



## **SERMON CHAYEI SARAH: A QUESTION OF FIREWOOD**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 23 November 2019  
Wimbledon Synagogue

This sermon consists of the minister's own views. It does not necessarily represent the views of the congregation to which it was delivered, or those of any other institution with which the minister is connected. It is © Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber 2019, and the author has asserted his moral rights.

- 1 Rav Ashi, a 5th century Babylonian rabbi who was one of the early editors of the Talmud, owned a forest. One day, he chopped down some of its trees and sold them as firewood to a pagan temple. His friend Ravina objected, citing the rule of Jewish law which forbids us from assisting others in sinning. But Rav Ashi replied, “They will use most of the wood for ordinary heating.”<sup>1</sup>
- 2 The deadline to register to vote falls on Tuesday evening, and I remind everyone who has not yet registered, or who has moved house or changed their personal details since registering, to do so.
- 3 I don't issue this reminder with much glee. The election we are currently facing is a nightmare of an election. Voters have a choice between two parties which are both institutionally racist. For our next Prime Minister, Britain might get a man who has made offensive remarks about Jews, or a man who has made offensive remarks about Muslims. A man who has called Hamas his friends, or a man who has said that black people have “watermelon smiles”. Every vote, even if it is not for one of the two main parties, will hasten the path to Downing Street for one of these two men.



- 4 There is no obviously right answer. An instinctive Jewish reaction – and one espoused by a number of my rabbinic colleagues, as well as the *Jewish Chronicle*, is to vote for whoever is most likely to defeat Labour candidates.
- 5 It has been suggested that anyone who votes for Labour is indifferent to British Jews, to our feelings, and to anti-Semitism. But this is trite and over-simplistic. Because one might equally say that anyone who votes for the Conservatives is indifferent to British Muslims and to Islamophobia.
- 6 Neither of those statements is true. We are confronted with what is, essentially, a binary choice between two ugly parties, and we all have an immensely complex ethical dilemma to struggle with over the coming days. There are many factors to consider. Whatever the *Jewish Chronicle* says, this is not a single-issue election. Racism is a huge factor but so too are Brexit, homelessness, the economy, the NHS, refugees, transport, climate change. There are many, many strands to the parties' manifestos, and the relationship between them is labyrinthine.
- 7 The philosopher Lon F Fuller has compared such intricate groups of issues to a spider's web (sorry, I know I'm always going on about spiders). He said: "A pull on one strand will distribute tensions after a complicated pattern throughout the web as a whole. Doubling the original pull will, in all likelihood, not simply double each of the resulting tensions but will rather create a different complicated pattern of tensions. This is a 'polycentric' situation because it is 'many centred' – each crossing of strands is a distinct centre for distributing tensions."<sup>2</sup>



- 8 The problem with an election is that it forces us to take our incredibly complicated, nuanced analyses and opinions and distil them into one single cross on a ballot paper.
- 9 Where will we draw it? What values will guide us as we reduce our complicated set of political priorities to a single decision?
- 10 On the one hand, Rabbi Hillel asked,<sup>3</sup> “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” – if the Jewish community doesn’t come together at this election to stand up for its own interests, maybe nobody else will leap to our defence. But on the other hand, in the very next breath, Hillel went on: “But if I am only for myself, what does that make me?” – if the only people we consider in this election are ourselves, if we vote without a thought for the consequences for others, we might be inflicting torments on our neighbours.
- 11 The juxtaposition of these two teachings next to each other underlines the complexity of this election. There is a lot at stake for our own community, but there is a lot at stake for other communities as well. We have to stand in our own shoes, but we also have to stand in others’ shoes. It’s all about the Jews, but it’s not all about the Jews. We need to stand against anti-Semitism in memory of the pain of our ancestors, yet we must also protect other minorities from hatred in memory of the years we spent as reviled outsiders in foreign lands.<sup>4</sup>
- 12 The Jewish community has genuine fears. The Muslim community has genuine fears. EU citizens have genuine fears. The homeless have genuine fears. One way or another, this election is going to leave some groups at best bitterly disappointed, and at worst potentially at risk of



serious harm. How can we, the electorate, possibly cast a vote knowing that it will cause unspeakable consequences for some of our fellow citizens?

