



SERMON VA'ETCHANNAN:¹ THE TEN GUIDELINES

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 1 August 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 Do you have to wear a mask in a sandwich shop? Business secretary Alok Sharma doesn't know.² I suspect very few people do. The situation is complicated not just by the fact that the rules never very clear, but also by the fact that the guidance changes what feels like every five minutes. Don't wear a mask, you can wear a mask, you must wear a mask except when you're not wearing a mask... The reissuing of government guidance with minor tweaks makes it very difficult for us to manage our lives.
- 2 Halfway through the Book of Exodus, our ancestors received the Ten Commandments.³ Then, three books later, they received them again... slightly differently. There were some changes. The Reform movement's lectionary summarises this portion as "Review of the Revelation at Sinai". I'm not sure 'review' is an apt description... how many stars would they receive? 'People who bought the law against murder also bought the law against adultery'?
- 3 But something must be behind the differences between the two editions. Was this a case of God taking a leaf from Alok Sharma's book and reissuing the guidance with minor tweaks? Or was something else going on?
- 4 An essay by the 19th-century rabbi Samuel Luzzatto, known as the Shadal, gives a very comprehensive answer. He identifies twelve differences between the two passages – some quite significant, some of only one or two letters – and carefully explains each one.⁴



- 5 For instance, in the first version we are told that Shabbat is about commemorating God's rest at the end of the Creation story.⁵ In the second version, though, Shabbat is a commemoration of how we were rescued from slavery.⁶ Nu? So what is Shabbat about? Well, the Shadal explains that this tweak recognised that the second version was being delivered to an entirely new generation. These were the Israelites who were about to enter the Promised Land, and none of them had experienced slavery in Egypt. There was, therefore, every risk that, without an extra reminder, they would forget that chapter of their history. So the meaning of Shabbat was amended to make it more suitable to its new audience.
- 6 Another amendment between the two versions of the Shabbat commandment is more famous – the first⁷ says to remember Shabbat, the second⁸ to keep it. שמור וזכור. Why the difference? Well, the generation of the wilderness would stop receiving manna after every six days, so all they would need to do is remember that sequence and then they would be able to realise when it was Shabbat. But in Israel, there would be no more manna, so the new generation would have to pay really close attention and keep their own calendar in order not to miss it.
- 7 Does this mean God changed God's mind and updated the central Ten Commandments between Exodus and Deuteronomy? That would be quite a radical reading of the text. But the Shadal takes us somewhere even more radical: he says that Moses took it upon himself to update them.
- 8 Now, the argument that the later version of the Ten Commandments – which we read this morning – is in the voice of Moses rather than that of God... that isn't controversial. It's not always easy to follow who's speaking in these long narrative passages, but it probably is indeed all one long



speech by Moses: “God said...” and then a long quotation of the revelation sequence from Exodus.

- 9 But, says the Shadal, it wasn't quite a quotation. Moses, after 40 years of wearying experience in leading the Israelites, realised that some clarifications were necessary. So he added some tweaks of his own. He decided לתקן דבריו, to correct the commandments. To correct the commandments! That's definitely what it means. לתקן comes from the same root as תקון עולם, repairing the world. Moses decided that the commandments were broken, or not fit for purpose, and he repaired them before repeating them to the Israelites.
- 10 This is huge. It tells us that Jewish teachings – especially biblical teachings, which are particularly likely to seem alien or even immoral or hideous to a modern audience – do not work on a ‘one size fits all’ basis. At least, one size does not fit all generations. During the 40 years in the wilderness, Moses learned more about the people he was leading, and came to realise that they needed different rules to support them through a rough patch than the ones God had intended for a previous generation.
- 11 The same principle still applies. Back in the day when we gathered in person in Queensmere Road, and the service-leader would face the ark for certain prayers, it made perfect sense for everyone to bow where tradition dictated we should bow. But now we're all on-screen and facing each other, maybe we need לתקן דברינו and find a different way.
- 12 And isn't that what we're all doing at the moment? Adapting? We thought it would just be a virtual Pesach, then we thought it would just be a virtual Shavuot, and now we know it's going to be a virtual High Holy Days as



well. The ever-changing guidance is frustrating and upsetting. But we can, like Moses, adapt as well, and keep going as best we can in changed circumstances. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GKW 01.08.20

¹ Deuteronomy 5:1-24

² Sky News, 16 July 2020: <<https://twitter.com/AvaSantina/status/1283673408564334592>>

³ Exodus 20:1-13

⁴ Samuel David Luzzatto, *Bikkurei ha-Ittim* 5588 (1827): 86-95. Repr in *Beit ha-Otzar*, vol 2 pp 87-93. Unfortunately the Shadal's essay doesn't seem to have been translated from Hebrew, however a passable English summary is available courtesy of Eliezer Daniel Jesselson, "Between Exodus and Deuteronomy", Bar-Ilan University (28 July 2007): <<https://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/vahet/jes.html>>

⁵ Exodus 20:10

⁶ Deuteronomy 5:14

⁷ Exodus 20:7

⁸ Deuteronomy 5:11