



## **SERMON KOL NIDRE: THE LONGEST DAY**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Sunday 27 September 2020  
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 It's a little-known fact, but the entire book of Deuteronomy, a little of which we'll read in the morning, took place on one single day.<sup>1</sup> All 15,000 words, 11 parshiot, all were spoken on a single day of our ancestors' lives in the wilderness.
- 2 One thing I've done to while away the long hours of lockdown is rewatch all nine series of *24*. *24* is a particularly silly American spy thriller. Each series consists of 24 episodes, each an hour long, set in real time. So each series covers an entire day: the first instalment might be 8am-9am, then 9am-10am, and so on. It might start off in daylight, go through some darkness, end up in daylight again. Every episode begins with a ticking clock and a voiceover from the main character: "I'm Federal Agent Jack Bauer. And this is the longest day of my life."
- 3 It's cheesy and a bit meaningless, but it got me thinking about what the longest day of my life is. It's probably Yom Kippur. Certainly, about 7:30pm tomorrow night will be the most tired I feel all year.
- 4 It might be the same for you; it might not. The fact is, we all experience time differently. As Einstein famously summarised his theory of relativity: "An hour sitting with a pretty girl on a park bench passes like a minute, but a minute sitting on a hot stove seems like an hour."<sup>2</sup> On this basis, 2020, with all its trials and tribulations, could easily be said to be the longest year of our lives.



- 5 Every year, Yom Kippur rolls round at exactly the same moment – precisely one Hebrew calendar year since the last – yet we never really pause to ask ourselves what’s so special about this season. One rabbi’s surprising answer is: nothing. While God commanded the Israelites to have festivals and holy days,<sup>3</sup> the 15th-century Rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama suggests<sup>4</sup> the precise choice of date was left up to us: God was sitting in Heaven waiting for the humans to decide, then leapt into action to make the arrangements once the timetable was confirmed. We were commanded that Yom Kippur should follow 10 days after Rosh Hashanah, but where in the year these festivals should fall was a law of humanity, not a law of nature. Had our ancestors decided differently, we might be marking Pesach right now, instead of Kol Nidre.
- 6 Yet the remarkable thing is, this doesn’t take the magic out of it. Knowing that it’s not a natural phenomenon doesn’t make Yom Kippur’s regularity any less comforting. Whether the year flew by on gilded wings, or dragged its knuckles like a nation under lockdown, at the same point of each cycle we come to this moment. Kol Nidre. All our vows.
- 7 How many vows did we make in the last year? How many of these can we actually remember? In such a disrupted year, who could recall everything we promised to do – promised others to do, and promised ourselves – since last October?
- 8 It’s been a long year, subjectively. Yet each day lasted precisely 24 hours. As the writer Arnold Bennett put it: “The supply of time is truly a daily miracle. You wake up in the morning, and lo! your purse is magnificently filled with 24 hours of the unmanufactured tissue of the universe of life. It is yours. It is the most precious of possessions.”<sup>5</sup>



- 9 Today is simply a human-made extension of that miracle. Today, we are granted 24 hours (or 25, to be precise; the Hebrew calendar is complicated...) to pause, to look back, to review the time since last Yom Kippur. This year, this long, onerous year, it's a particularly difficult task. But together, as a community, we will do it.
- 10 I'm Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber. And this is the longest day of my life. 11:59:57... 11:59:58... 11:59:59... 12:00:00.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GKW 27.09.20**

<sup>1</sup> Jack R Lundblom. *Deuteronomy: a commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Erdmans, 2013): 911.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Robinson. *Einstein on the Run: how Britain saved the world's greatest scientist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019):74.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 23:2

<sup>4</sup> Akeidat Yitzchak 67

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Bennett. *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (New York: George H Doran, 1910): 16.