- 13 It all comes down to Rav Ashi and his forest.<sup>5</sup> Our votes are like firewood. Whoever we vote for, they will use a proportion of our firewood for idolatry, for purposes of which we utterly disapprove. The rest, they will use for legitimate political policies that we might endorse and which might promote the values we learn from our Judaism. And we have to sell our firewood, to make a living. So, quite simply, we must try to work out who will abuse the least amount of our wood? It is incumbent on us to do our research: on the racism scandals on both sides of the political divide and at the parties' reaction to wrongdoing in their ranks, on our local candidates and on the national manifestos. The way forward is, sadly, far from obvious. But the question is clear. Which party is going to use the smallest proportion of our firewood for idolatry?
- 14 Britain in general, but the Jewish community in particular, is being pushed towards an impossible decision on 12 December. And I am very angry with the leadership of both parties for forcing us into this position. But let us be clear: when faced with a binary choice, whatever one chooses does not indicate indifference to that option's shortcomings. You can vote Conservative without being indifferent to those who will suffer under a Conservative government – and there is no doubt that there will be suffering. You can vote Labour without being indifferent to those who will suffer under a Labour government – and, again, there is no doubt that there will be suffering. Your rabbis and student rabbis and community will continue to support you whatever choice you make.



- 15 I've made mine, but I'm not going to share it. I don't think it's the place of the rabbinate to instruct congregants *en masse* for which party they should or should not be voting. In this extreme situation, however, I do think it is the place of the rabbinate to tell the story of Rav Ashi and to reiterate that, no matter what concerted message is being spread throughout the Jewish community, you each have a real and personal choice to make. No journalist, no rabbi's pastoral letter, no manipulative newspaper column or Facebook post can tell you what to do.
- 16 Whichever way we vote, none of us are traitors to our people, and none of us are willingly assisting with the commission of sin or hate crime or exploitation or neglect – on one condition. That one condition is that we have done our homework and reached a considered, informed decision. One that we've wrestled with. We must go to the ballot box with a compassionate heart and a pure spirit, and make a thought-through decision, one that seeks to balance our own interests with the interests of other members of society. It should be a decision over which we've agonised.
- 17 There is no way of divining the right answer. In five years' time any of us might regret our choice. In fifty years' time my grandchildren might roll their eyes in woke embarrassment when they hear how granddad voted in the 2019 general election. But so long as we make a genuine effort, in good faith, to strike that balance – to identify the Prime Ministerial candidate who is going to use as much firewood as possible for righteous purposes, and as little as possible for idolatry – we have done our duty as British Jews and as British citizens.



- 18 On your seats you will find copies of an ‘Election Day Prayer’, which I originally prepared for the American presidential election in 2016.<sup>6</sup> Please feel free to take this with you as the country enters this difficult time.
- 19 Before Yom Kippur, the slightly unrealistic tradition is to wish an ‘easy fast’. I am not going to wish you an easy election, because it is far from that. But, as we pray that God will look kindly upon us at this election season, and forgive us for the firewood we are inevitably going to sell to unworthy politicians, I will wish you a *הצבעה טובה וצדיקה*, a good and righteous vote.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GKW 23.11.19**

<sup>1</sup> bNedarim 62b

<sup>2</sup> Lon L Fuller. “The forms and limits of adjudication.” *Harvard Law Review* 92 (1978-79), 353-409: 395.

<sup>3</sup> mAvot 1:14

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 23:7

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Rabbi Mark Dratch for coming up with this analysis in his article, “The Ethics of Selecting a Political Candidate”, in *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 11 (1986): 5-18.

<sup>6</sup> <<https://gabrielquotes.org.uk/2016/11/08/an-election-day-prayer/>>