



SERMON PINCHAS: HANDING OVER

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 20 July 2019¹
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Moses knew when it was time for him to go. He didn't want to go, didn't want to leave his people, but he understood the reasons why it had to happen.
- 2 But he also does something interesting. He makes sure to find out who his successor will be. Long before Moses actually went, he started a handover process. He transferred "a little bit of his **הַדָּבָר**, his authority" to Joshua.
- 3 This is an intriguing idea. What does it mean to transfer some of one's authority? Does it mean that, after the transfer, Moses had less authority, and would on occasion have to start deferring to Joshua? Or was it more symbolic, meaning that Joshua was given slightly more gravitas in the eyes of the Israelites?
- 4 Let's think about some other transitions. In the coming week, we are likely to see a new Prime Minister take office. Just like Moses, Theresa May doesn't get to choose either exit date or her successor. She will simply be told who they are and she will co-operate with them to ensure an orderly handover. But whose honour and gravitas and authority is being transferred? Not Theresa May's, because she wasn't born Prime Minister. She took over the job from David Cameron. Ultimately, the authority being transferred – the power, the honour – comes from the Queen, and she is just a figurehead for



the people. The Prime Minister derives their authority from the people and nobody else.

- 5 Another moment of transition, of course, is happening here in York, as I move on and my colleague Student Rabbi Peter Luijendijk will be replacing me. I am most certainly not giving him any of my authority or my honour or my power... because I don't have any, or at least, what I do have isn't mine to give.
- 6 What authority I have had during these two years I've spent with you is authority with which you have entrusted me. Every service I've led, I have done at your invitation. Every question about Judaism I've attempted to answer, I have done because someone trusted me enough to ask it. The **הוד** is yours. It is not me passing on my **הוד** directly to Peter: it's me handing it back to the community and you in turn entrusting it to someone else. The only **הוד** in play is that of this community.
- 7 And what a community! Last night at Judaism 101, I picked my top 32 figures from the Jewish past, present and future. Number 32 was the York Liberal Jewish Community. That was not just me being sappy and sentimental: it was heartfelt.
- 8 Claude Montefiore, one of the founders of Liberal Judaism, once wrote: "It was not an ibn Gabirol or a Maimonides, still less a Spinoza, who fulfilled the Jewish mission most truly, or rendered the greatest service to the Jewish cause. No. It was the many little obscure Jewish communities through the ages, persecuted and despised, who kept alive the flame of the purest monotheism and the supremacy and divineness of the moral law."²



- 9 It has been a privilege to spend these two years with you all. This community has been my first pulpit, and I have to thank you for welcoming me with open arms. Everyone who has done readings in services, handled the scroll, poured out wine, made challah, hosted me, booked rooms at the Meeting House, come to J101, schlepped tables and chairs before the seder, taught our young people, brought snacks for kiddush, turned up with a zeal to learn Hebrew – or, indeed, everyone who has simply been here – you are doing the work and living the Judaism that Claude Montefiore praised.
- 10 I was just a first-year student rabbi – in my first term, indeed – when I arrived here to officiate at Yom Kippur 2017, and there was no compulsion on you to entrust me with your הוד. But like our ancestors in the wilderness, you were generous with your trust, and for that I am grateful.
- 11 Parashat Pinchas which we read today is an ending but also a beginning. Similarly, this Shabbat is an ending but also a beginning. There is a special prayer for such occasions. Deeply emotional, it is traditionally read by a study group when they have finished working their way through a Jewish book – Rashi’s commentary on the Torah, say, or a volume of Talmud – and addressed to that book. But I think it works all the better at times of transition for communities and their clergy:

הדרן עלך והדרך עלן

We will remember you, and you will remember us;

דעתן עלך ודעתך עלן

Our thoughts are about you, and your thoughts are about us;

לא נתנשי מנך ולא תתנשי מנן

We will not forget you, and you will not forget us:

לא בעלמא הדין ולא בעלמא דאתי.

Not in this world and not in the world to come.



It continues:³ “May it be Your will, Eternal One our God and God of our ancestors, that Your Torah be our occupation in this world, and will remain with us in the world to come. May the words of Torah, Eternal One our God, be sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of all Your people so that we, our children, and all the children of the House of Israel, may come to love You.”

And let us say, Amen.

Check against delivery.

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¹ Numbers 27:15-23

² C G Montefiore. “Epilogue” in Edwyn R Bevan and Charles Singer (eds), *The Legacy of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927; repr 1953), 507-523 :515.

³ This is the Rabbinical Assembly’s version: <<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/upon-completing-book>>