



**SERMON ROSH HASHANAH:
THE YEAR OF THE SLIGHTLY-CLOSED EARS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Monday 10 September 2018
South Hants/ The Isle of Wight

- 1 The past year has been the year of the slightly-closed ears.
- 2 This is, theoretically, our last Rosh Hashanah as members of the EU. So Brexit: the slightly-closed ears of the government hear only the voices and statistics and arguments and pleas that they choose. The quest to deliver 'the Brexit that the people voted for' is based on the notion that Britain voted for a given Brexit. We didn't. The ears aren't totally closed: just slightly-closed, enough to be selective, enough to tell us about the people to whom these ears are attached.
- 3 For many British Jews, this is their first Rosh Hashanah as non-members of the Labour Party. So the anti-Semitism scandal: the slightly-closed ears of the party leadership are picking up the voices of the tiny minority of Jews who support their watered-down policy against anti-Semitism, picking them up loud and clear. But the majority – our rabbis, our elected bodies – not being heard. Slightly-closed ears.
- 4 The Grenfell Tower Inquiry is the first chance that many of the tower's former residents, and their families, have ever had of being listened to. These people lived in the heart of London, less than five miles from Downing Street, yet society cut them off, excluded them, closed its eyes to the reality of their lives... until this Inquiry, set up especially to listen, albeit through slightly-closed ears: there are strict terms of reference. Talk about the fire, OK. Talk about wider social issues before and after, not OK. Slightly-closed ears.



- 5 The endlessly perplexing story of the Binding of Isaac¹ is full of slightly-closed ears. Two moments in particular are drawn out by later retellings.
- 6 The first retelling is not all that much later. Written around the second century, the Targum Jonathan is, officially, a translation of the Torah into Aramaic. But it's a very, very free translation, and the translator allowed himself to add in lots of extra stories and narrative details. For the Binding of Isaac, he added a prequel.
- 7 Remember, in the Torah itself, the passage starts, "And it came to pass that God tested Abraham, and called to him, 'Abraham!' And Abraham said, 'Here I am.'"² How did the Targum elaborate on this?
- 8 "Isaac and his brother Ishmael quarrelled; and Ishmael said, 'I should inherit from our father because I am his firstborn son.' And Isaac said, 'No, I should inherit, because I am the son of Sarah his wife, whereas you are the son of Hagar her handmaid.' Ishmael answered, 'I am more righteous than you, because I was circumcised at thirteen years, so I was old enough to hide or refuse had I wanted to, but you were circumcised at eight days old, so we have no way of telling whether or not you would have agreed.' Isaac responded, 'Behold now, today I am thirty-seven years old, and if the Holy One, ever to be blessed, were to demand all my limbs, I would not refuse.' These words were heard before the Eternal One, and God at once decided to test Abraham, so called to him, 'Abraham!' And Abraham said, 'Here I am.'"³
- 9 It's a much better opening – see how it seamlessly slides back into the actual language of the Torah at the end? – but what does it tell us about Abraham? Abraham heard God's challenge straight away ("Here I am!") but apparently he was blissfully unaware of thirty-seven years of serious, bitter rivalry between his two sons. Family affairs, local matters, things going on right



under his nose, seem to have passed him by completely; Abraham was living in a different dimension, very attached to his image of himself as a holy man in congress with God, so that when God called to him from ever so far away, he jumped up immediately. Perhaps this explains why he was so ready to sacrifice his son; God came first, family came second.

- 10 The second retelling of the Binding of Isaac story is much more recent, written by Rabbi Karen Soria in the 1980s. She examined the episode from Sarah's point of view, Sarah who was left behind at the bottom of the mountain while Abraham took her only son away into the wilderness to do she knew not what. Contemplating the passage of the Torah reading in which the angel called out, "Abraham! Abraham!" to stop the sacrifice at the last minute,⁴ Rabbi Soria wrote:
- 11 "Sarah dreamt of firestone and knife, flame-maker and blade; and now her head reeled with her dizzying realisation. Sarah struggled to stop the dream, to snatch away her son. But the dream slipped out of her grasp as she felt the universe spinning around her and images whirling about her. Faster and faster the pictures leaped out, heaping up on her. The altar was made; wood laid out; firestone readied; Isaac bound: altar, wood, firestone, Isaac; wood, firestone, Isaac, Abraham; altar, Isaac, Abraham, knife; firestone, Isaac, Abraham, knife; Isaac, Abraham, knife, ram. The images flashed too quickly for her to separate them. But a ram – she had seen a ram! Abraham, lift up your eyes and see! He lifted the knife. Blinded by a fear and light greater than any she had ever known, Sarah screamed, 'Abraham! Abraham!' And then Abraham heard the angel of God calling him."⁵
- 12 Wow.



- 13 But what does this tell us about Abraham? There's been a bit of a switch. Before, he was deaf to his family and alert only to missives from above. Now, something of a reversal. Abraham didn't hear the angel calling off the sacrifice, not until Sarah – his wife, his partner in life, the mother of his favourite child, the matriarch of his family – not until Sarah screamed, from ever so far away, did he somehow hear her and wake up to the reality of what he was about to do. And then he stopped.
- 14 His slightly-closed ears were, first, slightly-closed to anything that did not originate from the spiritual plane, then, when his priorities shifted, and he was holding a knife over his own flesh and blood, his ears were slightly-closed to anything not from that earthly, family plane.
- 15 Poor Abraham never got the balance quite right. To be fair – probably, neither do we. It's hard to have one foot in the earthly plane and one foot in the spiritual plane and manage to attune ourselves to messages from both. Far easier to slightly-close our ears, whether to one plane altogether or to one at a time in turn.
- 16 Rosh Hashanah kicks off a ten-day period where, however hard we find this balancing act in our daily lives, we can now place particular emphasis on succeeding with it. We connect with the spiritual plane through prayer and worship, reading texts from our history and meditating in our hearts. And we connect with the earthly plane by coming together as a community, by contemplating our deeds over the last year, the people we wronged, the things we did right, our relationship with our loved ones, how we connect with each other.
- 17 Like Abraham at the beginning of his story, we listen for the still small voice of God. Like Abraham at the end of his story, we are alive to the cries of our



family. We hear when Heaven calls to us. We hear when our earthly companions call to us. Now is the time when, in the words of Isaiah,⁶ the ears of the deaf are unstopped.

- 18 The past year has been the year of the slightly-closed ears. May the coming ten days lead us into a year of open ears. Kein y'hi ratzon – may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 10.09.18

¹ Genesis 22:1-19

² Genesis 22:1

³ Targum Jonathan on Genesis 22:1

⁴ Genesis 22:11

⁵ Karen Soria. 'A Modern Midrash on Genesis 22: Sarah and the Binding of Isaac', *Journal of Reform Judaism* 29 (1982): 37-39.

⁶ Isaiah 35:5