



**SERMON TERUMAH:¹
WILLIAM AND THE TABERNACLE**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 9 February 2019
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 This month marks the anniversary of my favourite ever fictional character. It's a hundredth anniversary, a centenary, so that probably lets on that it's not a biblical character. In fact, it's William Brown of the *Just William* stories.
- 2 William first appeared in *Home Magazine* as an 11-year-old boy in February 1919. He remained an 11-year-old boy throughout the 1920s and '30s. He continued to be 11 when war arrived, and when he first encountered "Hitler and the Nasties". Despite having several birthdays over the course of the 20th century, he was still 11 in his last story, published in 1970 after the death of his doting author Richmal Crompton.
- 3 The *William* books are one of the earliest examples of crossover fiction appealing equally to adults and children. The 10-year-old Gabriel who first encountered William was enthralled with his general riotousness and naughtiness. But the stories were never actually aimed at kids, and they've continued to grow on me in adult life. A more considered perspective on William shows me that his naughtiness is, in fact, almost always an unintended consequence of genuinely good intentions.
- 4 And his spirit... The things I love about William's spirit are too numerous to list. His bafflement at the grown-up world is a joy. His language – so often inexpertly borrowed from the parents whose social mores he fails to understand – makes me laugh until my sides ache. His unstintingly good heart and relentless optimism are a lesson to us all.



- 5 And his inventiveness is quite something. In one story, he sketches out his vision for the house he'll buy when he makes his first million: "It'll be a decent sort of house with no carpets or anythin' like that in, so that they can't say you've made 'em muddy with not wiping your boots, an' we can break anythin' we want to 'cause it won't matter 'cause we can pay for it. I'm goin' to break ten windows every day. I bet I'll have more fun than anyone else in the world. I'm goin' to keep a window mender in my house all the time mendin' the windows ready for me to break 'em again. An' I'm not goin' to have any flowers or paths in the garden. I'm jus' goin' to let it go wild with long grass an' trees. An' I'm goin' to buy a lot of wild animals from the Zoo to live in it – elephants an' lions an' tigers an' giraffes an' things like that. All livin' wild in the garden – but we'll tame them so's they'll be tame with us but wild with everyone else. I'm not goin' to have any flowers in the garden. I never see any sense in flowers. An' I'm goin' to have a sweet shop in the house too so's we can get sweets whenever we like. We'll all be livin' together in this house. An' I'm goin' to have a real train runnin' through it all down the passages an' through the rooms, with real coals, so's we can drive it about when it's too wet to go out to play with the wild animals. I'm goin' to have a rollercoaster instead of staircases an' I'm goin' to have swings on the roof an' I'm goin' to have a water-chute from the roof right down to a pond in the garden. An' I'm goin' to have one room with insects all over it – snails an' caterpillars crawlin' all over the walls, so's we can watch 'em. An' they'll look a jolly sight nicer than what wallpaper does. Seems queer to me," he ended meditatively, "that people have been buildin' houses all these years an' never thought of a few sens'ble things like that."²
- 6 We all dream about creating our own dream home. But William actually displayed a surprising level of intuition and intelligence in laying out his plan.



He started with problem-solving. ‘What’s the drawback with my current house?’ he asked himself. When he realised the answers – breakable items and boring wallpaper – he came up with solutions. Then he thought big: everyone’s dream home has a little bit of the extraordinary in it, a little bit of fantasy, and William duly installed a railway system and a waterslide. Finally, he thought practical. A big house with so many features would need someone to run it and do the workaday stuff with which William, busy with his rollercoaster and garden full of giraffes, would not want to bother. Hence the glazier on standby.

- 7 In this week’s parasha, the Torah sets out the blueprint for the Israelites’ dream home, the Tabernacle. Adorned with all manner of woods and metals and precious stones, the Tabernacle was a portable wonder. It was the last thing you would expect to see in the hands of a desert-dwelling migrant people who had been enslaved just years before.
- 8 Just like William Brown’s ideal home, the instructions for the Tabernacle answer the three main questions. First, what was the problem that needs solving? In this case, the lack of a holy communal space. This was a people, united by their history and their faith in God, in possession of the sacred tablets of stone, and they had no fitting place in which to store them.
- 9 Second, what fantastical device could be used to make it wondrous? The decorations went a long way towards that, but it’s also worth observing that the Tabernacle’s roof was made from the hide of an animal called the תחש. We have no clue what animal this was. The Old Jewish Publication Society translation calls it a seal; the New [and infinitely more sensible] JPS translation calls it a dolphin. The Talmud says³ it’s a unicorn. Whatever it was, it elevated the Tabernacle from being an implausible construction to a



phenomenal one which must have struck every Israelite with its splendour every time they saw it.

- 10 Third, how can this work in practice? The answer: nuts and bolts and loops and grooves. This was no pipe dream. The real, practical details are enumerated in the Torah, in sometimes tedious detail. The whole thing worked. It was designed so that it could be flat-packed, transported and reassembled. That was the need, and consideration was given as to how that need could be fulfilled.
- 11 These days, I dread to think what the RSPCA would say about a synagogue which announced a plan to decorate its sanctuary in dolphin skin. And they probably wouldn't be overly keen on William Brown's room full of snails and caterpillars. But nevertheless, the three-stage method for community building which both of them employed is valuable and one which every Jewish community can use.
- 12 What needs improving? What would add a little bit of the extraordinary to our experience? How do we make it happen?
- 13 May we all work to create our dream community – kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 09.02.19

¹ Exodus 25:1-22

² Richmal Crompton. 'The Outlaws and the Hidden Treasure' in *William's Happy Days* (1930; repr London: Macmillan, 1990): 119-20.

³ bSanhedrin 28b