



SERMON VAYEIRA:¹ MOCK THE WEAK

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 27 October 2018
Wimbledon Synagogue

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- 1 To what extent does a responsible newspaper editor have to take care not to whip up their readers into a frenzy of hatred?
- 2 Legally, maybe not at all. Jewishly, they probably do. The Mishnah tells us,² “One may not sell non-Jews bears, lions or anything that may harm the general public,” because if we don’t know the buyer well, we don’t know how responsible they will be with a dangerous item. Although there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with selling, the seller has a duty to make sure that they are not putting dangerous items in the hands of the careless. And so, I would suggest, a newspaper has a duty not to write damaging stories about someone in such a tone that a portion of its readership is stirred up to bombard that someone with hate-filled messages.
- 3 The front page of the *Jewish Chronicle* this week³ is an ‘exposé’ of a session delivered to a Labour Party branch meeting in Dulwich by a young woman called Annie Cohen. It gives a number of carefully-selected quotes from her speech, alleging that she “compared Tory immigration policy to the Holocaust”, drew links between “the Nazi Party and members of the Zionist movement”, argued that “Zionism is a racist ideology”. The front-page



spread was preceded, during the week, with four individual drip-published articles on the same topic, all of which were illustrated with a photo of Ms Cohen – a Holocaust researcher and Jewish educator by trade – wearing a yellow onesie and looking rather daft. She was not asked for comment before publication.

- 4 Annie Cohen has now published the full text of her speech,⁴ which shows that the *JC*'s quotes were taken rather out of context. It seems that she did, in fact, also deliver a number of sensible and helpful messages around anti-Semitism and how intolerable it is, something the *JC* omitted to mention. This is not to say that she said nothing controversial, far from it: much of what she said was contentious, disagreeable and without a doubt clumsily phrased. But we are talking, here, about a young person who is not a politician, not really that powerful or important in the grand scheme of things, giving a talk in Dulwich to a group of Labour Party anoraks... How did she become the Big Front-Page Bad of Anglo-Jewry?
- 5 The Jewish press of this country regrettably has a lot of followers (not all of whom are Jewish) who are openly extremist, who wish to stir up hatred against other minorities and who certainly won't brook any disagreement as to Israel. And, of course, the stories about Annie Cohen set them off. She has spent the week receiving hate-mail. I've spoken here before⁵ about the hate-mail I've received for daring to express a dissenting view, but I can tell you that anyone who is a woman gets it far worse. Rape threats, suggestions that they commit suicide... It happened to Nina Morris-Evans, who was pilloried by the Jewish press over the summer over the admittedly ill-considered 'Kaddish for Gaza' event. And now it's happening to Annie Cohen.



- 6 And it was so, so predictable. The *Jewish Chronicle* looks at its own Facebook page. It sees the sort of hate-filled comments that fester there. And I think it is regrettable, in choosing its targets, that it takes no account of the fact that it knows its coverage will expose vulnerable young people to abuse. The abuse is not the journalists' fault, but their failure to recognise that it is a consequence of their writing is troubling. Why was Annie not asked for a comment? Why did the journalist choose an outdated photo of her wearing a silly childish costume? Why was her session considered worthy of front-page coverage and four online stories at all, instead of a couple of paragraphs on an inside page? These all send subtle signals to readers; the *JC* doesn't intend these signals to incite harassment, but it knows, or surely should know, that they will and goes ahead regardless.
- 7 It is particularly pertinent that so many of these targets of communal ire are women. And it is no coincidence. Women who open their mouths in the public sphere are judged more harshly than men, and the abuse they receive is more frequent, more intense and far more explicit. We only have to consider the murder of Jo Cox MP, her murderer having been whipped into a frenzy by press coverage that took no account of the impact it would have on extreme individuals. Her killer could have chosen any left-leaning MP, but the one he chose was an outspoken woman. That was, sadly, no surprise. Astonishingly, society is not yet comfortable with outspoken women.
- 8 We see an ancient example of this double-standard, I think, in today's Torah reading.
- 9 In the chapter before today's passage, we hear Abraham's reaction to the news that he is to have a child at the age of 100: "He threw himself upon his face and laughed – קִיץְקָ – as he said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a



man a hundred years old, and can Sarah bear a child at 90?”⁶ Then the narrative moves on, and eventually Sarah herself came to hear the news, and we are told, “Sarah laughed – קִטְצָה – to herself, saying, ‘Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment, when my husband is so old?’” But after Sarah’s laughter, the narrative doesn’t move on. It pauses while she is rebuked by God, who demands of her husband, “Is anything too wondrous for Me?”

