



**SERMON KI TISSA (LEO BAECK SHABBAT):¹
THE TRIAL OF THE PYX**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 14 March 2020
Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue

- 1 Once upon a time, Goldsmiths' Hall hosted the Liberal Judaism annual dinner. But, hard as this may be to believe, once a year it hosts something even more interesting and important. Once a year, it hosts the Trial of the Pyx.
- 2 The Trial of the Pyx is an ancient legal institution that has survived to the present day, in which a full trial, before a senior judge, is held in the largest and most ornate room at Goldsmiths' Hall. And who is put on trial? Actually, not a person at all. It's coins.²
- 3 At the Trial of the Pyx, the Royal Mint has to provide a sample of all the coins it's produced over the last year, and a jury of metallurgical experts from the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths will spend two months analysing them to check that they meet the official standard. They melt them all together to check for impurities and ensure that the total weight is as expected.
- 4 And why? To act as a check on cheating politicians. Historically, we're told, the Master of the Mint – an extra title held by the Chancellor of the Exchequer – was tempted to siphon off a few ingots of precious metal for his own private treasury.³
- 5 This feels like a special moment. All sections of society coming together – civil servants, the judiciary, politicians, technical experts, civil society groups – melting separate components together into one whole, for good. For the reassurance of the public.



- 6 These days, of course, we probably trust politicians not to enrich themselves via petty theft of gold ingots. But it's not as if we now have complete faith in the moral probity of our political leaders. It's easy to think of the Trial of the Pyx's survival into the 21st century as a piece of superstitious medieval theatre, but I really think that on some level it brings comfort and certainty, not only that our coins are on-point but that the system still works, that disparate sections of society can function in harmony.
- 7 This week's parashah is, of course, the parashah of molten metal. The Israelites, too, gathered together all sections of their encampment – priests and laity joining forces – and had their own melting ceremony. Of course, the creation of the Golden Calf was also superstitious, but it too was based on an understandable fear. They felt abandoned by Moses, their leader, who had gone up Mount Sinai.
- 8 The rabbis of the Talmud seemed to feel a real sympathy for the Israelites left in this predicament:⁴ they said that Moses had promised to be back by the end of the fortieth day, but Satan made one of his rare cameo appearances and confused the people's timepieces, making them believe that Moses was late back. In their panic, and their fear that he had died, they created a Golden Calf.
- 9 I see the Golden Calf as something akin to a comfort blanket or a teddy-bear; a child grasps towards it when they feel vulnerable or are in need of solace. Even though it's objectively meaningless, it serves a human purpose.
- 10 And comparing the wilderness-dwelling Israelites to children is very easy, because that is, essentially, what they were. In Egypt, they had been enslaved. They had no political power and no grounding in faith. They had had no opportunity to gain experience in the governing of a people, and they



had no relationship with God. Their only understanding of religion came from the Egyptians, and as Moses pointed out to God in one daring midrash, “You brought the Israelites out of Egypt, where everyone worships lambs!”⁵

- 11 Young people make mistakes, and ‘young’ isn’t necessarily a marker of age, but of experience and understanding. I’m very young in terms of the process of entering the rabbinate. Leo Baeck College is full of people who are young in rabbinic experience. This is why it’s so valuable for us to be able to do what I’ve been able to do this morning: to enter communities, watch experienced rabbis, observe minhag.
- 12 And also, to do what I’m currently doing: try things out. Perhaps, like the early Israelites experimenting with self-government and exploring religion for the first time, I’ll fall short. I’ll make mistakes. Hopefully I won’t go so wrong as to construct a Golden Calf, but you, as a community, are very kindly providing me with a safe space in which I can blunder and then learn.
- 13 Leo Baeck relies on this support from communities. It relies on you allowing students in. It relies on you loaning your rabbis out. It relies on your active involvement – the next generation of rabbis is being trained up for you. As you’re a London community, Leo Baeck even relies on you to come (in better, healthier times) to events, take evening classes, visit our amazing library. I probably shouldn’t mention this on Shabbat, and there’s an irony in my using Parashat Ki Tissa to encourage you Israelites to pool your gold for a big project, but Leo Baeck also relies on your donations.
- 14 The making of the Golden Calf is classically looked upon as a black mark in the chronicles of the relationship between God and the Jews. But in a strange way, it’s a positive: the Israelites recognised their vulnerability, came together as one people, and made a genuine attempt to solve their problem.



- 15 So too could we choose to view the Trial of the Pyx as a sad tradition indicative of distrust in our leaders, or alternatively as a beautiful, ritual illustration of how disparate elements of society co-operate to create trust.
- 16 The goldsmiths don't test the coins one-by-one. They melt them into one mass, and it is that one mass that is assayed, that is tested. No individual coin can either pass or fail. We judge their standard by the collective. So too does the Progressive Jewish community of this country stand or fall together. Discrete institutions – Leo Baeck, Northwood and Pinner, Liberal Judaism, the Rabbinic Conference – don't have any worth on their own. But when melted down, mixed together, solidified and then assayed... then we prove to be something special.
- 17 Leo Baeck College appreciates your support over the last year, and we hope that in the coming year our relationship, which is such a vital part of the communal melting pot, can continue to go from strength to strength.

Check against delivery.

GKW 14.03.20

¹ Exodus 32:1-14

² See the Trial of the Pyx Order 1998

³ Rob Ilfe and George E Smith (eds). *The Cambridge Companion to Newton* (Cambridge: 2012, 2nd ed): introduction, 25.

⁴ bShabbat 89a

⁵ Exodus Rabbah 43:7