



**SERMON EIKEV:
THE GOLDEN WATERS OF SINAI**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 8 August 2020
Birmingham Progressive Synagogue

- 1 I recently rewatched the excellent Leonardo di-Caprio film *Catch Me If You Can*.¹ It tells the slightly-embellished true story of the 17-year-old conman Frank Abagnale Jr, who perfected the art of forging cheques and managed to steal more than \$4million over a period of a few years. In the end – pardon me for spoiling it – he was caught, served a short time in prison, and became a reformed character and a useful member of society.
- 2 This wasn't just the classic story of a criminal seeing the error of their ways and 'going straight', however. Because Frank Abagnale's crime was integral to the way he became a useful member of society. Had he not done the crime, his career and his life would have gone in a very different direction.
- 3 Because his job, after leaving prison, was as a security expert. He knew everything there was to know about forging cheques, and spent the rest of his working life assisting the police in tracking down fraudsters, and assisting the banks in designing more secure systems. He carried the legacy of his crime with him, and that legacy didn't just shape his personality, it actually defined and enhanced the remainder of his existence.
- 4 In today's parashah, we read Moses's retelling of the Israelites' travails over 40 years in the wilderness. The niceties are often a tiny bit different to how we read the stories happening 'live' earlier in the Torah. When it comes to the retelling of the episode of the golden calf, last time we read it, back in



Exodus, Moses crushed the idol, ground it up, scattered the powder in water and made the Israelites drink it.²

5 This time,³ it's slightly different. No reference to anyone being made to drink ground-up gold. Rather, this time, Moses claims: "I broke it to bits and ground it thoroughly until it was fine as dust, and I threw its dust into the stream that comes down from the mountain."

6 'The mountain', of course, is Sinai. So Moses came down from Sinai carrying the tablets of stone, inscribed on them everything that holds us together as the Jewish people, but something else comes down from Sinai as well: a stream carrying the remnants of the golden calf. Just as we carry the words from those tablets of stone – that came down from Sinai – with us to this day, so too does the stream that flows down from Sinai travel with us. And it is full of gold.

7 Frank Abagnale's past gave him knowledge of cheque fraud, that he later used to protect society. What did we learn from the story of the golden calf, that continues to guide us in our lives?

8 I think there are four messages. First, and probably least interesting, is monotheism. We only have one God and don't need idols. That was a lesson we drank from the golden waters of Sinai that flowed with us throughout our history.

9 Secondly, a distrust of mobs. Our ancestors worked themselves up into a frenzy and anyone who had thoughts of standing against them was swept along in the current. Now we know that having the courage to be an individual, and to resist the madness of the crowd, is a virtue and a duty and shouldn't be seen as an unwelcome burden.⁴ That was a lesson we



drank from the golden waters of Sinai that flowed with us throughout our history.

- 10 Thirdly, the confidence to cope with changing leadership structures. The Israelites panicked because their one leader, Moses, was gone up a mountain. He went out of sight and they descended into anarchy. Since then, they gradually realised that they don't always need to have a parent within view in order to maintain communal structures. This prepared us for 2,000 years of exile: distributed across the world, often oppressed, we still didn't collapse and resort to idolatry. That was a lesson we drank from the golden waters of Sinai that flowed with us throughout our history.
- 11 Finally, though, was the real revelation of Sinai. The revelation that actions have consequences. As slaves, the Hebrews had no agency, no power, no ability to make decisions or choices. The transition from being slaves, where nothing you do can make the situation any worse, to free human beings, where people have to take responsibility for their own actions, was truly a revelation.
- 12 And these are the four lessons we drank from the golden waters of Sinai that flowed with us throughout our history.

Check against delivery.

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¹ Steven Spielberg. *Catch Me If You Can* (Dreamworks: Los Angeles, 2002).

² Exodus 32:20

³ Deuteronomy 9:21

⁴ See [5778] GW Sermon 9