



SERMON VAYESHEV:¹
THE FIRST KINDERTRANSPORT

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 1 December 2018
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 ויביאו את־יוסף מצרימה – “And they took Joseph to Egypt.”²
- 2 In this week’s parasha, we read of the terrifying journey on which Joseph was taken, from the warm familiarity of his family to the harsh unknowns of Egyptian slavery. And notwithstanding the fact that God looked after him in his new life,³ what Joseph faced in Egypt was far worse than what he had become accustomed to in Canaan.
- 3 Or was it?
- 4 Let us remember exactly what chain of events led to Joseph being sold to slave-traders. When his brothers saw him approaching them, from across the field, their bitterness and jealousy boiled over and they began whipping each other into a murderous frenzy. “Now, let us kill this dreamer and cast him into a pit!” Then Reuben speaks up and urges against the slaughter, and Judah comes up with the bright idea of faking the death and selling Joseph on as a slave.⁴
- 5 So in fact, when we compare Joseph’s life in Canaan and Joseph’s life in Egypt, it’s not quite the right comparison to make. Because had the brothers not sold him to the passing Ishmaelites, they wouldn’t have just let him go to continue enjoying himself with his technicolour dreamcoat and his doting father. Had he remained where he was, he would, in all probability, have died.



- 6 2018 marks the 80th anniversary of the Kindertransport, and this Shabbat has been designated by World Jewish Relief as Kindertransport Shabbat. It is an occasion for us to commemorate the arrival of 10,000 Jewish children to this country, and to give thanks for the generosity and hospitality of the host families who so warmly opened their homes to their fellow human beings in need.
- 7 I want to reflect on a slightly different aspect of the Kindertransport: the parents. The countless German Jews who packed their children off into the unknown – to end up they knew not where, to live with they knew not whom, to be cared for they knew not how. These parents did not know whether their children would be taken in by a wealthy family or a poor one; by a kind family or a strict one. They did know that there was a risk – that their beloved offspring might end up in a worse position than the one in which they had been brought up. But they also knew that that was not the comparison. The lives that the Jewish community of Germany had led up until 1938 were no longer available. Everything was changing.
- 8 Just like Reuben and Judah, in that moment the parents were faced with a choice was between leaving perilously or staying even-more-perilously.
- 9 By the end of the Book of Genesis, Reuben and Judah were reunited with Joseph and knew the end of his story.⁵ They found out that he had survived and prospered, and they had the relief of learning that their gamble back in the field – selling Joseph into slavery and possible (but only possible) death – had paid off.
- 10 Many, probably most, of the Kindertransport parents never had that luxury. They never saw their children again. They never got the opportunity to see them grow up, to find out whether they would become a Peer of the Realm



tireless in their work to support refugees;⁶ whether they would become a famed illustrator of comic books;⁷ a professor of law at Oxford University.⁸ They never knew with the certainty of Reuben and Judah whether their gamble had paid off.

11 But we know that they made the right decision. So it is right for us, at this moment, to remember not only the children and those who offered sanctuary, but also the courage of the parents, who dared to dream of a surer life for their offspring.

12 I will now read the words of the Kindertransport prayer written by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg.⁹

Check against delivery.

GW 01.12.18

¹ Genesis 37:1-22

² Genesis 37:28

³ Genesis 39:2

⁴ Genesis 37:18-27

⁵ Genesis 45

⁶ Lord Dubs

⁷ Lily Renée

⁸ Sir Guenter Treitel

⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, 'Kindertransport commemorative prayer', published by World Jewish Relief: <https://www.worldjewishrelief.org/assets/000/002/424/Rabbi_Jonathan_Wittenberg_original.pdf?1542891031>