



SERMON NO'ACH: AM I THE ASSHOLE?

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 24 October 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 “Am I the asshole for photoshopping my sister’s tattoo out of my wedding photo?”¹ “Am I the asshole for mis-translating conversation between my wife and my mom to help them get along?”² “Am I the asshole for demanding that my girlfriend show me where she buried our beans in the woods, causing her to break up with me?”³
- 2 There is a fantastic corner of the internet called ‘Am I the Asshole?’, or AITA, on which morally-conflicted members of the public post scenarios from their lives, like those I just read out. In return, they receive votes, and feedback, from readers. As you can hear, the situations range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Some posters are clearly in the wrong, some genuinely divide opinion.
- 3 There is no shortage of websites where people post their guilty secrets, and no shortage of websites where people post to complain about things other people have done wrong. But what makes AITA unique is that those posting accept (or normally accept) that there is a real possibility they are in the wrong. Pamela Hieronymi, a philosophy professor in California, sees it as a basic, almost instinctive, human urge to try to figure out whether or not we’re doing the right thing: AITA is so popular, she speculates, because “one way to understand the rules of the game is to talk with other people about it.”⁴ On at least some level, all of us wonder from time to time whether we’re actually doing the right



thing; now there's a safe, and anonymous, space in which to try to find out the answer.

- 4 In this week's parashah, we read about the punishment God visited on the builders of the Tower of Babel. But was it God who meted out the punishment? The biblical grammar is slightly odd. נרדה ונבלה – let Us go down and confuse their language. What is God doing acting in the plural? The Talmud explains: “The Holy One never acts before consulting with the Heavenly Entourage.”⁵
- 5 The word used for ‘consulting’ might sound a little familiar: נמלך. At least the latter bit is familiar: מלך, the root meaning ‘king’ or ‘ruler’. יהוה מלך. But, as well as the all-powerful ruler, it also means ‘to consult’ or ‘to reconsider’ or ‘to change one’s mind’.
- 6 We might say there's a valuable democratic notion in there, that to rule means to consult. But then again, is it really a fair consultation if the מלך sets the terms? Are the consultees going to give honest answers if they're in fear of the One managing the consultation? The word used to describe the Heavenly Entourage is פמליא, which literally means ‘household servants’. Servants, surely, cannot truly speak their mind to their master. They will inevitably become yes-men, saying whatever they think the master wants to hear.
- 7 And in any event, we all know from surveys and polls and mis-used statistics that the way the consultation is framed can dictate the response. There are no shortage of posts on ‘Am I the Asshole?’ that are questionably framed. “Am I the asshole for making my girlfriend a



delicious romantic dinner?”⁶ asks one gentleman, who for some reason omitted to mention upfront that the said delicious dinner included mushrooms, which he knew his girlfriend detested. There is, in fact, a real trend of a questioner describing a situation so innocently that we know they must be hiding something, because why else would there be any moral complexity to the situation? ‘Am I the asshole for buying my wife a new car... with money I stole from the charity she volunteers for? Ha!’

- 8 Yet these deceptive posts are always – and I do mean always – seen through. We might speak different languages, and use different words, and sometimes try to hide our true meaning behind a cleverly-crafted sentence, but ultimately we can still hear and understand each other.
- 9 God asked the Heavenly Entourage, “Would I be the asshole if I destroyed the Tower of Babel and confused its builders’ tongues?” Clearly, the Heavenly Academy said, “No,” because, sure enough, the builders’ tongues were confused.
- 10 But not all that confused. A thread still connects us all, and we can cut through each other’s obfuscation. We yearn for the counsel of others, even those on the other side of the world, because what confuses us is not language, but life. The generation of Babel did the wrong thing, and since then we’ve lived in a morally complex world. But by communicating, as openly and honestly as possible, and through the flattest power structure we can devise, we can come together and figure out the answers. Kein y’hi ratzon, may this be God’s will.

Check against delivery.



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¹ https://twitter.com/AITA_reddit/status/1278762688282329089

² https://twitter.com/AITA_reddit/status/1282010256961417216

³ <https://twitter.com/redditships/status/1248605413911801857>

⁴ Tove K Danovich. "How 'Am I the Asshole?' created a medium place on the internet", *The Ringer* (7 October 2020): <<https://www.theringer.com/2020/10/7/21503068/am-i-the-asshole-reddit-2020>>

⁵ b.Sanhedrin 38b

⁶ https://twitter.com/AITA_reddit/status/1224380698401787908