



**SERMON VAYISHLACH:¹
OUR OWN LIMP, OUR OWN SHAME, OUR OWN TRIUMPH, OUR OWN
NAME**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 14 December 2019
Birmingham Progressive Synagogue

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- 1 There are 2,672 losers in Britain this weekend. Some of them – Greens, English Democrats, the Christian People's Alliance – fully expected to lose. And some will be really very shocked to find themselves suddenly out of work. But of the 3,322 candidates² in the election, only 650 were winners. The rest are losers.
- 2 'Loser' is such a pejorative term. It's a playground insult. Every election that is contested will have its winner and every election will have its losers. If we, as a society, value contested elections, we should value the social role performed by the losers.³ But so often, we don't. While many of these losers, essential to our democracy, will be household names, many others will never be seen or heard from again. I sat up on Thursday night watching results come in from across the country, yet even moments after I heard each Returning Officer read out the names of candidates in their constituency, I couldn't begin to list them.
- 3 We all know about Jacob's ladder, but what about Jacob's loser? Because, like all free elections and all good stories, today's Torah reading features a winner and a loser. After transporting all his baggage across



the ford of Yabok, Jacob wrestled with a mysterious man in the night, and triumphed over him.

- 4 But why was Jacob's loser so mysterious? Partly because of the ambiguity of the biblical text, but also because he refused to give his name. Jacob did ask, but the man – like a true politician – answered that question with a question: למה זה תשאל לשמי “Why is it that you would ask my name?”
- 5 The 13th-century commentator Rabbeinu Bachya imagines the man explaining his reluctance to reveal his identity: “I am the loser. It is the way of the world that a winner announces their name, so that they can be honoured. But a loser never wants to announce their name, lest they be ashamed.”⁴
- 6 The two-and-a-half thousand losers of the 2019 general election will fade into obscurity over time; almost all of them are already forgotten. But The Loss – the historic defeat of an opposition party, and the first strong majority government in a decade – will live on in the history books. Behind all the individuals stands one big Winner and one vanquished Loser.
- 7 How will The Winner react to The Loser? Will they demand their name, expose their identity, open them up to shame? Will they crow about their triumph? Celebrate the fact that, thanks to them, dozens of MPs are clearing out their Westminster offices and making their constituency staff redundant?



- 8 This has been an especially difficult election for the Jewish community. From the outside it may well look as if we've all been intractably opposed to Labour and staunch proponents of a Johnson-led government. But, worrying as anti-Semitism is, we know that this summary of how we think is far too simplistic. This has been a bitterly divisive election for Anglo-Jewry, perhaps all the more so because scarcely anybody else recognises it. There is no 'Jewish vote'.
- 9 Even though the Conservatives have been returned to power, our community has its fair share of losers too. Just like every section of society, we have people reliant on benefits and the NHS; those who need legal aid or are dependent on the Human Rights Act. And beyond the confines of Judaism, there are British Muslims, and EU citizens, and the Windrush generation.
- 10 Swathes of society are genuinely smarting from the result. Others are genuinely elated. This is a toxic cocktail for our nation, and there has to be a healing process or we will never be able to move on or even live peaceably beside our neighbours.
- 11 We must not seek to humiliate the losers. Jacob, I'm sure, meant no harm in asking his assailant's name. The assailant had asked Jacob's – changed it, indeed – and it was only polite to return the enquire. But it was hurtful nevertheless. The man was embarrassed by having been beaten. He didn't want his identity to be forever entangled with his failure.
- 12 Interestingly, though, Jacob's identity is forever entangled with his victory. Because while he won the fight, he sustained a permanent injury to his thigh, impeding his movement for the rest of his life. Every time he



stood, walked, sat, lay, Jacob was reminded that success has its costs.

This episode took place on a journey, while he was transporting his baggage from place to place, so an injury was a real hurdle. And not just him, but the whole Jewish people, who – as we are told in our parashah – abstain from eating that part of any animal, in memory of this particular battle.

- 13 Our ancestor strove with a Divine being and prevailed. His name was changed, and we still bear the name of Yisra'el. We carry the memory of his triumph, but we also carry the memory of his limp. The loser, meanwhile, remains anonymous – and he has no limp.
- 14 In the great game of life we all get to experience being winners and we all get to experience being losers. Being in either position has its costs. Jacob's win was all about building his identity as Yisra'el, yet on Thursday we all won by the good fortune of living in a free democracy with a secret ballot, nobody asking our name or forcing us to reveal our political preferences. The mysterious man's loss was bloodless and without physical injury, yet on Thursday we all lost by sustaining the limp of a bitter campaign that divided us from our friends and neighbours.
- 15 This is the moment when we move on from the heat of the hustings, when we reject the labelling of Winner or Loser. We are all members of society and it is time to stand by our most vulnerable fellow citizens, to follow the guidance of Jeremiah⁵ and seek the wellbeing of the cities to which God has led us.
- 16 When someone asks how we voted, it's fine to disclose that if we choose. But it's also fine to answer their question with a question, saying, "What



happened happened. We all have to live together. It's the way of the world that we each carry our own baggage across the river of the past: our own limp, our own shame, our own triumph, our own name. But we shouldn't add to each other's baggage. So למה זה תשאל אותי: why is it that you would ask me?"

Check against delivery.

GKW 14.12.19

¹ Genesis 32:23-33

² Sarah Turnnidge. "Record number of women to stand in 2019 general election", *The Huffington Post* (16 November 2019): <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/women-candidates-general-election-2019_uk_5dcfdd5fe4b01f982f02716f>

³ The 19th-century Ukrainian posek Rabbi Benjamin Aryeh ha-Kohen Weiss wrote a fascinating responsum on how important it is to have opposition in a political system. A translation appears in Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum and Noam J Zohar (eds), *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol 3, "Community" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018): 408ff.

⁴ Rabbeinu Bachya on Genesis 32:30

⁵ Jeremiah 29:7