. Obviously this particular one is no more



authoritative than any other, and it certainly doesn't date back to Sinai, but there's something about the physicality of it, the effort that went into preparing it, which gives me a tingle.

- 4 On Monday, I'll be packing up my travelling-rabbi-kit, strapping the Torah into my car and heading onto a ferry to my pulpit for Rosh Hashanah: of all places, on the Isle of Wight. They need me to take a scroll with me because they don't have one of their own; in fact, there is not a single sefer Torah on the whole island.
- 5 So while we read this Shabbat² **לא־מֵעַבֵּר לִים הִיא**, "it is not beyond the sea, that you need to ask 'Who will go over the sea and bring it to us?'" – well, for the Isle of Wight, it is beyond the sea, and they do need it brought to them. And that's what I'm going to do. The scroll's insurance policy says it can't be left unattended in a car, so I'm going to have to carry it with me on the ferry. Perhaps I should stand at the pointy end of the boat and hold it aloft like a figurehead (or like the *Titanic* poster) – after all, I'm told Torah scrolls like a nice bow.³
- 6 Of course, the observation in this week's parasha that the Torah is not beyond the sea was more figurative than literal. It means that, following revelation, the Torah is accessible to us: there's no excuse for not bringing it into our lives. One verse earlier is another poetic comparison: **לא בשמים היא**, the Torah is not in heaven. But that's a slightly more intriguing one, because it raises the question: if the Torah is not in heaven, what is God's connection with it? If the argument 'it's not in the sea, it's on the land' is supposed to mean we can easily access and refer to the Torah, the opposite argument – 'it's not on the land, it's in the sea' – would lead to the opposite conclusion,



that the Torah is inaccessible. So if it's not in heaven, what does God do when God wants to refer to the Torah?

- 7 A Talmudic tale⁴ tells us the slightly surprising answer: nothing. God can't refer to the Torah. We're told: "When Moses died, Joshua forgot 300 of the laws, and became doubtful about 700 more. The people said to Joshua, 'Ask!' But Joshua replied, 'It is not in heaven.' And God added, 'It is not possible for Me to tell you these laws.'"
- 8 The Israeli philosopher Moshe Halbertal describes⁵ this moment as "the transition from inspiration to interpretation": after Moses, no longer does Jewish authority "derive from direct, personal experience of revelation", but rather it comes from the power and scholarship and wisdom of being an interpreter of the corpus of texts that were revealed.
- 9 The Israelites who forgot 300 of their laws tried to plug this gap by urging Joshua, "Ask God!" – that had been what Moses would do, but after his death it was no longer the solution. Asking God was no good. Instead, the Jewish people had matured, and were tasked with plugging gaps in their knowledge under their own steam.
- 10 The 16th-century Italian commentator Sforino⁶ said that the principle of לא-לא מעבר לים היא means that, in modern times, lack of access to expert Torah scholars is no excuse for poor behaviour: "True, there are commandments which are difficult to master without expert guidance; repentance, however, is not one of them."
- 11 When Moses smashed the commandments on his first return from Mount Sinai, it was a disaster for the Israelites, because that was their only source of the law; there was no back-up, no photocopies, no iPhone apps (although



of course Moses did have two tablets...). There was nothing to help the Israelites through the legal void into which they had suddenly been cast. But by the time of Joshua, the second set of stone tablets, while still important, were important in a different way. It was not as if they were the only means by which the Israelites could discern what God wanted of them: the Israelites had their own intellect and creativity for that! The importance of the stone tablets was as an artefact. The physical presence of them was reminiscent of the most exciting moment in the people's history. The weight of them was symbolic. The extraordinary dedication that went into lugging them round the desert was a respect for the past and a reverence for tradition. That's why I like having a sefer Torah in my flat, in my car, in my hands.

12 But it's also not the be-all and end-all. The **לא־מַעְבֵּר לִים הַיָּם** of **הַיָּם** does not refer to the physical scroll. It doesn't mean that literal sefer Torah isn't across the sea. The Isle of Wight, and countless other Jewish communities, may well be some distance from their nearest sefer Torah. And while scrolls are a worthwhile investment in our history and peoplehood, and a beautiful tactile symbol of where we've come from, sifrei Torah don't actually come cheap, so we can't really fault synagogues who don't own one, still less individual Jews!

13 Instead, that verse about the accessibility of Torah refers to its content. We're in a post-Moses world. We don't rely on direct experience of Divine revelation to know what God wants of us, to be bound into the Jewish people. We don't need to quake with absolute terror every time someone nearly drops a scroll or damages a chumash. We're in no danger of losing our Judaism through physical accident, for our Judaism is not over the sea: it's in our hearts and, most importantly, in our minds.



14 Let us enter the new year in this spirit. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 08.09.18

¹ Some people refer to this as the Song of the Sea. I call it that bit in Exodus where the words are written like brickwork.

² Deuteronomy 30:13

³ This is a nautical reference, you landlubber.

⁴ bT'murah 16a

⁵ Moshe Halbertal. *People of the Book: canon, meaning and authority* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997): 20.

⁶ Sforino on Deuteronomy 30:13