



**SERMON EREV R'EH:
LOCAL SPIRIT**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 14 August 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 A new sitcom came out earlier this year called *The Jewish Enquirer*. It's all about the life of a journalist at a Jewish newspaper, and it's very relatable – this newspaper proudly runs front-page stories such as, “Exclusive: Chief Rabbi shops at Marks & Spencer,”¹ “Anti-Semitic attacks rise by 0.03%: exclusive,” and, “Cloudy weather in Tel Aviv: exclusive.”²
- 2 But what makes it really fun is that it's filmed in the heart of Jewish north London. I went to the premiere screening, and every time a familiar location appeared, there was an appreciative gasp from the audience of Jewish north Londoners. A character getting frustrated at a difficult traffic junction in Hampstead Garden Suburb that's made us all frustrated at one time or another. Someone visiting that fish-and-chip shop in Finchley. A scene set in the park opposite the Sternberg Centre. Even though I'm not really cut from north London cloth – as you know, I'm from your neck of the woods – it's fun to see the area where I've been living for four years featured so heavily.
- 3 Local identity can be a powerful thing. That's probably what lies behind the Torah's fascination with the idea of a subverted town. In tomorrow's parashah, we read:³ “If you hear it said, of one of the towns that the Eternal One your God is giving you to dwell in, that some scoundrels from among you have gone and subverted the inhabitants of their town, saying, ‘Come let us worship other gods’ – whom you have not experienced – you shall investigate and inquire and interrogate thoroughly. If it is true, if the fact is



established that abhorrent thing was perpetrated in your midst, put the inhabitants of that town to the sword and put its cattle to the sword. Doom it and all that is in it to destruction: gather all its spoil into the open square, and burn the town and all its spoil as a holocaust to the Eternal One your God. And it shall remain an everlasting ruin, never to be rebuilt.”

- 4 Horribly violent as this is, it's easy to see the Torah's concern. A town in a pre-internet age – lots of people living in close proximity with no easy way to communicate with anyone outside the town – was fertile ground for rumours to spread and mob-rule to take over.
- 5 Even in the modern world, local networks are strong, something we realise all the more keenly at the moment as local outbreaks of coronavirus are prevalent. Just as disease can spread through a community, so, thought the Torah, could seditious ideas. We know that it's not just physical contagion that gets transmitted in a local area. There is genuinely such a thing as local spirit.
- 6 We've seen this with all the synagogues that have set themselves up on Zoom during lockdown. Stuck at home, anyone could choose to tune in to any activity being held in any synagogue anywhere in the world. In fact, this could be a prime opportunity to experience Jewish life in Los Angeles, Singapore, Sydney... yet here everyone is tuning into Wimbledon. Even for those whose community hasn't yet gone fully online, the tendency is to tune into somewhere physically nearby, even though there's nothing physical about it. Why do the congregants of the Manchester Liberal community choose to join York for services instead of Brighton or Bristol or Baltimore? Local spirit.



7 These subverted towns, though: they don't actually exist. We're given great detail on how to find them and how to destroy them, but historically speaking it never actually happened. The rabbis declared: "A subverted town has never existed – nor will there ever be one. So why do they appear in the Torah? Because we should learn from them and receive a reward."⁴

8 So what should we learn?

9 The sociologist Benedict Anderson famously described countries, nations, as "imagined communities".⁵ He argued, essentially, that the people of Manchester have no connection at all with the people of Bristol – people they've never met – except the imaginary one implanted in our minds by the idea of Great Britain uniting us all.

10 But the flip-side of this is that local communities are not imagined communities. They are real. The people of Hampstead Garden Suburb might not be part of any real communion with the people of Brighton, but they most certainly are part of a real communion with each other. They have their locality in common. They have that annoying junction in common. They have that fish-and-chip shop in common.

11 People have plural identities. The Tebbit test of 'who would the Pakistani community support if England played Pakistan at cricket'⁶ is narrow and reductive. So too is the common introspection, "Are we British Jews or Jewish Brits?"⁷ It's not an either-or. Someone can have a British identity, a Jewish identity and a Wimbledon identity. Not to mention a black identity, a gay or straight identity, a professional identity. An identity as an Arsenal supporter or a saxophonist or a crochet fanatic. One rabbinic text⁸ even shows a recognition of regional identity – not limited to one's particular town, but not as broad as the entire country. Like being a northerner.



- 12 This is the educational message that the Torah’s description of a subverted town comes to teach us – that it’s a possibility, because people have a range of identities, and these identities will sometimes come into conflict with each other. (Every parent who’s had to decide between taking their child to cheder and taking her to football practice will be familiar with this conflict!) The lesson is that it’s not always easy, and needn’t always be easy, and probably shouldn’t always be easy. There will be times when the Jewish identity won’t win out.
- 13 But the Torah is careful to warn that we must “investigate and inquire and interrogate thoroughly”⁹ before burning anyone to the ground. And that is what we must do, when encountering anyone with a complex set of identities.

Check against delivery.

GKW 14.08.20

¹ *The Jewish Enquirer*. “The Key Cutter and the Vegan.” Directed and written by Gary Sinyor (Amazon, 17 January 2020).

² *The Jewish Enquirer*. “The Juicer.” Directed and written by Gary Sinyor (Amazon, 17 January 2020).

³ Deuteronomy 13:13-17

⁴ t.Sanhedrin 14:1

⁵ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁶ Mike Marqusee. *Anyone But England: cricket, race and class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), e-book edition: chapter 5.

⁷ Amos Schonfield. “The Jewish memories behind a new refugee youth movement”, Masorti Judaism (31 May 2018): <<https://masorti.org.uk/the-jewish-memories-behind-a-new-refugee-youth-movement/>>

⁸ t.Sanhedrin, ibid

⁹ Deuteronomy 13:15