



**SERMON EMOR:<sup>1</sup>**  
**THE DIGNITY OF THE PRIESTHOOD**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 11 May 2019  
Southport and District Reform Synagogue

- 1 There's this rabbi who really wants to try pork. They resist the temptation for a while, but eventually they decide they just have to give in to it. They drive to a different city where they won't be seen by anyone they know, walk into a restaurant, and order a hog-roast. It soon arrives – a whole suckling pig, cooked in butter, mouth open, apple in mouth, the whole works. Just as the rabbi is picking up their fork to begin eating, to their horror, the door of the restaurant opens and in walks the chair of their congregation! The rabbi looks around wildly for escape, and, seeing none, turns to the waiter and loudly says, “How elaborately you decorate the apples here!”<sup>2</sup>
- 2 Back in real life, there's a huge news story in Russia at the moment, and it's about a priest.<sup>3</sup> Sergei Zotov had a great pulpit in the city of Magnitogorsk (population 407,000) until he was suddenly demoted, last month, and moved to a tiny village called Fershampenuaz – population 4,000.
- 3 What was the cause of his fall from grace? His wife Oksana, who owns a beauty salon in the city Magnitogorsk, won the title Miss Sensuality at a beauty contest. An anonymous website revealed that she was married to a priest, and the religious authorities took stern action. The local archpriest declared, “It is a great sin when the wife of a priest exposes herself. He will not be rehabilitated until his wife repents.” He went on to ask: “What kind of a priest is he if he cannot control his own family? How does he intend to control his congregation?”



- 4 The whole country seems to be buzzing with the controversy. The BBC report of the story translated a selection of online comments from Russians gripped by the saga. One Russian seemed particularly baffled: “Have I missed something?” they asked, “Where in the Bible does it say that priests can’t have a pretty wife?”
- 5 The Bible doesn’t say that, of course – but it does come surprisingly close in this week’s parashah: “When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire.”<sup>4</sup>
- 6 Putting aside the death penalty for the Levitical priest in the Torah, both attitudes – those of the Torah and those of the Russian church – seem to stem from the same belief, which is that religious leaders have to be ‘holier-than-thou’. The idea is that religious leaders need to hold ourselves to higher standards than the general public. It’s more or less OK for ordinary Russians’ wives to enter beauty contests, but it’s unbecoming of the priesthood. If an ordinary Israelite woman has extramarital sex, that’s not ideal, but carries no particular consequences for her parents; but priests are expected to control their daughters to maintain the purity of the priesthood.
- 7 It would be easy – too easy – for me to explain this tendency away by blaming it on religious leaders’ self-importance. The rabbi who wanted to try pork didn’t mind any of their congregants trying it; it was just for themselves that they thought it seemed inappropriate or unbecoming. There certainly is some clergy self-importance in religious life: what’s OK for the small people isn’t OK for me.
- 8 But there’s also, sometimes, a tendency from congregants to put faith leaders on a pedestal to which they, the congregants, don’t aspire. I’ve had congregants who are extremely active in local politics tell me that it’s not



appropriate for me, as a (semi-)rabbi, to be a member of a political party.

Some of my colleagues who visit communities on Saturday have been asked not to take the train home before Shabbat goes out... by congregants who drove there in the first place.

- 9 Even in the joke with the rabbi who wanted to try pork, the congregants who ‘caught’ them were themselves in a non-kosher restaurant. If it’s OK for them – and I have no hesitation in saying that it is OK for anyone who chooses to eat non-kosher meat to do so, even though it’s not a choice I’d make myself – then it should be OK for the rabbi.
- 10 What’s more, in the Jewish case at least, rabbis have a prophetic task. Since the destruction of the Temple, the Talmud tells us,<sup>5</sup> the gift and duty (and burden) of prophecy was removed from the prophets and given to the rabbis. Prophecy, though, has never been a dignified business. The Israelites of old said to Isaiah,<sup>6</sup> “Stop seeing! Do not share your visions of the truth: instead, speak to us only of smooth [inoffensive] things.” Deciding to ignore people’s wishes, to follow them down the road shouting into their ears things which they have expressly said they do not want to hear... that’s not dignified. It’s borderline stalking. And yet it’s necessary.
- 11 Elijah was labelled<sup>7</sup> an **עכר ישראל**, a troubler of Israel (even a bringer-of-disaster-upon Israel). The prophet makes themselves a derided and reviled outsider, repeating over and over their truth in words “often slashing, even horrid, designed to shock”. They “challenge the apparently holy, revered and awesome”. They sometimes “sounded blasphemous”. They used “sweeping allegations” and “overstatements” and screamed their prophecies “one octave too high” for the people’s comfort.<sup>8</sup> Is this ranting and raving (often accompanied, at least in the images in my head, by bizarre robes and



unkempt beard) consistent with notions of ‘the dignity of the rabbinate’? Not really. And yet it’s necessary.

- 12 The fact that this development – rabbis taking over the role of prophecy – happened at the destruction of the Temple is telling. Because that also marked the end of the reign of the Jewish priesthood. The priesthood was an antiquated and undemocratic institution. You had to be born into it, and to stay in it you had to subscribe to an obsession with purity. You couldn’t marry a widow or it would impair the priesthood’s purity. You couldn’t attend a funeral or it would impair the priesthood’s purity. You couldn’t have a disability or deformity or it would impair the priesthood’s purity.
- 13 Once this system came to an end, things changed. The faith leaders of today’s Judaism aren’t in danger of being un-purified – and even if, somehow, one was, we wouldn’t regard that as defiling the rabbinate as a whole. As Rabbi John D Rayner z”l has put it:<sup>9</sup> “The Temple did not last for ever: the Second, like the First, came to an end, and all its splendid rituals became a wistful memory. But when it fell, a new and greater institution stood ready to take its place: the Synagogue, house of the people’s assembly. No sacrifices were offered here, no Priests performed mysterious rites while the laity watched in silent awe. Here Israel’s people met as equals, together studying the word of God, so that the Torah which had been taught to Moses and the Prophets became in truth the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.”

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 11.05.19**



<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 21:1-12

<sup>2</sup> My mum told me this joke. I don't know where she got it.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Scarr and Krassi Twigg. "Russian priest posted to remote village over wife's 'sin'", *BBC News* (15 April 2019): <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-47912910>>

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 21:9

<sup>5</sup> bBava Batra 12a

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 30:10

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 18:17

<sup>8</sup> Abraham J Heschel. *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962): 8-15.

<sup>9</sup> Taken from Andrew Goldstein and Charles H Middleburgh (eds), *Machzor Ruach Chadashah* (London: Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, 2003): 309-310.