



## **SERMON MIKKETZ:<sup>1</sup> GROWTH AFTER DEATH**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 8 December 2018  
Tikvah Chadasha (Shenfield)

- 1 I have a tomato plant at home that doesn't produce any tomatoes. In fact, if you look closely at its base, you'll see that it's dead. Drooping brown leaves hanging limply off the stem – no sign of life at all. Except... a little higher up, it's showing more signs of life. And the further upwards you go, the more vibrant and green it gets. I keep watering it and while the dead section reaches higher and higher, the plant keeps growing more and more green from its constantly-rising top. I can't reach the highest leaves any more. And there are still no tomatoes.
- 2 The bizarre way this plant behaves – living bits inexplicably emerging from dead bits – reminds me a little of Pharaoh's dream of the seven thin ears of corn swallowing up the seven full ears.<sup>2</sup>
- 3 We almost always read from the story of Pharaoh's dream during Channukah. The word חנכה derives from the Hebrew root ח-נ-ך meaning 'dedication', and the festival is so-called, of course, because it is when we celebrate the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after it was desecrated by our oppressive enemies. Desecration aside, the Temple was left in a terrible mess. Anyone walking into it would immediately sense that it was abandoned, derelict, and totally unsuited to be the spiritual centre of the people of Israel.



- 4 Yet out of the ruinous state in which Antiochus's army left the Temple, new life grew. Green leaves emerged from roots which, on the surface, looked dry and dead – so it was with the tomato plant, so it was with the Channukah story.
- 5 But what of Pharaoh's dream? When I said it reminded me of my plant, I didn't mean it was a close parallel – it just seemed vaguely reminiscent... odd things happening with plants. Strictly speaking, however, it seems to be showing us more-or-less the opposite scenario: instead of new life emerging from dead stock, it is the emaciated, unhealthy stock which is swallowing up and destroying the healthy growths.
- 6 Yet we need to look at Pharaoh's dream not as a narrative in itself, but as a symbol. It sounds obvious (the whole point of the story is that everything he dreams about is symbolic) but the symbol was, specifically, a warning – of famine. Warnings are intended to alter future action, so we should treat them as being narratives of the change we want to see, not of the dire emergency they may depict. When we see that yellow warning triangle on a bottle of bleach, we don't think, "This means I'm going to end up with holes corroded into my hand." We think, "Thanks to this reminder, my hands are going to remain in one piece!"
- 7 So Pharaoh's dream was not about unhealthy stock swallowing up and destroying healthy growths. It is about how to avoid that. The future of which it spoke – and it spoke it implicitly, needing Joseph's insight to interpret it – was one without famine. A future where healthy growths abound.
- 8 Armed with knowledge of what the future has in store, the Egyptians know how to avoid the impending disaster. As soon as the famine starts – as soon as the ground begins to look parched, supplies become scarce, the rivers dry



up – the people can break open the silos in which they have been storing grain and, out of the deathly decay of starvation emerges an unexpected plenty.

- 9 That is why Parashat Mikkeitz aligns so well with Channukah: they are both about the journey from envisaged destruction to startling revival.
- 10 Channukah has one more iteration of this motif to contribute: light amidst the darkness. This is the most fundamental symbol of something positive appearing and sustaining itself in the face of something negative.
- 11 May we all go into our last two nights of Channukah in a spirit of appreciation for the new life we kindle with every light we light.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 08.12.18**

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 41:1-14

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 41:5-7