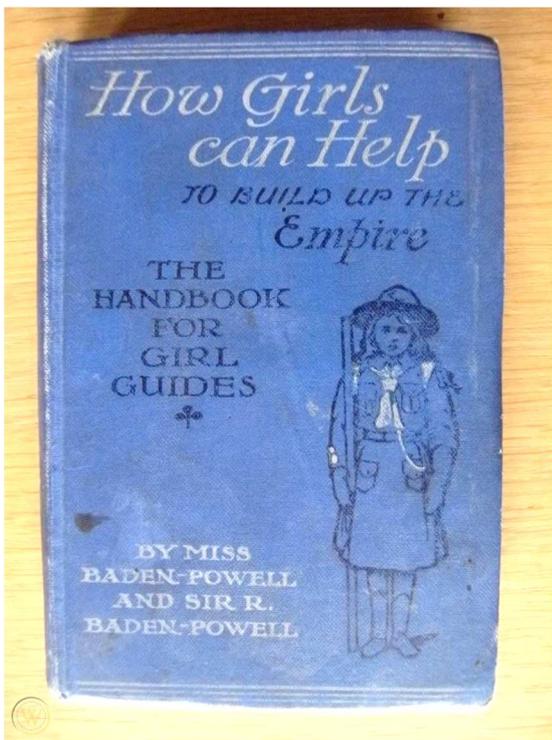




**SERMON CHUKKAT:¹
STRIP BADEN-POWELL OF HIS VESTMENTS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 27 June 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 הפשט את־אהרן את־בגדיו – “Strip Aaron of his garments.”²
- 2 Not so far away from the shul is Wimbledon Windmill. A couple of years ago I went to visit it, and on display in one of the cabinets there is a book with this excellent title:



It was part of a large display of Baden-Powell memorabilia because it was in that very windmill that he wrote his seminal book *Scouting for Boys*, out of which grew the international Scout movement.³



- 3 Robert Baden-Powell was an Empire man through-and-through... right down to a dreadful episode in which he shot an African chief, a prisoner-of-war, in Matabeleland in 1897 – despite having promised his safety.⁴
- 4 In the wake of #BlackLivesMatter, many more allegations about him are coming into the spotlight at the moment. And they are extremely damning. A BBC interview⁵ with his biographer Tim Jeal – the biggest Baden-Powell fan there is – reveals just how impossible it is to defend him: “Mr Jeal said that any admiration Baden-Powell had for Adolf Hitler was confined to their shared ideas about boys’ education.” Oh, well that’s OK then... It continued: “He said a diary entry in which Baden-Powell described *Mein Kampf* as a ‘wonderful book’ had been misinterpreted.”
- 5 I was a Scout for years, from Beavers through to Explorer Scouting. And I heard Baden-Powell’s name used a lot. But always in a context of idolisation. He was our founder. He had the inspiration to create such a wonderful organisation. He dedicated his life to empowering young people. Nobody ever mentioned the fact that he was keen on the Nazi Youth and had a history of committing war crimes.
- 6 Immediately after the end of this morning’s Torah reading comes Aaron’s death scene. God’s instruction to Moses is succinct but so telling: הפשט את־הפשתים את־בגדיו אהרן – “Strip Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Elazar.”⁶
- 7 What does it mean to take someone’s clothes away? Three things, I think. Firstly, embarrassment: clothes, and especially fine priestly vestments marking the wearer as someone who holds high office, are vital to our sense of dignity. To have them stripped off is a gesture of humiliation. And secondly, demotion and withdrawal of honour. Aaron had been the High



Priest, the most senior religious figure of the Israelites; then, by the simple gesture of removing his robes, he lost the honour that attaches to that position. In a very visual, symbolic gesture, the Israelites saw that he was no longer their leader and no longer worthy of their honour.

- 8 The current national debate over statues is one thing, but I wonder if it's a diversion from the real issue, which is not the physical manifestation of these individuals but the legacy that these people left. Every institution funded by the slave trade, every school named after a racist politician; every Scout troop that tells stories of good old Baden-Powell. All are part of an unsavoury legacy.
- 9 Now, modern Scouting is obviously not a Nazi-sympathising institution. Yet it makes no attempt to confront its past. Lauding Baden-Powell uncritically is simply lazy. Engaging with him uncritically is the wrong thing to do – and it wastes a teachable moment for today's young people, who could benefit from understanding the complexity of how institutions' history develops. Instead of being taught that the Scout movement is Baden-Powell's baby, they should be taught that the Scout movement had an abusive father but has outgrown him. 'This movement is bigger than any one person,' the kids should be told, 'and while we're grateful that Baden-Powell founded us, we're not grateful for anything else he did and, over the years, we've matured to have an ideology of equality and inclusion completely different to the views he held.'
- 10 The Israelites adopted a sensible 'the king is dead, long live the king' approach to transition: Aaron died and Elazar immediately put on his robes. It was not 'Aaron's religion'; it was just a religion of which the first High Priest happened to be called Aaron. They didn't allow his legacy to define



them – because had they done so, they would have been forced to overlook his many faults. An idol must be flawless, after all.

- 11 And this is the third symbolism of stripping someone's clothes from them. Transparency. The word the Torah uses for removing Aaron's robes is **הפשט**, from the root **פ-ש-ט**. That root also gives us the word **פשט**, meaning 'obvious', or 'simple', or 'explanation'. Once you take someone's fancy robes of office away from them, they are just a human being, and they are exposed to the world. All can see their virtues and their failings.
- 12 History, especially English history, is full of figures that we fondly think of as being benevolent, but who actually admired Hitler, or murdered African chiefs, or traded slaves, or caused famines. What should happen to their statues is one conversation. But there can be no doubt, I think, that we should **הפשט** all of them – in all three senses. Leave them naked, remove the rosy glow of honour with which we instinctively regard them, and explain them by leaving their deeds completely open to public scrutiny.
- 13 What happened after Moses stripped Aaron? **ויראו בליהעדה**. All the community saw. They saw the **פשט**, they saw the obvious. They saw Aaron without his clothes. And they were the better for it.
- 14 The lesson of the last few weeks is always to try to see historical figures – especially by whom we have an instinct to define ourselves – stripped bare. Only then can we truly evaluate them.

Check against delivery.

GKW 27.06.20



¹ Numbers 20:1-21

² Numbers 20:26

³ Robert Baden-Powell. *Scouting for Boys*, 1908 (repr Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): xlii.

⁴ BBC News. "Was Robert Baden-Powell a supporter of Hitler?" (11 June 2020): <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-53007902>>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Numbers 20:26