



SERMON VAYIGASH:¹ MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 15 December 2018
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 I've always watched *The Apprentice*, but with this series I've been deeply bemused to find that the candidates are getting older: when I started watching, and I was about fifteen, the candidates were all quite a lot older than me. But now I seem to be older than lots of the candidates. Strange.
- 2 Of course, the problem with the current generation of *Apprentice* candidates having grown up, like me, watching *The Apprentice*, is that it's given them a model of 'how *Apprentice* candidates behave', and they are – consciously or unconsciously – imitating it. Each year, the stars of the show are just a little bit more shouty than the exemplars they watched the previous year. Just a little bit more vain. Just a little bit more given to talking in meaningless clichés. So by now, at series fourteen, those candidates who are my age have spent more than a decade closely observing increasingly ludicrous candidates, they have reached levels of cringeworthiness undreamed of by early generations of *Apprentice* heroes.
- 3 This year's candidates have had things to say such as, "My personality sells me,"² "There's no need to watch your back when you're already two steps in front"³ (surely that's actually precisely when you need to watch your back?) and, "I eat, sleep and breathe success."⁴ This candidate in particular got under my skin. Their smug self-satisfaction and endless self-belief, coupled with total lack of talent and total lack of ability to work with a team, infuriated me. Everything they did and said – their mannerisms, their turn of phrase, the



way they treated their fellow candidates – really, really annoyed me. And this from someone I’ve never even met in real life!

- 4 I guess we all have a personality type that we clash with. This *Apprentice* candidate exemplified that type for me. So too, I’m afraid to say, does the Biblical character of Joseph. I just cannot read anything he says or does, from this Shabbat’s parashah or from anywhere else in his lengthy story, without thinking, “What a...” followed by a word I wouldn’t use on the bimah.
- 5 A few weeks ago we read his very first appearance, in which he has a dream ghastly in its vanity and for some reason decides to share it. Even before he starts speaking, the text warns us that his recitation made his brothers “hate him all the more”.⁵ “Listen, pray, to this dream that I dreamed,” Joseph says. “And look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf.”⁶ Not having picked up the negative vibes from his first speech, he reaches yet greater heights of arrogance: “The sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing to me.”⁷
- 6 What a... Yes.
- 7 The rabbis of old were clearly not so keen on him either. In one of the most unflattering midrashim I can think of for a main, Israelite character, we are told that Joseph was like “a man who sat in the market, pencilling his eyes, curling his hair and lifting his heel, while exclaiming, ‘Aren’t I handsome! I am quite the man!’”⁸
- 8 This pattern of Joseph’s smug superiority continues throughout his life, which takes up the latter third or so of the Book of Genesis.



- 9 But it gets worse. It's fitting – sadly fitting – that earlier this week was Human Rights Day, because in this parashah Joseph moves being anti-social and enters into the territory of human rights violations. At the end of the story with the dreams, he was a hero: foreseeing the coming famine, it was Joseph who had the idea to stockpile food to keep Egypt safe when supplies ran out.⁹
- 10 Now we see that that was not his plan at all. He was not stockpiling food to keep the Egyptians safe. He was doing it to take them hostage and to improve his own position. Having risen from prisoner to Prime Minister in an incredibly short time, he forgets his roots and is happy to see the poor people starve rather than give them the food he has in abundance. To see them starve – or for them to demean themselves by begging and buying.
- 11 But it gets worse still. Once Joseph has taken all the Egyptians' farm animals and farmland and the people are still hungry, he steps up a gear and enslaves them.¹⁰ The image of him “moving the people city by city, from one end of Egypt even to the other”¹¹ is particularly chilling, and has strong echoes of the Khmer Rouge, who also forcibly transported those who lived in Cambodia's towns and forced them to work on huge collective farms.
- 12 In a few weeks' time, we begin the Book of Exodus, set around 50 years after this story. In Exodus, of course, it's not the Egyptians or the Cambodians who are the slaves: it's the Israelites. How did this transition happen? We're told: “There arose a new king who knew not Joseph.”¹² But I think the new Pharaoh did know Joseph. He may not have known him personally, or even known his name, but he clearly knew of Joseph's work. Because who was it who set Egypt the example of relying on institutionalised slave labour? Who



came up with the idea that enslavement was the way Egyptian society should react to times of crisis? Joseph.

- 13 The ripples of this week's parashah continue to make their effects felt later on still in the story of the Israelites. In the wilderness, it is always hunger which causes strife among the community, which causes them to mutter against their leaders.¹³ The ancestors of this generation took advantage of a vulnerable people's hunger and enslaved them; their descendants were enslaved and hungry.
- 14 There is a rabbinic principle called **מידה כנגד מידה**: measure for measure. In its longer form, it says: "By the way a person treats others, by that they will be treated."¹⁴ This is essentially the Jewish equivalent of karma. But the idea gets applied across the Torah as a whole – sometimes across the Old Testament as a whole. Joseph behaved badly but he never got his comeuppance: the comeuppance did come, but it fell not upon him but upon a later generation.
- 15 This is not comforting. The idea of a personal karma – if I do something wrong, it comes back to bite me; if I do something right, I get rewarded for it – that seems more or less fair. But the idea of intergenerational karma isn't nice. Why should I suffer because my ancestors misbehaved? Come to that, why should I be comfortable or well-off just because my ancestors were good?
- 16 It may not be comforting, but it's real life. Everybody has the capacity to act in a way that will have an impact on the future. That impact might be good or bad, intended or unintended. But from climate change to Brexit to writing wills to building a new visitor centre to commemorate Clifford's Tower, we can make a difference.



- 17 It may not be comforting. But it's empowering.
- 18 I have a deep distaste for Joseph. But as with many things that are unlikeable, offensive and wrong, that distaste teaches a worthwhile lesson. The power to create change is in our hands. Our descendants will evaluate how we use it.

Check against delivery.

GW 15.12.18

- ¹ Genesis 47:13-21
- ² Sarah Byrne
- ³ Frank Brooks
- ⁴ Kurran Pooni
- ⁵ Genesis 37:5
- ⁶ Genesis 37:6-7
- ⁷ Genesis 37:9
- ⁸ Genesis Rabbah 87:3
- ⁹ Genesis 41:29-36
- ¹⁰ Genesis 47:14-20
- ¹¹ Genesis 47:21
- ¹² Exodus 1:8
- ¹³ Eg Exodus 16:3
- ¹⁴ Eg bMegillah 12b