



**SERMON M'TZORA:¹
BUILDING A PATHWAY**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 13 April 2019
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 The current measles outbreak in the United States is yet another reminder that vaccination is still widely opposed even today – and if anything, its detractors have grown yet more fanatical. Only last month, anti-vaxxer protestors in New York appalled observers by arriving at a demonstration wearing yellow stars.²
- 2 In one sense, this is nothing new. As soon as Edward Jenner had carried out the first recorded vaccination in 1798, inoculating 8-year-old James Phipps against smallpox by injecting him with cowpox pathogens, resistance to the idea began: in particular, many religious people were horrified at the idea of mixing animal material into the human body.³
- 3 Even decades later, the Church continued to be concerned about animal-based inoculations giving their human hosts animal characteristics. In 1882, one archdeacon delivered an astonishing tirade comparing the use of animal matter in human vaccines to the use of human matter in vaccines for angels: “The heavenly ichor that pours through the archangel’s veins would feel that the fires of hell were raging through his system, and that the carnalities and sensualities of the human race, with the added passions of a beast, mischievously had been incorporated in his now less archangelic nature.”⁴
- 4 So there was a real horror of making use of animals for the purpose of curing humans from disease. This wasn’t an animal rights concern: it was entirely a revulsion at the mixing of species.



- 5 It feels faintly ironic that it was religious concerns that were so opposed to animals' involvement in medicine, when the Book of Leviticus is so insistent that animals had a central role in the treatment of those with the mysterious צרעת disease, commonly identified with leprosy. These were not just regular sacrifices, either: their blood was sprinkled on the patient, and specially applied to their right ear, right thumb and right big toe.
- 6 Clearly, the archdeacon's ancient ancestors did not share his dread of using animal products in medicine. But equally, I think a lot of us shudder slightly when reading Parashat M'tzora. There's an awful lot of fairly senseless gore. I can get why society – especially a stiff Victorian society – was so upset at the idea of injecting cow-juice into their veins.
- 7 But my first thought when I read the story of the yellow star anti-vaxxers was: this, I don't get. For people in the 21st century to oppose vaccines is ludicrous, but even so, what is the connection with the yellow star? What element of the Holocaust are these protestors identifying with?
- 8 Of course, on reflection, it's obvious: it's the persecution. Anti-vaxxers are trying to say that society's attempt to persuade and coerce them into inoculating their children is comparable to the Nazis' actions against the Jews. Jews had to go into hiding from the Nazis to escape extermination; anti-vaxxers feel as if they're on the verge of having to go into hiding from a relentless, totalitarian health system, that this is the only way for them to escape the evils of vaccination.
- 9 Entirely separate from their actual opposition to vaccinations, also, they feel like martyrs. They feel that society looks down on them and stigmatises them for their views.



- 10 On this front, they're not wrong. Society does look down on anti-vaxxers. Society does stigmatise them for their views – and even more so than for the flat-earthers and climate-change deniers, because by refusing to inoculate their children, anti-vaxxers actively endanger other people's safety. There are even proposals to punish social media companies who allow anti-vaxxer discourse to appear on their platforms.⁵
- 11 But nevertheless, is society wrong to make martyrs out of them? Does the stigma do more harm than good, by encouraging anti-vaxxers to dig their heels in, don yellow stars, play the victim, and refuse, all the more strongly, to inoculate their children?
- 12 Parashat M'tzora is all about tackling stigma. All the sacrificing of pigeons and sprinkling of blood is theatre: a tool the priests use to persuade the Israelites to accept a cured leper back into their midst. It is unsurprising that the wilderness wanderers had a genuine terror of infectious disease. It is equally unsurprising, but still unfortunate, that this terror morphed into a prejudice against sufferers and former sufferers of disease. The leper was viewed with fear and dismay. It was widely believed that their condition was Divine punishment for some heinous sin. They were ostracised from all social structures. With the ancients' poor understanding of medicine, these prejudices extended even to those who were completely cured.
- 13 The blood-sprinkling, then, was a dramatic public symbol of cleansing. The priests held their audience spellbound with enigmatic rituals, and once they were finished, as if by magic, the stigmatised leper was purified. The community trusted that the patient was fit to return into the mainstream, and their disgrace was at an end.



- 14 Lepers and anti-vaxxers are very different. The leper has done nothing wrong and their stigma is wholly undeserved. The anti-vaxxer, on the other hand, is rigidly sticking to an unscientific and utterly discredited belief that puts lives at risk.
- 15 Nevertheless, stigma rarely serves any purpose. Even when its targets have done something shameful, the stigma only serves to heighten divisions, to keep them on the outskirts of society and to heap misery and opprobrium in an unconstructive way. Released prisoners are perhaps the best example of this. There is a great taboo about having been in prison, and employers are typically reluctant to hire anyone with a criminal record – yet the individual has done their time and paid their price, and it is society’s job to rehabilitate and reintegrate them. We have to provide them with a path along which to return or else they will pay a greater price than they deserve. Society has to behave like the best and most magnanimous of its members, not emulate its worst.
- 16 I do not suggest that we should relax our insistence on vaccination. In fact, I’d go further, push for compulsory vaccination and support the proposed ban on anti-vaxxer nonsense being propagated online.
- 17 But we do need to think about who is on the outskirts of our society, and who is feeling excluded. The yellow stars were hyperbolic. Nothing in American healthcare policy is remotely like the Holocaust and it is absurd and offensive to suggest otherwise. However, we cannot just pour scorn on these people and expect the problem to go away. We have to create a route for them to re-enter civilisation, to move out of the corner into which they’ve painted themselves without too great a loss of face. Society must be stern, but it must also be supportive.



18 It's a huge shame that so many innocent birds had to die in order to help the ancient Israelites get over their stigma against sufferers of צרעת. But they nevertheless teach us about the lengths to which we need to go – holding our noses if necessary – in order to welcome back into the fold those who have departed from our midst.

Check against delivery.

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¹ Leviticus 14:1-20

² Allison Kaplan Sommer. "Auschwitz Museum blasts anti-vaxxers for donning yellow stars in protest." *Ha'aretz*, 31 March 2019: < <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-anti-vaccination-protesters-don-yellow-stars-provoking-ire-from-auschwitz-museum-1.7068078>>

³ Baxby, Derrick. "Jenner, Edward (1749–1823), surgeon and pioneer of smallpox vaccination." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-14749>>

⁴ The Venerable Archdeacon Colley. *Vaccination a Moral Evil, a Physical Curse and a Psychological Wrong* (Leicester: National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League, 1882): 6.

⁵ Hugh Pym. "Minister targets anti-vaccination websites." *BBC News*, 26 March 2019: < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-47699791>>