



SERMON KORACH:¹ THE CHOSEN STICK

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 20 June 2020
Glasgow Reform Synagogue

- 1 אבחר בו מטהו יפרח – “I will choose the staff which will blossom.”²

- 2 When I was a small child, my family went on holiday somewhere – maybe France or Italy – and one day we visited a cathedral. Towards the front of the cathedral there was a rope, to stop tourists getting too close to the bimah. I asked my mum what would happen if I ignored the rope and carried on walking, and I vividly remember her replying, after briefly struggling to conjure up a convincing answer, “Erm... the vicar will come out and hit you with a stick.”

- 3 Of course, I now realise that that wasn’t true (because you don’t get vicars in cathedrals). But what would have happened? Well, presumably the vicar would have come out and politely asked me to leave. And if I’d refused? He might have explained, threatened, cajoled. Ultimately, though, one assumes he’d have called the police.

- 4 And what would the police do? It’s not for nothing that the great Torah commentator Rashi called the police “men with sticks and whips”.³
Ultimately, the police force is an institution that relies upon violence. We use the term ‘force’ as a euphemism, really just referring to “the ability to call up people dressed in uniforms, willing to hit others over the head with wooden sticks”.⁴



- 5 The question we now have to ask ourselves is: if the vicar was willing, in principle, to call the police to come and hit me with a stick, in what sense was my mum wrong? Why didn't he just come and hit me with a stick himself? It's the same outcome, no?
- 6 There are two likely answers. Firstly, that would be illegal. And secondly, the vicar – a man of the cloth – was probably not given to violence.
- 7 Both of these responses are slightly specious, however. He might not be given to violence, yet he was willing to dial 999 and invite a group of men to perpetrate some. We all like to tell ourselves that if we aren't holding the stick, we aren't responsible for the beating. But that isn't right. As the great legal scholar Robert Cover observed, our society is based on a highly artificial separation between word and deed, designed to allow each participant to tell their conscience that moral responsibility rests with someone else. In a capital murder case, the executioner doesn't pass sentence and the judge doesn't pull the switch.⁵
- 8 But what is it that makes the judge's sentence and the executioner's hand motion permissible when I, as a private citizen, have no right do either? That's this idea of 'legality'. The police are allowed to use violence and I'm not. Their stick is the chosen stick, and mine isn't.
- 9 Parashat Korach reeks of testosterone. Everybody is at each other's throats, squaring up to each other, killing each other, labelling each other, blaming each other. It is no surprise at all that the contest between the tribes (and there would have to be a contest, wouldn't there!) was judged between their various sticks.



- 10 And the Levites, led by Aaron, had the chosen stick. The stick that God had sanctioned. Aaron was officially the mightiest of the tribal chiefs. And his stick – although it was covered with blossom – was still a stick.
- 11 A midrash, however, lists a further miracle of Aaron’s blossoming staff. “The almonds were sweet and bitter: sweet ones grew on the right-hand side of the staff, and bitter ones grew on the left. And when Israel did what God wanted, the sweet almonds on the right would be fresh. And when the Israelites transgressed God’s will, the ones on the left would be fresh, and the sweet ones would wither away.”⁶
- 12 A stick that gives whoever wields it instant feedback on whether they are doing the right thing or the wrong thing? Now that is an invention to be reckoned with. Unfortunately, Aaron’s staff was just a one-off, but it still gives us a valuable model: external oversight.
- 13 The police wield the chosen stick. They, alone, have the lawful authority to use it to hit people. They cannot be allowed to exercise this authority unsupervised. Since, in our case, this supervision is unlikely to take the form of Divine revelation, it needs to come from the next best source, and that is the rest of society. The police only hit people on behalf of the rest of us – those who call them, those who fund them, those who respect them for the genuinely difficult and dangerous work they do. So, it is incumbent on us to see that they, as our agents, are using their chosen stick as fairly and as sparingly as possible.
- 14 So much of the Jewish experience is about striving to achieve a God-like level of righteous behaviour. Even Korach, before being swallowed up by the ground, insisted that each one of us is holy.⁷ That means that, for so long as God doesn’t cause bitter almonds to grow on police truncheons as



a form of instant, edible feedback that excessive violence and discrimination against the black community must stop, we have to fill the vacuum.

- 15 The whole community is holy. And if, like Korach, we have to protest and make a stand in order to have that point heard, then that is where our duty lies. A chosen stick must be used carefully; and when the world realises this, perhaps every stick and every instrument of violence will blossom with sweet almonds. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GKW 20.06.20

¹ Numbers 17:6-26

² Numbers 17:20

³ Rashi on Deuteronomy 16:18

⁴ David Graeber. *The Utopia of Rules: on technology, stupidity and the secret joys of bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015): 58.

⁵ Robert Cover. "Violence and the Word", 95 Yale LJ 1601 (1986): 1,626-1,627.

⁶ The midrash is recorded, but not cited, in *D'rashot Rabbi Y'hoshua Ibn Shu'aib*, Parashat Vayikach Korach, and also in Toledot Yitzchak *ad loc.*

⁷ Numbers 16:3