



SERMON SH'MOT:¹ TOWARDS SAFER SACRED SPACES

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 18 January 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

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- 1 “God said to Moses: ‘Go, gather the Israelites together, and say to them: **פקדתי אתכם**, I have surely taken note of you.’”²
- 2 Maimonides wrote a list of 24 things for which anybody who does any of them is liable to excommunication.³ To let our hair down at the end of last term, my Rabbinic Literature class played a game of ‘Excommunication Bingo’: we wrote these 24 things out in a grid and ticked off those of which we were guilty.
- 3 Turns out, a lot of us should have been excommunicated many times over. ‘Treating any point of rabbinic law with disrespect’ seems to be a particular trap for Progressive Jews. ‘Failing to mark the second day of festivals in the Diaspora’ likewise. And so on.
- 4 Two offences, though, seem most unfair in the stark form in which Maimonides put them. **המבזה את החכם**, ‘saying bad things about a sage’; and **חכם ששמועתו רעה**, ‘being a sage about whom bad things are said’.
- 5 There are times when a sage (by which we mean ‘rabbi’) needs to have bad things said about them. There are times when clergy – of any faith –



cross a line, and, for the sake of the safety of their congregants, need to be investigated and, where necessary, disciplined. Speaking out against someone like a rabbi, who is in a position of power, is daunting enough; we should be doing everything we can to help people feel that they can do this without fear of reprisal or hostility.

- 6 There are also times when a rabbi has a bad reputation unfairly. False allegations are not common, but they do happen, and a blanket rule that the mere existence of a questionable reputation must lead to immediate shunning is also unjust.
- 7 Maimonides's system didn't take account of any of this complexity. He never quite got the balance right, and would have excommunicated accuser and accused alike.
- 8 But we shouldn't look down our noses at him too much. Our own community also hasn't got the balance right. Most weeks, if you look hard enough in the press, you'll find a couple of distressing articles about clergy abuse. It's a sad fact of life. But this week, the articles about clergy abuse were set in a Reform synagogue, and concerned extremely serious allegations made against a Reform rabbi.
- 9 It is not my place to determine whether the allegations are true, and I stress that I am not at all suggesting anything about what the conclusion of the investigation should be. But what is important is that there must be an investigation. The fact that this matter ended up spread all over the *Times* and the *Guardian* should be deeply shaming – not because it shows that synagogues are also vulnerable to clergy abuse (or alleged abuse), because we all knew that and it happens in every religion. No,



what is shameful is that the complainants were put in the position of feeling that they had no option but to go public with their story.

- 10 Now one of Wimbledon's sister synagogues is facing an inquiry by the Charity Commission. And all because there is, it turns out, no process for complaints against Progressive rabbis to be considered properly and centrally. Individual synagogues may or may not have their own employment rules, but these are very patchwork and no substitute for a clear, transparent system, run by the national movements, that listens to and counsels accusers and accused alike.
- 11 On Monday, I signed an open letter⁴ calling on the movements to fill this lacuna urgently, demanding "a safer future for our sacred spaces". In part, it reads: "Any case of concern should be investigated by a well-constituted ethics committee of lay and professional leaders. This includes cases where the concern is not deemed a breach of law. As is the case in all other professional bodies, the ethics process should have a range of sanctions at its disposal including reprimand and censure, as well as suspension or expulsion from the clerical bodies."
- 12 פקד פקדתי אתכם, 'I have surely taken note of you.'
- 13 What does it mean to take note of someone? It must mean something more than 'recall'; God didn't say, זכר זכרתי אתכם. It must mean something more than 'listen'; God didn't say, שמע שמעתי אתכם.
- 14 To take note refers to active listening. God didn't just bear in mind the Israelites' suffering in Egypt and do nothing, but rather worked hard to secure their release. Although the slaves did not have their anguish



instantaneously resolved the moment they heard the Divine message, they felt validated because they knew that God had taken note of them, empathised with them, was supporting them, was taking steps for them.

- 15 We have to make our sacred spaces safe. We have to be able to say to congregants who raise concerns – whether those concerns are about a rabbi or a student rabbi, a chair or a cheder teacher or a volunteer – we have to be able to say to them, **פקד פקדנו אתכם**, ‘We have surely taken note of you.’ And to guarantee that when we say it, we do so in complete honesty, we need, urgently, to create processes to back up that statement. Taking note of an allegation doesn’t just mean listening to it and then getting on with our other manifold tasks. It doesn’t just mean jotting it down and forgetting about it. It means supporting the complainant. It means faithfully investigating the complaint. It sometimes means taking the painful and courageous step of suspending, pending inquiry, a figure who is widely respected. Equally, of course, we have to say **פקד פקדנו אתכם** to the subject of any complaint. They too have a right to be taken note of: to have their voice heard and their concerns acted upon.
- 16 The approach of Maimonides was about conflict avoidance. Utter a word against a rabbi? Excommunicate! Rabbi with any allegations circling around them? Excommunicate! Everything is kept as low-key as possible and tensions, ideally, stay below the surface.
- 17 Except... they don’t, do they? Tensions always bubble up, whether into the *Jewish Chronicle* or into the courts.



- 18 God's approach was different to that of Maimonides. God didn't clamp down and silence the Israelites' voices. On the contrary, God told Moses: צעקת בני ישראל באה אלי: 'the cry of the children of Israel reached Me'.⁵
- 19 The biblical narrative of God leading the Israelites out of Egypt is a story of heeding the cry. It's a story of taking note. It's story of active listening. Today, we began the Book of Exodus. On 21 March, nine weeks away, we will finish it. By then, I set a challenge for our national Progressive Jewish community – rabbis, professional staff, lay leaders, synagogue leaders. That challenge: resolve this crisis. Heed the cry. Set up a process which means that vulnerable congregants in our communities will never again feel that their voices are not being taken seriously.
- 20 The Exodus, we are told,⁶ "began in degradation and ended in glory". At this time, judging by the embarrassing press coverage, we too are in degradation. Let us all work together to ensure that, like our ancestors, we end it in glory, with safer sacred spaces. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GKW 18.01.20

¹ Exodus 3:1-22

² Exodus 3:16

³ Hilchot Talmud Torah 6:14

⁴ <<http://tinyurl.com/safersacredspaces>>

⁵ Exodus 3:9

⁶ mPesachim 10:4