



SERMON TOL'DOT: DIG WELLS TO HELP OUT¹

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 21 November 2020
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Once upon a time, Abraham owned a café in the desert.² It was incredibly popular – much as you'd expect a café in the desert to be. He had all sorts of cakes and snacks and soups, but by far the most popular product was the cold water. Some days it seemed like every single traveller passing him in the desert would stop off for a drink of cold water. This meant that he was particularly narked off when the Philistines stopped up his wells.³ It basically ruined his business.
- 2 OK, he didn't have a café.⁴ But at the moment, when major restrictions to the way we live our lives are causing so much distress to business owners, it got me thinking. Because we don't actually know why the Philistines did it. Why would they seal his wells up with earth?
- 3 I managed to find three different suggestions in the literature. The most recent comes from the Malbim, a 19th-century commentator. He suggests⁵ that it was pure spite – possibly xenophobic spite. The Philistines actually needed the wells for their own water supply, but once they saw that Isaac was using them, they filled them in to try and drive him and his family out of the land.
- 4 The second explanation is much older, from the Tosefta in around the 2nd century. This suggests⁶ that they were fearful the wells would jeopardise national security, whether by making the land a more attractive target for



conquest, or by giving invaders underground cover, or simply for providing water to the enemy.

- 5 The third explanation is actually a variant reading of the same Tosefta... and it boils down to Health and Safety. The Philistines were worried that the big unattended wells posed a risk to travellers, so they blocked them up to prevent accidents.⁷
- 6 Trying to work out people's motives based on incomplete information can be really difficult; it can be impossible. When we only have their actions by which to judge their aims, how can we guess with any degree of confidence?
- 7 Take the lockdown. On one reading, it looks pretty damning. Local restrictions in every part of the country except government ministers' constituencies; little financial support for the north but plenty for the south; contracts awarded to ministers' friends...⁸ We could easily infer that the whole thing is less motivated by concern for public health and much more about bolstering senior figures in the Conservative party and their friends.
- 8 In fact, almost any set of circumstances can give the impression that there's some malign motive at play. Oftentimes, that turns out to be true. But also not unusual is for there to be a mix of motives. Maybe the Philistines were genuinely worried about national security, but they also kind of wanted to stop up the wells so as to spite Isaac with his strange unitary God, and so they were quite pleased to have a pretext for the operation. Or maybe they were truly altruistic and genuinely only concerned for the safety of travellers. Who knows?



- 9 Isaac certainly didn't know. He just ploughed ahead with his plans to re-open his café, digging the wells again without a moment's thought for whether there might actually have been a good reason for blocking them up in the first place. No thought for the consequences. No risk assessment.
- 10 At this point, I nearly ended up making this sermon one of those very classic Gabriel sermons in which I slag off a much-loved biblical character and end up praising and defending those who are traditionally viewed as the baddies.
- 11 But, actually, no. Because the fact that Isaac didn't bother to find out the reason for his wells having been blocked isn't to his discredit. It's to the Philistines' discredit. They were the government. They didn't have any right to be given the benefit of the doubt – especially when doing something really drastic, really life-altering, like limiting a desert-dwelling family's access to water. They cut off his livelihood; the burden is surely on them to explain, to justify what they're doing.
- 12 But there was no explanation; there was no justification; there was no Drink Out to Help Out, no engagement with him at all. Isaac was just left with no water, some filled-in wells and a spade. Is it any wonder he did what he did?
- 13 All of our wells are currently stopped up. Our services banned, our GP appointments online-by-default, our swimming pools closed. And, truthfully, the explanations are lacking. It's not clear why collective worship should be banned when there is no evidence it risks outbreaks. It's not clear why closing pubs at 10pm would help tackle the virus. It's



not clear why tashlich was banned but fox-hunting events could go ahead. It's not clear why people in Wales should be able to walk into Tesco and buy satsumas but not stationery or sanitary towels.

- 14 There might, very well, be good reasons for all of these rules. Or the ministers who made them might be well-meaning but clueless. Or they might have selfish motivations. We don't know. Asking the question doesn't imply distrust, doesn't make one a lockdown sceptic or a 'covidiot'. It's a perfectly simple question and the best possible outcome would be for us to receive a reassuring answer.
- 15 With the story of the Philistines, the Malbim had one possible explanation and the Tosefta had two. And that sort of speculation can be fun, for those of us reading it centuries later, because after all that's why we read literature. We can all read the same novel and have completely different interpretations of which characters are good, which are bad, who should have done what differently.
- 16 But in real life, not knowing is not fun. There are enough unknowns in our present situation – when will we get a vaccine, what's going to happen next – without adding in artificial elements of mystery and suspense. The Philistines should have told Isaac why he was unable to access his wells.
- 17 To be a leader is to be obliged to explain yourself. Judaism has long recognised that, on being elevated to the role of communal official, one is not becoming a master; rather, one is becoming a servant of the community.⁹ This week's parashah teaches us this important lesson about democracy and about civics, yet we're not the government. So there's one more meta-lesson in there: as Jews, we're part of society, and when



our texts give us a lesson which we can spread to wider society, it's our duty to spread it. Not in a missionary sense, but in an educational sense.

- 18 In this case, that lesson comes in the form of a question: why are our wells stopped up? Let us ask it. Let us use our democratic rights to the full. Let us engage with the society in which we live, informed and enriched by our Jewish values. Kein y'hi ratzon – may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GKW 21.11.20

¹ Genesis 26:12-22

² This isn't true.

³ Genesis 26:15

⁴ Told you.

⁵ Malbim on Genesis 26:18

⁶ t.Sotah 10:6; see also Rashi to Genesis 26:15

⁷ This is Neusner's translation of **מפני גייסות**. It is not immediately obvious how he arrived at it – it might just be Neusner being Neusner – but a slightly strained interpretation of **גוס** (one who comes into contact), **גוסס** (one who sinks) or **גיסא** (a bold person; a neighbourhood) might explain it.

⁸ Peter Geoghegan and Russell Scott. "Government accused of 'cronyism' after Tory councillor wins £156m COVID contract", OpenDemocracy (9 October 2020): <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/government-accused-of-cronyism-after-tory-councillor-wins-156m-covid-contract/>> – this is just one example.

⁹ b.Horayot 10a-b