



SERMON B'MIDBAR: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 1 June 2019
Wimbledon Synagogue

Prologue

We have exam week coming up at Leo Baeck, so I wrote this sermon about 10 days in advance, when I was taking a break from revision. As an advance warning, it refers to Theresa May. 10 days ago, I took the gamble of referring to her in the present tense and assuming that she'd still be in office this Shabbat. That gamble (just about) paid off, so here goes...

- 1 A researcher at York University has concluded that Theresa May answers only 11% of the questions asked of her at Prime Minister's Question Time.¹
- 2 The aptly-named Professor Bull has spent his whole career analysing the ways in which politicians dodge questions. In 2003, he published a book cataloguing 35 different techniques that have been used to evade interrogation in Parliament, on TV and in radio interviews.² The moves he discovered included: reflecting the question back to the interviewer ("Well, you tell me"), unwillingness to answer ("I'm not going to speculate") and even the making of unrelated political points ("A more pressing issue is the Opposition's lack of clarity on this").
- 3 Then Theresa May came along and Professor Bull's research was shot to pieces. He had to add a 36th category, for Mrs May has her own special move for evading awkward questions, which he terms "gives a non-specific response to a specific question".³



- 4 He gave an example from PMQs in 2016: Jeremy Corbyn asked whether the introduction of universal credit would leave anyone worse off, to which Theresa May replied: “The introduction of universal credit was an important reform for our welfare system. It is a simpler system, so people can see much more easily where they stand in relation to benefits.”⁴ Enlightening stuff!
- 5 Professor Bull’s research only goes as far back as the latter part of the 20th century. If only he’d looked further back... perhaps at the Second Book of Samuel.
- 6 After David’s illegal census, as we read in our haftarah⁵ today, God gave him a choice of three punishments: famine, foreign invasion, or plague. Three simple options; choose one.
- 7 But David didn’t actually choose one. In true Theresa May style, he answered God’s specific question with a non-specific response: “I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hands of God, for God’s compassion is great; and let me not fall into the hands of men.”
- 8 We can picture a more contemporary version of his evasion quite clearly. An MP – Yvette Cooper, say – asks, “Will the Prime Minister accept a famine, or surrender to foreign invasion, or allow a plague to ravage the land? Which of those three options will the Honourable Lady select?”
- 9 And Mrs May stands up to reply: “This is a difficult time for Britain,” she says, “and the whole country will be in no doubt about the importance of the decision that is to be made. I want to be very clear that I will not accept any proposal that places us at the mercy of other nations, whether inside or outside Europe.”



- 10 Cries of, “Answer!” from the backbenches fail to secure any more detailed response.
- 11 That was how David reacted to the threefold choice before him. A recognition that it presented a dilemma; a general statement of his broad policy goals; and that’s it.
- 12 Robert Alter, who has just published a monumental translation of and commentary on the Hebrew Bible, thinks⁶ David’s reply was implicitly choosing pestilence: foreign invasion would obviously leave Israel vulnerable to the hand of humankind, but so too, he reasoned, would famine: as we’re now only too well aware, securing a nation’s food supply relies on a lot of international agreements and diplomatic negotiations.
- 13 Rashi quotes a more interesting opinion:⁷ David was concerned for his public image. Had he chosen war, the argument goes, everyone would have observed how well-protected David personally was (being a king and all that) and they would have been aggrieved that he’d placed the general population at a risk he wasn’t sharing. So too with famine: the royal household was wealthy enough to withstand a famine, and the optics of a monarch supported by mighty storehouses choosing to deprive Israel’s poor of their sustenance are not attractive. But in the face of disease, concludes Rashi, all are equal – so that’s what David chose.
- 14 What Rashi doesn’t explain is the imprecision of David’s answer. If he chose pestilence, fine, say, “I choose pestilence.” Why did he evade the question?
- 15 I think the answer has to be that, once again, he was concerned for his public image. He didn’t want to take an unpopular decision (hence ruling out war and famine) but he also didn’t want to be seen taking a decision based solely on his own popularity. He didn’t want to declare, “I choose pestilence



because it will make me look equal with my people,” because that is no way to decide difficult questions.

- 16 Had he opted for war, perhaps he could have negotiated peace with the invading forces: humans, after all, may be easier to placate than an angry God. With famine, perhaps he could have shared the contents of his storehouses to lessen the impact on the most vulnerable.
- 17 Maybe David actually should have placed a high value on his own protection, above that of his people. Every nation needs a leader, after all, and all the more so in times of crisis. The Prime Minister has a space reserved for her in the Downing Street nuclear bunker, while the rest of us would have to take our chances on the outside – and that’s a reasonable decision. Sometimes being a sound leader means taking harsh and unpopular choices... if they’re decent ones.
- 18 Who can say what the best decision would have been? (I don’t use the phrase ‘the right decision’ because I don’t think there is a right decision.) What I think we can say, though, is that David bottled it. He gave a smarmy, grovelly non-response to God – ‘How mighty and compassionate You are’ – and his actual preference was for the outcome that would preserve his own image, however disastrous the consequences for Israel.
- 19 To be fair, we do read, just a few verses on, that David learned his lesson: when he saw destruction being wreaked on his people, he did feel guilty, and take responsibility, and try to put things right. He realised that he was accountable to his people and that they would judge his behaviour by its outcomes not by its optics. He became a good leader.
- 20 Good leadership is more than soundbites and evading important questions. As Sir Humphrey Appleby once said, “National leadership is about surviving



until the next century; politics is about surviving until Friday afternoon.”⁸

Leadership is about values. It’s about serving those who are led. May our own politicians, and judges, and leaders of all kinds – from those who run our synagogues to those who run our country, or who are vying to run our country – realise the same. Kein y’hi ratzon; may this be God’s will.

Check against delivery.

GW 01.06.19

¹ Peter Bull and Will Strawson. “Can’t Answer? Won’t Answer? An Analysis of Equivocal Responses by Theresa May in Prime Minister’s Questions” in *Parliamentary Affairs* (2019), 1-21: 13.

² Peter Bull. *The Microanalysis of Political Communication: claptrap and ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 2003): 114-122.

³ Bull and Strawson, *ibid*: 6.

⁴ HC Deb, 2 November 2016, col 880-881.

⁵ 2 Samuel 24:1-14

⁶ Robert Alter on 2 Samuel 24:14

⁷ Rashi on 2 Samuel 24:14, attributed to Rabbi Alexandri

⁸ Slight paraphrase from *Yes Prime Minister*, “A Victory for Democracy”. Written by Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn (BBC, 13 February 1986).