



**SERMON NITZAVIM-VAYELECH:
IT IS NOT FAR AWAY**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 12 September 2020
Glasgow Reform Synagogue – bat mitzvah of Bea

- 1 Normally, at a bat mitzvah, I would start by welcoming everyone, and especially those who had travelled long distances to be here. Of course, in this case, I'm in London so perhaps one of those furthest away from the centre of the action.
- 2 Bea and I have been doing online learning since before it went mainstream. We actually only met the once in real life, back in February, before all this balagan really got going, and we just always planned our lessons to be virtual. Her family live in Dumfries, I live in London; that was just the way we were going to do it. Sure, the shul is in Glasgow, and we had intended to be there in person today. But we will still have that opportunity. The kiddush is to come! The fact is, even putting coronavirus aside, we are incredibly fortunate to have had the technology to let us access learning even when we're distant from each other.
- 3 לא רחוקה היא – it is not far away. What does it mean to be far from a source of learning, and what does it mean not to be?
- 4 Sforno, a 16th-century commentator on the Torah, says² it means that there is no need for teachers or sages. There is no need to seek advice or guidance from any expert in a far-off place, but rather we each have the wherewithal to understand and apply the Torah without instruction.



- 5 With all respect to Sforno, this is clearly wrong. In fact, there is a great irony in his decision to record, in his much sought-after Torah commentary, the idea that teachers are unnecessary. If teachers are unnecessary, why were so many rabbis and students across the Jewish world clamouring to learn from his interpretations?
- 6 Of course we need teachers! Self-guided learning is sometimes possible, and certainly a learner needs to throw themselves into their lessons if they are to get anything out of the experience. But we can't do it all on a DIY basis. I certainly rely on my teachers. Every day, the things that I do, I learned from them: schoolteachers, cheder teachers, madrichim in LJY-Netzer, my teachers at Leo Baeck College...
- 7 Yet teachers can only work with the raw material before them. As Professor Barry Chazan, an expert in Jewish educational theory, says, we recognise that students "aren't just empty vessels waiting to be filled. Rather, the individual is an active dynamic organism who grows and is shaped through their own active engagement in learning. They are considered an active partner in the educational dynamic."³
- 8 Bea has certainly been an active partner in her long educational journey towards bat mitzvah. It's never easy to start learning something completely new – in this case, a Torah reading – from scratch in one's teens. It's particularly tough to be expected to tune in to lessons every Sunday afternoon, however lovely the summer weather outside. (I mean... lessons?! On a Sunday?)
- 9 And it's only made harder when, like Bea, you're not living in a remotely Jewish area and can hardly explain to your friends quite what you're doing. Learning an ancient language in a right-to-left script so as to be able to read



14 sentences of it out of a scroll made of cow-skin... it's a real niche in which you've spent the last few months, Bea. It's almost weird! I recognise that. But you really did throw yourself in. You practiced. You let me push you to have a go at reading more and more of your parashah without the vowels until you realised you could do it.

10 And you proved the Torah right when it said **לא רחקה היא** – it is not far away. What is not far away? It's not as Sforno suggested, that we all innately get everything without any sort of help or support. But we all have the ability to learn. Within each of us is a little Jewish spark, the nouse to engage in Jewish learning. Nobody can do it without a teacher, but far more importantly nobody can do it without something inside. Back when we started, you didn't think you'd ever be able to sound out all those complicated Hebrew words with their many syllables and their silent yuds. But you could. **לא רחקה היא** – it is not far away.

11 Your reading came from the very end of the Torah. There's really very little left, certainly no major twists or plot developments. Yet every ending is also a beginning. In the last chapter of Torah, Moses dies, and the Israelites – with their main teacher no longer holding their hand – set out on a new journey of their own.

12 Similarly, Bea, this is the end of the journey to your bat mitzvah. But it's by no means the end of your Jewish journey. Your community are gathered around to support you; and inside you is the wherewithal to grow Jewishly.

13 One tradition suggests we forget our names upon death.⁴ The problem with this forgetfulness is that, on entry into the world to come, everyone will be asked their name. If they can't give it, they are singled out for special and violent punishment. The solution, suggested the 15th century Rabbi Yosef



Elimelech, is to find a verse from the Hebrew Bible which begins with the first letter of your Hebrew name, and ends with the last letter of your Hebrew name, and by remembering that verse, we will be able to reconstruct our name.

- 14 In Bea's case, there is only one possible choice. From this very parashah, just two verses after her reading finished, we have: "For I command you this day, to love the Eternal One your God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments, laws and rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that the Eternal One your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess."⁵ It starts with an א – אשר – and ends with a ה – לרשתה – which are the first and last letters of Bea's Hebrew name, אריאלה. So we pray that this verse will come true for Bea, that she will go from strength to strength, and thrive, and increase, and be blessed. And let us say: amen.

- 15 Mazel tov!

Check against delivery.

GKW 12.09.20

¹ Deuteronomy 30:1-14

² Sforino on Deuteronomy 30:11

³ Barry Chazan. "The philosophy of informal Jewish education", Infed.org (2003): <<http://infed.org/mobi/the-philosophy-of-informal-jewish-education/>>

⁴ David Golinkin. "Why do some Jews recite a special verse at the end of the Amidah?" (Schechter Institute: 5 April 2010): <<https://schechter.edu/why-do-some-jews-recite-a-special-verse-at-the-end-of-the-amidah/>>

⁵ Deuteronomy 30:16