



SERMON EREV SHAVUOT: THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Thursday 28 May 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 One commentator said that the new lockdown rules, where you can meet one person at a time in a park, must be a gift to spies. They can now sit on a bench next to one person, dressed in a trench coat, collect a briefcase containing secret documents, cross the lawn to another bench, sit down next to another person, and hand it on. All perfectly legal.
- 2 In all seriousness, parks are always a good place for delicate meetings. You can be out in the open where nobody can creep up on you; there's nobody to overhear.
- 3 But the outdoors can also be dangerous. There's no-one to hear your private conversation... but, as the saying¹ goes, there's also no-one to hear you scream.
- 4 I've recently been working on an essay about the laws of the goring ox, and found a fascinating passage² in which the rabbis puzzled over an apparent contradiction in the biblical text.³ The Torah tells us that when an ox kills a person, it should be stoned to death – and additionally, if the ox has a history of killing people, the owner should be punished as well. The question is... how can an ox ever acquire a history of killing people if it's to be stoned to death after its very first homicide?
- 5 The Talmud comes up with several possible scenarios, each more ridiculous than the last: maybe the ox's previous victims had all been terminally ill so they didn't really count; maybe there were so many other



similar-looking oxen around that, at the time of the previous killings, witnesses were unable to identify the culprit.

- 6 My favourite possibility was conjured up by Rav Pappa: “Maybe it killed someone but then fled to the marsh before it could be stoned, then killed again and fled to the marsh, and so on.”
- 7 The idea of the wilderness on the edge of towns and villages as being a great, lawless expanse, perhaps populated by murderous oxen on the run from justice, is a powerful one, and it finds its roots in the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Ruth, which we’ll read tomorrow morning, Ruth was repeatedly warned⁴ that a young woman gleaning alone in the fields was at risk of molestation. The outdoors was portrayed as a space in which she would lose control of her own destiny, just as the rabbis envisaged it being a space where threatening animals roamed free, and where there was nobody to save anyone who ended up in danger.
- 8 Losing control isn’t always a bad thing, however. Being told what to do is tough, but losing control over other people – being unable to dictate what other people to do, and not being burdened by that responsibility – that can be liberating.
- 9 Receiving the Torah certainly limited our ancestors’ freedom: 613 new commandments! But it was also a liberation, the final symbol of the Israelites becoming a free people, no longer enslaved to human masters, the equal of other free peoples across the face of the planet.
- 10 And, crucially, the Torah was given not in the land of Israel – the home of our ancestors – and not in the tent of the mishkan, where the priests slipped behind curtains to perform mysterious rites. No, the Torah was given outdoors, in the great wilderness of Sinai, in a huge open space.



- 11 The rabbis, of course, had an explanation for this: “The Torah was given in the desert, publicly and openly, in a place belonging to no one, so that no nation should be able to say, ‘It was given in Israel’s land, so has no application to us,’ and no tribe say, ‘In my territory the Torah was given.’”⁵
- 12 The great open wilderness, dangerous as it was, also had benefits. It became something communal and collective, something inclusive, from which nobody was banished and over which nobody could claim ownership.
- 13 This year, our celebration of Shavuot is very much not taking place in public spaces. We can’t gather in shul and we can’t gather in a park. We can, however, gather online, and perhaps that is actually the modern-day equivalent of the Sinai desert: open to anyone, a great equaliser, a space where everything is shared and anyone is welcome.
- 14 Of course, online services do exclude some. Those who don’t have the technology, or the technological skills, are cut off. Then again, so did the choice of Sinai for revelation exclude people. Everybody in the world was allowed to be present at the giving of the Torah, but that doesn’t mean everybody in the world was able to be there. People had work and school. People couldn’t afford the journey or the time.
- 15 For online shuls in the time of covid, the solution is, of course, to reach out outside services. If someone can’t make it onto Zoom, we give them a ring later in the day.
- 16 What was the solution for the exclusive nature of revelation in an inaccessible wilderness? Us. The Jewish people. It’s our job to help share the gift of Torah with everyone who seeks it, especially those who are unable to manage it without help. I don’t mean this in a missionary sense,



but in an educational sense. If people who want to taste the sweetness of Torah can't do so, we need to act as transmitters to boost their signal.

- 17 This is why, at Shavuot, after reading about the giving of the Ten Commandments, we go on to read the story of Ruth. She was literally in the field, yet couldn't get the grain she needed without support; and she got that support. This is here to remind us that our duty is to recognise those in our own communities who might be struggling with connection, whether they're in the field or outside it. On Shavuot, we commit to continue to help people access their Judaism however close or far they are from our community. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GKW 28.05.20

¹ And also Deuteronomy 22:27

² bBava Kamma 41a

³ Exodus 21:28-29

⁴ Ruth 2:8-9, 22

⁵ Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, ba-Chodesh 5