



## **SERMON B'HA'ALOT'CHA:<sup>1</sup> INSULATED FROM DEATH**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 5 June 2020  
Manchester Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 I really enjoyed this picture when it appeared in the news last month:



It shows Father Tim Pelc, a priest in Detroit, blessing his parishoners' Easter baskets by 'sprinkling' holy water onto them from an appropriately safe distance.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 It's not just Catholics who use sacramental liquids, however. In tomorrow's Torah reading parashah we will find that I might also be in need of a water-pistol: "To purify the Levites, this is what you shall do to them – sprinkle on them expiation-water and pass a razor over all their flesh, and wash their clothes, and they will be purified."<sup>3</sup> And strange though it seems, even in



ancient times, long before coronavirus was on the horizon, social distancing was an integral part of this ritual.

- 3 The water in question was the ‘water of lustration’, water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer,<sup>4</sup> a special sacrificial cow – and this extremely rare liquid was the only way in which the ancient priesthood could cleanse themselves of tumat met, of the impurity acquired when encountering a human corpse.
- 4 I say ‘encountering’... it’s not just through touching a corpse that people became impure. Passing a funeral procession in the street; being in the same building as a corpse; standing under the same tree as a corpse; walking over a grave. The range of situations in which one can contract tumat met is seemingly endless,<sup>5</sup> and that was all the more problematic because it was such a difficult impurity to shift. Only the water of the red heifer would do – and here’s the catch, it could only be administered by someone who was themselves pure, and who had never been impure.<sup>6</sup>
- 5 So where could you find this person? Someone who’s never attended a funeral, been near a grave or even innocently walked over a patch of ground, deep under which is a long-forgotten burial pit?
- 6 Well, you can’t find them. That person doesn’t exist. Everyone is considered tumat met.<sup>7</sup> So if you can’t find them, you have to make them. “Courtyards were built in Jerusalem,” we are told,<sup>8</sup> “on top of solid rock, and under them there was a hollow [an air-gap that blocked impurity] from any deep graves beneath. And they brought pregnant women there, and they would give birth there and raise their sons there.”
- 7 When the priestly sons reached the age of 7 or 8,<sup>9</sup> just before they hit puberty,<sup>10</sup> they were ready for action. They were loaded onto the back of a



big ox – actually, they were on the back of a door that had been taken off its hinges<sup>11</sup> and put onto the ox, to shield them from contamination by any grave they might travel over on their journey – and taken off to administer the purifying waters of the red heifer.<sup>12, 13</sup>

- 8 In those courtyards, they tried to distance the boys completely from the real world. What must life have been like for those poor boys? Brought up in an artificial, sterile environment, air-gapped from the outside world, never leaving the compound in which they were born until finally needed for the task for which the adults had been grooming them their entire childhood. It wasn't so much isolation as insulation. Insulation from any vestige of death.
- 9 But in doing so, they weren't just insulated from death. They were insulated from life.
- 10 Writing about our current lockdown, an extremely controversial article<sup>14</sup> by retired judge Lord Sumption made an interesting point: "What sort of life do we think we are protecting? There is more to life than the avoidance of death. Life is a drink with friends. Life is a crowded football match or a live concert. Life is a family celebration with children and grandchildren. Life is companionship, an arm around one's back, laughter or tears shared at less than two metres. These things are not just optional extras. They are life itself. They are fundamental to our humanity, to our existence as social beings."
- 11 But it's more than that: to be alive is to come into contact with death. We're all tumat met, contaminated by corpses, because we've all attended funerals, walked past graveyards, visited or even worked in hospitals – these are all part of the challenge the world throws at us, and to live fully,



we have to meet that challenge rather than hide ourselves away in an air-gapped courtyard. Even when we're not under the same roof as the deceased, we're encountering death in other ways: choosing what speed to drive the car, whether to chance it with the cheese that's a day past its use-by, trying to give up smoking or making a firm decision to continue with it. Interaction with death is not just part of the human experience, it is the human experience, and it's the knowledge that one day it will be us in the cemetery that makes us value the human contact Lord Sumption described.

- 12 But this is not an 'end the lockdown now' sermon. Our lockdown – at least while it is only measured in months – is simply not comparable to the miserable upbringing of those small boys. They were cut off from reality and suffered for it.
- 13 Father Tim Pelc is probably suffering through his social distancing as well. Clergy are missing human contact too! But he was creative, and did everything he could do build connections and community, finding ingenious ways to serve his parishoners despite the distancing rules in force in Detroit.
- 14 We can't control the fact of our lockdown, but we can decide whether it will make us retreat into air-gapped courtyards, completely cut off from the outside, or whether we will go out of our way to be creative, to build connections, and to reach out.
- 15 This Shabbat's Torah portion contains another rule about the Levites: compulsory retirement at age 50.<sup>15</sup> Yet it's accompanied by something more compassionate:<sup>16</sup> "But they shall continue to minister alongside their brethren in the tent of meeting, and they shall continue to hold office, but



they shall not do any work.” Older Levites were not allowed to work, but rather than being left at home to feel bored and rejected, they continued to share in the company (and honour) of their friends and family.

- 16 May this – creative company-keeping and community-construction – be the way that we, too, approach our lockdown, as it enters week eleven. Kein y’hi ratzon, may this be God’s will.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GKW 05.06.20**

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 8:1-11

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press. “Detroit priest sprays holy water from squirt gun to maintain social distancing”, *The Guardian* (17 May 2020): <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/17/priest-holy-water-squirt-gun-detroit>>

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 8:7

<sup>4</sup> Rashi ad loc

<sup>5</sup> See Rabbi Yochanan Lombard’s *Concise Guide to the Halachos [sic] of Taharas [sic] ha-Kohanim*: <<https://dinonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/A-Concise-Guide.pdf>>

<sup>6</sup> Hilchot Tumat Met 2:7

<sup>7</sup> Radbaz on Hilchot Bikkurim 5:9

<sup>8</sup> mParah 3:2

<sup>9</sup> Tosafot on bSukkah 21a, sv “U-m’vi’in nashim u-barot v’yoldot”

<sup>10</sup> The idea of keeping young boys in a compound until they become useful to the adult world just before hitting puberty is the most Philip Pullman thing I’ve ever heard, but that’s another story.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Samuel Cohen. *The Boy on the Door on the Ox: an unusual spiritual journey through the strangest Jewish texts* (New York: Aviv Press, 2008): Kindle edition, chapter “Spiritual Audacity”.

<sup>12</sup> mParah, ibid

<sup>13</sup> Temple fanatics seem to be planning to resurrect this idea for the present day, as access to certain areas of the Temple Mount is limited to those who are pure, and such a person needs to be grown from scratch: see Herb Keinon, “The Temple is in their sights”, *The Western Jewish Bulletin* (13 March 1998). In order to begin work on a Third Temple, others would need to be purified, and that would require access to a red heifer. Work is actively underway to find one: Melanie Lidman, “To ready for the final redemption, Israelis take red heifers by the horns”, *Times of Israel* (9 August 2015): <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/red-heifer-temple-institute/>>

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Sumption. “Locking up the elderly until coronavirus is defeated is a cruel mockery of basic human values”, *Mail on Sunday* (2 May 2020): <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-8281007/Former-Supreme-Court-judge-LORD-SUMPTION-gives-withering-critique-Governments-lockdown.html>>

<sup>15</sup> Numbers 8:25

<sup>16</sup> Numbers 8:26