



**SERMON KI TISSA:<sup>1</sup>  
TO BE FILLED WITH KNOWLEDGE**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 23 February 2019  
Southgate Progressive Synagogue (for Leo Baeck Shabbat)

- 1 A lot of people ask me about being a rabbinic student. And however I respond, it always ends up sounding as if there's something faintly Hogwarts-like about life at Leo Baeck College. However hard I try to explain to anyone what we do during exam week – Chanting the Hebrew Bible, Grammar of Babylonian Aramaic, Rabbinic Literature Intensive, Medieval Commentators, Liturgy, Pentateuch... – and I might as well be saying, “Potions, Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts.”
- 2 I think there are three things that make Leo Baeck seem Hogwarts-y. The first reason is that these are, by any reckoning, somewhat obscure subjects. Between them they make up the programme's best estimation of what modern Progressive Rabbis need to know. Before we go out into the wider Jewish world, we're armed with skills and texts, experience and (hopefully) inspiration.
- 3 The second reason is that it's a small institution: we're the smallest degree-awarding college in the country (closely rivalled by the Royal School of Needlework), and there's a cosy atmosphere of intimacy. As the only seminary in the country training non-Orthodox rabbis, students travel in, on the Leo Baeck Express, from all over the UK – and, indeed, all over Europe – to come and learn together.
- 4 The third reason follows on from the second: we all do the same subjects. Whereas at university one would have friends doing different courses – one



studies medicine, another sociology – and even within courses there are different choices and modules, year groups at Leo Baeck stick together. On Monday morning, my entire year group has a couple of hours of Talmud study. On Tuesday morning, liturgy. We each bring our personal background and our prior experiences; these shape the way we interact, the way we approach texts, the way we study. Every graduate of Leo Baeck, at least in recent years, has studied the same curriculum, yet each cohort will have something special and something distinct.

- 5 In this week's parashah, we read the story of Betzalel being trained up for the vital task of designing the adornments for the tabernacle. We might ask how it is that an Israelite slave had the skill and the ability to perform such an enormous task. Anyone who's ever been involved in a synagogue building project knows that producing an end-product that satisfies everybody is no easy achievement.
- 6 But we also read the answer to this question: he didn't have the skill or the ability. God took him and filled him with *חכמה ותבונה ודעת*, with wisdom and understanding and knowledge, and with all manner of handicrafts and beautification. The Talmud tells us that Betzalel was just 13 years old.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 If he had to be Divinely souped-up with architectural skills, why him? Had anyone already had the necessary competence to design the tabernacle, they would have been an obvious choice. But since there was no such person, and the Israelites were reliant on miracles to acquire the requisite faculties, God could have given them to anyone: Moses, Aaron... even, perhaps, a woman! Why did God choose an unknown 13-year-old?
- 8 I think the starting point would be: obviously not Moses. He had far too much to do anyway, and he was a political leader. Theresa May doesn't decide on



- what building work needs to be done in Parliament; Moses couldn't be the architect of the tabernacle.
- 9 Equally obviously, not Aaron. As High Priest, he would officiate in the new structure, and his views on its design were definitely important. Nobody would redesign a synagogue building without consulting the rabbi! But equally, nobody would put the rabbi in charge of the technical drawings. A building with many users and serving many purposes cannot be designed by just one of them.
- 10 That still left more than 600,000 other Israelites eligible for the job. How did God decide? In fact, the Talmud tells us, God didn't. God wasn't quite sure either. Prepared to fill any appropriate person with *חכמה ותבונה ודעת*, but feeling unable to make the final decision, God is said<sup>3</sup> to have instructed Moses: “*אמור להם לך* – go and ask the people.” This was to be a tabernacle for the Israelites, so the Israelites had to give their approval to its creator.
- 11 I wouldn't go so far as to say that Leo Baeck College fills its students with wisdom; many of us are too far gone for that. But we are certainly all Betzalel, spending our days being given the knowledge and abilities necessary to a life in the rabbinate.
- 12 But, like Betzalel, rabbinic students such as myself, the rabbis of the future, are not self-appointed. On this Shabbat, every year, Leo Baeck sends us all out into the communities: *אמור להם לך*. Go and speak to the people.
- 13 Because, just as with the construction of the tabernacle, Leo Baeck also relies on trust and buy-in from the community it serves. It relies on support from Progressive Jewry, especially those Progressive Jews who live close enough to our campus at the Sternberg Centre in Finchley to join public



evening classes at our Lerhaus project. Or to come and visit our magnificent library. Or to offer your skills and abilities to volunteer for the College. Or to consider studying for a degree itself, whether as a rabbinic student or for an MA in Jewish Education.

- 14 Today, I'm equipped with prospectuses and leaflets and information about courses and classes and donations and visits. Leo Baeck College thanks you for your support over the last year, and asks you to continue it for the year to come.
- 15 Together, we can build the tabernacle of our community's future.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 23.02.19**

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 31:1-17

<sup>2</sup> bSanhedrin 69b

<sup>3</sup> bBerachot 55a