



**SERMON MATTOT-MAS'EI:¹
THE TENT IN THE ROOM UPSTAIRS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 18 July 2020
Glasgow Reform Synagogue

- 1 Who here ever went 'indoor camping' as a child? Set up a small tent in your bedroom and spent the night in a sleeping bag? I know I did.
- 2 During lockdown, I've surprised myself by becoming fascinated with Seder Tohorot. Seder Tohorot is the last section of the Mishnah, and it deals – in immense and often revolting detail – with the laws of purity and impurity. If you swap the straps on an impure sandal, does it become a new, pure sandal or does the impurity remain?² What if a lizard crawls into your pot of sourdough and dies there?³ What if a sponge soaked in impure liquid falls into an oven but doesn't touch the bottom?⁴
- 3 Part of what makes me find this material so absorbing (if you'll pardon the pun) is that it's an entirely self-contained, logical system that seeks to describe how טומאה – impurity – leaks from place to place and vessel to vessel, and how its spread can be blocked.
- 4 So it feels especially topical at the moment; while טומאה is a bit of a rabbinic invention, it's not a world apart from the rituals of social distancing and surface cleansing that are currently dominating society. We may not be concerned with 'If a lizard dies in our oven, does it contaminate all the bread or just the bits it's actually touching?', but rabbis across the world are, right now, considering, 'If someone with covid makes it into our congregation, do we have to shut the whole building or just clean that room?'



- 5 Of course, even in ancient Israel, I don't know how likely it was that a lizard would crawl into a heated oven. Another scenario that struck me as being incredibly tenuous when I first read it is: "A tent that is pitched in an upstairs room with part of its canvas lying flat over the hatch between the upstairs and the downstairs rooms."⁵
- 6 On first reading, I thought to myself, why would anyone pitch a tent in a building? And then I realised, that's what we all did! Indoor camping. It's a bit of fun for a child, pretending to be a grown-up explorer, braving the elements but without the discomfort and risk of the actual thing.
- 7 There's a sinister context to this scenario in the Mishnah, however. There's a corpse in the downstairs room. The rabbis are divided over whether the flap of excess tent canvas covering the hatch is enough to stop the impurity spreading into the room upstairs. Rabbi Yosi says it is; Rabbi Shimon disagrees and insists that only a proper tent actually pitched over the hatch can achieve this.
- 8 So then I wondered, of all the times to set up a tent indoors, why would you choose the moment when there's a corpse in the house? And then I realised, when would be a better time? When there's a corpse lying downstairs, when the harsh realities of life are laid bare in such a graphic way, who wouldn't prefer to retreat upstairs and play at camping, double-cocooning themselves from the scary memento mori?
- 9 Obviously the Mishnah's scenario is completely hypothetical and just a visual way of exploring how different structures shield against טומאה. But it also comes to teach us that there's nothing wrong with a bit of escapism from time to time. Play is a good thing. It simulates real life without getting all the details spot-on. There's no traumatic deaths at play, and even if the



tent isn't properly pitched – there shouldn't really be a spare flap of material – it doesn't matter, because it's just a game. Rabbi Yosi was right; the escapism of indoor camping can shield us against the emotional impact of the corpse downstairs.

- 10 Eventually, though, we have to return to reality. The play-tent makes us feel like it's keeping us safe from the wind and snow, but of course, it does no such thing. Escapism gives us an impression of sheltering from the tragedy in the house, but sooner or later we need to face it in person. So Rabbi Shimon was also right: an improperly-pitched play-tent doesn't form a proper barrier between the player and the life events happening in their house.
- 11 In this week's parashah, we read about the mind-numbing monotony of our tent-dwelling ancestors' journeys from place to place. They spent years living that life. A little escapism is the least they deserved.
- 12 The story of the Reubenites and the Gadites highlights this: they didn't want to deal with the challenges – military and social – of establishing a new state on the far side of the Jordan. They found a plot of land that they liked, and they wanted to stay there and be farmers and close their minds to the business of nation-building. But Moses persuaded them with a compromise: their children were allowed to stay and play in the idyllic pastoral scene east of the Jordan, while the tribes of Reuben and Gad bit the bullet, confronted reality and joined their people in its time of need.
- 13 Living in the moment is good; taking oneself away from the moment is good; returning to the real world is essential. **חדש ימינו כקדם**: renew our days as of old.⁶ Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.



Check against delivery.

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- ¹ Numbers 32:1-19
- ² m.Keilim 26:4
- ³ m.Keilim 8:6
- ⁴ m.Keilim 9:4
- ⁵ m.Ohalot 7:2
- ⁶ Lamentations 5:21