



SERMON EREV SUKKOT: A LITTLE BIT OF WATER IN MY LIFE

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 2 October 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 I'm normally quite grateful to have been born two millennia too late to have witnessed Second Temple times. Mutilating animals, sloshing blood around the place, a superior priestly caste... it's not for me. But there is one element that does appeal, one sacrament that's been lost which I would quite like to have seen. That's the water sacrifice.
- 2 On Sukkot,¹ the priesthood would draw three lugim of water from the spring of Shiloach, and parade it back to the Temple courtyard amidst much singing, dancing and merrymaking. It would be poured over the altar in a ceremony so exciting that, we are told, the rabbis would be moved to juggle flaming torches, knives, eggs and glasses of wine, and to do acrobatics.² One year there was a right killjoy of a priest who didn't really get into the spirit of it, pointing out that the whole ritual had no basis in the Torah. The entire crowd pelted him with etrogs.³ They just wanted their annual dose of Jewish frivolity without it being spoiled by theological tussles. Terrific!
- 3 Of course, this priest did actually make a good point. The water sacrifice doesn't appear in the Torah. It was a total invention. Some sages tried to find a scriptural basis for it, pointing to three words, two with surplus ם- s, and one with a surplus ם (spelling מים),⁴ but these really are contortions desperate even for 2nd-century rabbis – but then again I did



just mention that some rabbis did acrobatics. The fact is, the idea of pouring water over the Temple altar must have been poached from another culture with which our ancestors came into contact. And you don't have to be an expert anthropologist to work out that it must be, at its heart, a rain-dance.

- 4 In fact, in the Talmud, Rabbi Elazar tells us that this is precisely what it was about. Building on the idea that the Temple is constructed on top of the earth's foundation stone,⁵ he said: "When the water was poured during the festival, the deep says to itself, 'אבע מימיר, gush out your waters, קול שני ריעים אני שומע, I hear the voice of some friends!'"⁶
- 5 A small quantity of something, deposited in just the right place, can stimulate a greater supply of that something. This idea maybe doesn't feel all that unfamiliar to us... and it certainly shouldn't feel unfamiliar to scientists at AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford. Because it's how vaccines work.
- 6 In these strange times, we're seeing a wave of fools insisting that vaccines don't work, are harmful, are part of some massive conspiracy. We're seeing people insist that they would never allow any foreign matter to be injected into their bodies.
- 7 Yet we know that Judaism embraces the injection of foreign matter. Judaism is built of foreign matter, matter that stimulates and enlivens us. Instrumental music in services: where would Wimbledon's High Holy Days have been without Sarit? Presents at Channukah. Kippot. So much of what we do has been poached, borrowed or copied from the cultures and religions with which we were surrounded.



- 8 This makes it all the stranger that we find, not infrequently, rabbinic writings that express a deep distrust of, and distaste for, the non-Jews from whom we've learned so much.
- 9 These lines, about the dangers of hobnobbing with the Other, about the spiritual emptiness of the Other, troubled Rabbi Israel Lipschitz. In his 19th-century commentary on the Mishnah, called *Tiferet Yisrael*, he wrote: "We find many righteous non-Jews, who did acts of lovingkindness that benefited the people of Israel also, in fact many of them improved life for everyone on earth. כהחסידי דראקא, such as the chassid Drake, שהביא הקארטאפפעל לאיראפא, who brought the potato to Europe, and prevented many famines. וגוטענבערג שהמציא את הדפוס. And Gutenberg, who invented the printing press. ויענער שהמציא And Jenner, who invented the smallpox vaccine, and by his hand, many people were saved from illness, death and deformity."⁷ (Perhaps these days he would also have included Eric Yuan, who invented Zoom and allowed Jewish life to continue to flourish during a pandemic.)
- 10 So people who develop humanity have a special place in heaven – especially those who do so in the realms of science and technology – whether or not they're Jewish. We're happy to embrace input from outside our people, and can only hope that the geniuses within our ranks return the favour to the rest of humanity.
- 11 And at Sukkot, where we place a particular emphasis on welcoming guests into our private spaces, we should welcome all the influences



and innovations from which our place in the world has allowed us to benefit.⁸ A vaccine isn't a plot, it's a blessing, helping our miraculous bodies to reach their full potential. Water poured out on Temple Mount can encourage the earth to support those who need feeding. An injection of something new can stimulate us, the Jewish people, to grow and develop.

- 12 The voice of the Other is, in fact, the voice of our friends. קול שני ריעים. אני שומע, I hear the voice of some friends.

Check against delivery.

GKW 02.10.20

¹ m.Sukkah 4:9

² b.Sukkah 53b

³ m.Sukkah 4:9, t.Sukkah 3:16, b.Sukkah 48b

⁴ Sifrei Bamidbar, Pinchas, 150

⁵ Leviticus Rabbah 20:4

⁶ b.Ta'anit 25b

⁷ Tiferet Yisrael to Avot 3, Boaz no 1

⁸ See, in particular, David J Moster, *Etrog: how a Chinese fruit became a Jewish symbol* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), charting the history of what we know as the etrog from its Chinese origins to, at page 129, becoming "a beautiful migrant who has been able to leave behind the pressures of his or her youth to find a new homeland in which he or she is loved, honoured and esteemed".