



**SERMON EREV SH'MOT:
SEEING THROUGH THE FOG OF PROTOCOL**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 8 January 2021
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 All of my teachers say that there are times when a rabbi has to rip up the sermon they've prepared, and rewrite it to take account of some major event in the news. On the one hand, I'm sure they would include this week's attempted coup by Trump-supporting fascists, who attacked the United States Congress and, indeed, attacked democracy. This was a shocking event that should be deeply concerning to the Jewish people as much as to anyone else.
- 2 On the other hand, I suspect even my teachers would recognise that rewriting a sermon in the first ten days after the birth of a child is not necessarily doable.
- 3 In fact, nor is it necessarily desirable, because how appropriate that the first service I'm leading after the birth of my first child falls on Shabbat Sh'mot. This Shabbat, as we begin reading the Book of Exodus, we see in the opening chapters birth after birth after birth. The rebellious midwives saving Hebrew babies,¹ the hiding of Moses in a Moses basket² (what a coincidence that that was his name), and also the birth and circumcision of his first child.³
- 4 I don't want to compare Manuella and myself to the parents of Moses, but I think it's fair to say that we both brought a child into the world in very strange circumstances. In our case, it's not so much been about hiding



the baby but about hiding me. Smuggling me into scans from which partners were excluded due to covid. Staying at the end of my four-hour permitted visiting period and hoping none of the staff would notice I was still there to chuck me out.

- 5 It's been especially frustrating because so many of the rules and systems seem pointless. How can I pose a risk of infection by spending more than four hours visiting if the ward is empty except for my wife and my son? How can it take six 'phone-calls to find out whether partners can come to this particular appointment or that one?
- 6 At times, the systems – not the care, just the systems – have felt totally arbitrary and like they don't put parents first, or safety first, or anything first really. It's seemed like protocol for protocol's sake.
- 7 The Egyptian maternity system certainly didn't put Hebrew slaves first. Their expectant parents expected genocide. It was senseless killing and senseless cruelty.
- 8 But there were some heroes. The classic heroes of Parashat Sh'mot are Shifra and Puah, the midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh's kill order and let Hebrew babies live.
- 9 I see another hero as well, though, and that's Pharaoh's daughter. She adopted Moses, which was nice of her, but there's something more important that she did. She listened to Miriam.⁴
- 10 Miriam, Moses's sister, had accompanied the basket as it floated in the river, and it was her offer to find a wet-nurse – the real mother – that led to the family being reunited.



- 11 But what on earth possessed the Pharaoh's daughter, one of the highest people in the land, to enter into personal conversation with a Hebrew slave-girl she just happened to bump into while going for a swim?
- 12 The fact is, she was willing to deviate from Egyptian society's rigid rules in order to do the best thing for a vulnerable baby. She cut through the red tape to achieve everyone's best interests.
- 13 And that's what our consultant did when we eventually met her. She freed us from the bewildering rigidity of NHS procedures. She gave us her personal mobile number. She said, "Come and see me on Monday, text me when you get here and I'll come find you," rather than jumping through the lengthy hoops of an impenetrable electronic appointment system. She found a spare room so I could be included in conversations, and support Manuella, rather than left in the waiting room. She called with test results as soon as they came through (including out-of-hours) rather than leaving us to stew or to navigate the hospital's telephone system.
- 14 Like Pharaoh's daughter, she broke down barriers and pierced through layers of protocol, and it felt good. We felt heard, and cared for. Maybe Moses never thanked his adoptive mum, and our baby Omri certainly hasn't thanked our consultant, but both infants benefited from these caring, courageous women.
- 15 This is not a criticism of those who stuck to the rules. NHS workers are going through a staggeringly tough time at the moment, and it's no discredit that they stick to their procedures. There's nothing evil about the procedure; it's just impersonal. Similarly, had Pharaoh's daughter refused to listen to Miriam, that would hardly have been surprising. She must



have come into contact with dozens or hundreds of her subjects every day: the desperate, the boring, the cranks. We could have understood her if she simply remained aloof and determined to sort out a wet-nurse for herself. But even without criticising those who didn't choose to stand against the crowd, we can praise those who did.

- 16 Systems and rules and protocols are important. We know this as Jews – think of all the detailed touches we add to a seder plate in memory of the events of Parashat Sh'mot – and we know this too as people living through a pandemic, where compliance is our best tool to save lives.
- 17 But every system needs to be bypassed sometimes. Every tightly-coiled spring of policy needs to be relaxed. Those who see through the fog of protocol and perceive the human on the other side: they are the heroes of this Shabbat's portion.

GKW 08.01.21

¹ Exodus 1:15-20

² Exodus 2:1-3

³ Exodus 2:21-22, 4:24-26

⁴ Exodus 2:4-10