



**SERMON VAY'CHI:¹
LONDON BRIDGE IS DOWN**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 11 January 2019
Cardiff Reform Synagogue

- 1 Of course the most pressing news on all of our minds is the announcement that Harry and Meghan are going to step back from their royal duties and strive to become financially independent.
- 2 Now, their decision is completely understandable. The relentless hostile press coverage, much of it motivated by outright racism, coupled with abuse on social media, invasions of privacy and other ugly manifestations of the 21st century baying mob, more than explains why they have chosen a quiet life.
- 3 And yet I can't help feeling that their move to become financially independent involve something of a pretence. It feels like they're play-acting at being ordinary working people. Like ordinary working people, the Sussexes will split their time between Canada and a £2.4million cottage in Windsor. Like ordinary working people, they will effortlessly obtain jobs in a hedge fund or a venture capital firm. And so on. And so on.
- 4 Maybe I shouldn't be so cynical. Love them or hate them, the Royal Family is a part of who we are.
- 5 Liberal Judaism is currently in the process of updating its siddur. Communities across the country are experimenting with the new draft liturgy, and giving their feedback. One congregant in York took me aside after kiddush and had the following reaction: "This siddur is meant to last for 20 or 30 years, right?" "Right..." "So explicitly naming the Israeli-Palestinian



conflict seems very pessimistic. Whereas explicitly naming Queen Elizabeth seems staggeringly optimistic.”

6 The Queen has been the Queen for the whole of my life. Although the closest I’ve ever come to meeting her has been a glance across a traffic-filled main road while she was opening a building opposite my secondary school, and although we live in a democracy where the royal family has no real power, Elizabeth the Second has still been a part of my life. I’ve never known different lyrics to *God Save the Queen*. I’ve never known a different face on the back of coins. I’ve never used a post-box that isn’t labelled ‘ER’.

7 But the Queen is going to die one day. And I don’t know what it will feel like.

8 The government has detailed plans for all the possible scenarios, of course. In 2017, the *Guardian* published an amazing long-read about ‘Operation London Bridge’, the secret arrangements for Britain’s first days under a new monarch.² Big Ben will be muffled with special leather pads. Buses will stop and railway announcers will fall silent. Sombre music will play on all radio stations and TV channels. Biting satire will be removed from our screens and replaced with gentler, patriotic content; *Dad’s Army* but not *Have I Got News For You*. The nation will be plunged into mourning for someone most of us don’t know, yet for someone who has had some sort of impact on our lives.

9 And then, of course, will come the funeral. A massive, televised funeral. Horse-drawn coaches, black velvet drapes, a huge parade through the streets of the nation’s capital.

10 State funerals aren’t really that common, yet we all have a strong image in our head of what one looks like. And today’s parashah conforms to that image in every particular. Jacob – a patriarch of Egyptian society, albeit a



largely ceremonial one – was given a huge national send-off with every imaginable trapping. An extended period of national mourning, followed by a massive procession with all the great and the good from the Egyptian nobility. The 13th-century commentator Rabbeinu Bachya even tells us that there were horsemen and chariots provided as a security escort, in case Esau should turn up and mount a terrorist attack on his late brother's coffin,³ just as today all major state events are recognisable by the sea of fluorescent yellow jackets worn by our own security services.

- 11 What would Jacob's death have meant to the Egyptians? Those at the very top of the pyramid, who knew Joseph personally, would probably have been saddened on his behalf. They wouldn't have known Jacob so well, but they would support their colleague through the loss of his father.
- 12 But many of the dozens of officials and courtiers and equerries present will surely have been there out of duty rather than emotion. Grand Egyptian funerals were hardly rare, and there must have been a sense of inevitability for some of the participants as they pulled on their sombre robes for yet another procession.
- 13 The ordinary rank-and-file Egyptians, mostly living in poverty, might have been more indifferent. Jacob represented an elite of which they were not only not part, but a thousand miles apart. The procession going past their houses would have cost an unimaginable amount, while they struggled to provide enough food for their families. Even the robes alone would be worth enough to feed several children for a week.
- 14 A state funeral unifies a nation, but it also highlights cracks and divisions. People whose lives have been vaguely touched by the social role of the deceased will come together in their strange, inexplicable sense of loss; but



they will also see what a unique social stratum that person occupied, and how far away they themselves are from it.

- 15 Ancient Egypt was, obviously, a wholly unequal society, without pretence at social mobility, one-nationism or socioeconomic fairness. But I think that the Queen's funeral, when it comes, might well expose similar ruptures in the fabric of our country. Families live below the poverty line just miles away from Westminster Abbey, which will be the epicentre of so much expensive and expansive pomp.
- 16 Brought together, pushed apart. Our Royal Family is being somewhat pushed apart, but that is nothing to the divisions in British society. Jacob's funeral is a reminder of how complex and fragile society is. It calls us to think of the fractures in our own communities. The healing has to be done now, for life is short – and, at the end of it, what fractures remain will be very evident.

Check against delivery.

GKW 11.01.20

¹ Genesis 49:33-50:13

² Sam Knight. "‘London Bridge is down’: the secret plan for the days after the Queen's death", *The Guardian*, 17 March 2017: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/16/what-happens-when-queen-elizabeth-dies-london-bridge> >

³ Rabbeinu Bachya on Genesis 50:9