



SERMON VA'EIRA:¹ HAD ENOUGH OF EXPERTS?

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 16 January 2021
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Next month, my dad's first book is being published by Bloomsbury.² It's derived from his PhD thesis, and is all about the history of arts funding from 1934 to 1944. It's not exactly going to fly off the shelves, but for those who work in arts funding; for those who study cultural history; for those interested in interwar politics – it's a book for them.

- 2 In fact, everyone's PhD, everyone's area of research, everyone's specialisms and interests, are fascinating and important not only to them but to their fellow experts. I know someone who has a doctorate in the taste of Bramley apples, and of course that's of interest to others in their field. But we also don't typecast people. I don't know my friend with the apple doctorate because of our shared interest in apples; she's a member of the shul where I grew up. There's no rule that people need to confine themselves to one box, that after becoming an expert in one area, they're henceforth only allowed to talk about things in that area.

- 3 Now to Rabbi Akiva and the frogs, or rather the frog, singular. He was seeking to explain why the Torah refers to one single frog, when what is clearly being described is a plague of frogs, plural. This is very clearly just an error or corruption in the biblical text, or maybe an antiquated way of referring to a group of frogs (just like the plural of 'sheep' is 'sheep'). But Rabbi Akiva came up with a different explanation – that it was just one



frog that bred and bred and bred into a veritable infestation. This is rather fun. It's whimsical and daft, but also entertaining and a little bit touching.

- 4 Rabbi Eleazar ben-Azariah was not at all happy that Akiva offered an explanation. Even though his own explanation – it started with one frog that chirped for others to join it – is hardly more sensible than Akiva's, he insists that he has a place in the conversation and Akiva doesn't. "Get back in your box!" he said. "Your field is negaim (infectious sores) and ohalot (corpse impurity), not aggadah (interpreting stories)."
- 5 We don't know quite what he meant by this. Rashi argues³ that it was a slightly backhanded compliment to Rabbi Akiva: your field is so much more complex, weighty and important, don't demean yourself by telling stories about frogs like the rest of us do. To me, it seems rather more like a barbed criticism of Akiva as some sort of nerd or anorak. Infectious sores and corpse impurity are classic examples of areas of rabbinic law that are desperately technical and, on one view, uncreative. Mira Balberg and Moulie Vidas, in their article on this text, call these two fields "exacting and highly plodding".⁴ Just as an accountant who wanted to be an actor would, in a sitcom, be laughed out of drama school, a corpse-impurity expert who wanted to weave midrash about frogs was out of his depth.
- 6 Rashi's explanation is, at least, less insulting. But it still seems unfair. Aggadah is fun and uplifting. Fantastical tales beam out of our holy scriptures into the minds of inventive Jews. The rabbis of old acknowledged how this ancient form of storytelling "captured people's hearts".⁵ Why should any Jewish person be barred from joining in this



stirring past-time just because they happen to be an expert in something else? It's not even as if aggadah is an especially expert-led discipline: it's coming up with amusing stories about frogs, for goodness' sake! We're hardly talking about a situation where one expert – a cardiologist, say – is purporting to speak with authority about another area – like defusing nuclear weapons.

- 7 Moreover, what is special about Akiva's specialism? The choice of Akiva for this story, and the choice of negaim as his field, can't be a coincidence. Infectious diseases. Frogs breeding quickly. See the link? Far from intervening in an area outside his competence, Akiva was bringing his expertise to bear. He knew about the transmission of the biblical tzara'at disease, he understood how one infected person could become a transmission vector (Heaven knows, we all understand this at the moment); and he applied that knowledge to frog breeding patterns.
- 8 It takes all sorts of experts to make a nation. All sorts of people with different skills and passions. Additionally, everyone, whatever their skill or passion or expertise, gets to have a say on matters of general public conversation. Everyone gets to join in public fun. Nobody has to stay confined to the narrow box of their profession.
- 9 It takes all sorts to make a Jewish community as well. Even a small one, like ours. We need a rabbi, lay preachers, singers; someone to do the accounts, someone to maintain the website, someone to run the membership database; someone to do PR, someone to teach our children, someone to book the rooms...



- 10 Role-hopping is also entirely acceptable. The treasurer can also lead services. The room-booker can also do the Torah blessings. The rabbi can also teach the cheder.
- 11 When we all pull together, and don't mock each other's roles and interests ("What business have you with web design? Leave this and turn back to your fundraising"), or try to exclude, we're like the frogs in Rabbi Eleazar's vision: not breeding but inviting. One chirps, then more join; more chirp, then more join. By working together, each with our own area but also each crossing into other areas to build a fulfilling Jewish life – then we become a cohesive unit, and something to be reckoned with. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

GKW 16.01.21

¹ Torah portion: Exodus 7:26-8:11. Haftarah: Exodus Rabbah 10:4 (Shinan ed, p 231), a parallel text to b.Sanhedrin 67b. The haftarah read:

ויאמר ה' אל משה אמר אל אהרן נטה את ידך במטך [על הנהרות] (שמות ח'). אמר ר' תנחום: אמר לו הקב"ה למשה: המים ששימרוך בשעה שהושלכת ליאור, לא ילקו על ידך. ויט אהרן את ידו [על מימי מצרים ותעל הצפרדע] (שמות ח') ... בשעה שהיה מחג את הכוס, היה מתמלא מן הצפרדע. ותעל הצפרדע [ותכס את ארץ מצרים] (שמות ח'). תני: ר' עקיבא אומר – צפרדע אחת היתה, השריצה ומלאה כל ארץ מצרים. אמר לו ר' אלעזר בן עזריה: עקיבא, מה לך אצל הגדה? כלה מדברותיך ולך אצל נגעים ואהלות! צפרדע אחת היתה, שרקה להם והם באו.

And the Eternal One said to Moses: 'Say to Aaron, stretch out your hand.' (Exodus 8:1). Rabbi Tanchum said: "God said to Moses: 'You should not strike the water which protected you when you were cast into the Nile,' hence **And Aaron stretched out his hand.**" ...Whenever the Egyptians used to fill a cup, it was found to be full of frogs. **And the frog [singular] came up, and covered the land of Egypt.** Rabbi Akiva said: "It was only one frog, but it bred so rapidly that it filled the land of Egypt." Rabbi Eleazar ben-Azariah said to him: "Akiva! What business have you with interpreting stories? Leave this and turn to the laws of infectious diseases and corpse impurity! True, there was one frog at first, but it croaked for the others to come."

² Howard Webber. *Before the Arts Council: campaigns for state funding of the arts in Britain 1934-44* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

³ Rashi to b.Chagigah 14a, sv 'k'lach m'dabrotecha'. See also Mira Balberg and Moulie Vidas, "Impure Scholasticism: the study of purity laws and rabbinic self-criticism in the Babylonian Talmud", *Prooftexts* 32 (2012), 312-56: n 27.

⁴ Balberg and Vidas, *ibid*: 323.

⁵ b.Shabbat 87a