- 10 Both Abraham and Sarah snort with laughter at the news that they are to have a child in their old age. Same news. Same reaction. Only Sarah gets in trouble for it. Why could that be?
- 11 The medieval commentators try to come up with subtle distinctions between the two fits of the giggles. Radak⁷ suggests that Sarah’s laughter was “derisive”, whereas Abraham’s laughter merely demonstrated that “he rejoiced in his heart”. But this is a distinction that is not found in the text. The same word is used each time which means ‘to laugh at or with’.⁸ If the authors had wanted to indicate that Sarah’s reaction was materially different, they could easily have done so: the word they used, קִטְצָה, means ‘to laugh at or with’; but its cousin קִטְצָה means ‘to mock’, ‘to make a joke of’. If Radak’s understanding is correct, we would expect the text to use the first verb in relation to Abraham, and the second for Sarah. Yet the same word is used for each.
- 12 They both had the same reaction, yet Abraham, the man, was punished, while Sarah, the woman, was not. How can we explain this?
- 13 I’m still reeling from watching, a few weeks ago, the US Senate grill Dr Christine Blasey Ford as she described how Brett Kavanaugh, Trump’s



nominee to the Supreme Court, had sexually assaulted her as a teenager, and then grilling Judge Kavanaugh himself.⁹

14 Dr Ford, the accuser, sat in front of a semi-circle of senior politicians – 80% of them men – to be questioned on one particular evening from her youth, decades ago. Every time she conceded that she could not remember a particular detail, the internet, which was gathered in force to watch and comment on her ordeal, erupted with cries of, “Liar!” “She doesn’t have her story straight!” “Democrat stooge!” And yet her evidence was confident, consistent, honest (admitting to not remembering details, rather than trying to make them up, shows integrity) and, to my mind, credible.

15 Then Judge Kavanaugh took the stand. He is, of course, already a judge, a seasoned public figure, well used to being scrutinised in political fora. And he was angry. He lost his temper; he was self-pitying; he was aggressive; he was evasive; he was slick; he painted himself as the all-American hero and Dr Ford as a deluded, lying, politically-motivated stalker.

16 And yet... I’m going to pass round this still taken from the recording of the hearing.¹⁰ It was shared on Facebook with the caption, “Every. Woman. In. This. Photo.” Look



closely at the faces of everyone involved. In the centre is Judge Kavanaugh, his face contorted with his self-righteous contempt at the woman who dared accuse him of sexual assault. And behind him, in the row of spectators, the face of each woman is contorted into varying degrees of disgust, disbelief,



distaste. He wasn't convincing anyone. Except, perhaps, the powerful, privileged men on the committee, who voted the very next day to allow his nomination to proceed to the next stage.

- 17 The double standards, the wildly different ways in which the dignified accuser and the raving accused were treated, scandalised me.
- 18 And since, with Kavanaugh, we're talking about sexual acts, the second verb the Torah could have used about Sarah, but didn't, לִצְחֹק, the one that means 'to mock', also has another shade of meaning: 'to sport with', and, by euphemistic extension, 'to enjoy conjugal caresses'.
- 19 That could actually make sense here. The consonants are exactly the same, so the decision as to which of the two words to use was taken by the scholars who added in the vowels centuries after the text was written. Let's suppose for a moment that they'd decided to place the dots slightly differently: Sarah has just been told, at the age of 90, that she is once again to have relations with her husband. But now, the Torah doesn't say, "But Sarah laughed to herself," but, "Sarah felt a thrill to herself." In the sense of 'enjoying conjugal caresses'. She had an instinctive and eminently understandable reaction to a surprising piece of news.
- 20 So perhaps there was a difference of action between her and Abraham. This would explain the difference of treatment between her and Abraham. Yet it is still an instance of a woman being punished for feeling something instinctively. Abraham was free to fall on his face with joy; but when Sarah enjoyed her moment of reacting to the news, she was rebuked for it.
- 21 Society still imposes different expectations on, and has different reactions to, men and women: not just when it comes to sexual matters and gender issues



but any topic of public or political significance. Sarah and Abraham, Ford and Kavanaugh. Jo Cox. Nina Morris-Evans. Annie Cohen.

- 22 The story in today's Torah reading is thousands of years old, so perhaps its writers have an excuse for the double standards they applied. But the modern world really, really does not.

Check against delivery.

GW 27.10.18

¹ Genesis 18:1-19

² mAvodah Zara 1:7

³ Lee Harpin. 'Revealed: anti-Semitism training, Corbynite-style', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 26 October 2018: 1.

⁴ Annie Cohen. 'I tried to explain anti-Semitism and was accused of comparing Zionists to Nazis', *The Forward*, 24 October 2018: <<https://forward.com/opinion/letters/412611/i-tried-to-explain-anti-semitism-and-was-accused-of-comparing-nazis-to/>>

⁵ [5778] GW Sermon 9

⁶ Genesis 17:17

⁷ Radak on Genesis 18:12, 17:17 respectively

⁸ Brown-Driver-Briggs: קחצ

⁹ A transcript of this astonishing hearing has been published by *The Washington Post* here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/09/27/kavanaugh-hearing-transcript/?utm_term=.d916ff5f74e3>

¹⁰ Posted by the Facebook page *Boing Boing* on 27 September 2018: <<https://www.facebook.com/boingboing/photos/a.10151118038581179/10155713091541179/>>