



**SERMON TETZAVVEH:¹
PANTS ON FIRE**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 27 February 2021
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 In the autumn term, before everything shut down again, m'colleague's school had a mufti day, when the children were allowed to come in in their own clothes. Normally, their mufti days have a theme – like 'come in house colours' – but this one had the rather unimpressive theme of 'as you are'. Which is kind of not really a theme.
- 2 I thought a much cleverer, and more topical, theme would have been 'Zoom clothes': wear something smart on top and something much more casual underneath.
- 3 At the moment, I'm not afraid to admit it, I'm wearing terrible schlochy jeans with a hole in the right knee, socks with my toes sticking out, and no shoes. And it's not just our clothing that we relax over Zoom. I've crocheted my way through classes, I've answered emails during Leo Baeck College Student Society meetings...
- 4 Is this wrong? Is it inappropriate and disrespectful? Well, possibly. But it's also irresistible, and it may well be part of our new normal. We need to get used to people combining their home life and their Zoom life, and come to accept that it's not at all unreasonable.
- 5 We've all done it, right?



- 6 I'm certainly not the only one with shlochy trousers, however. As we read in today's haftarah,² it turns out that the priesthood of ancient Israel also had schlochy trousers. Yet, in a spirit of 'reduce, reuse, recycle', they did something rather special with their worn-out garments. They shared them.
- 7 Ordinarily, receiving a torn strip of used trouser might not be exactly a treat. But these were no ordinary trousers, and they were put to no ordinary use. "From the worn-out trousers of the priests they made lights. There was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illumined with the light of the Temple."
- 8 This is an incredibly powerful image. The priests sent out the light of their holy space into people's homes. They shared it beyond their own circle; they shared it beyond the privileged (male) elite who were able to travel to the Temple in person; they even found a way to let people do mundane tasks, such as sifting wheat, lit by a sacred flame.
- 9 Although the Palestinian Talmud focusses only on the light, we all know that flames don't just produce light. They also produce heat. And that is equally important here. The light of the Temple would have been visible a long way off anyway: it was a huge building, dominating the Jerusalem skyline, and vast swathes of the population would have been easily able to see its light simply by popping their heads out of the window. Being able to have a little bit of it in one's home was important and worthwhile, but the heat on the other hand: that helped make the whole thing a true, multi-sensory experience.



- 10 Nobody outside the Temple could possibly feel its heat, without the priests' generous and creative gesture. And then, everybody could feel its heat. When the time came for Temple services, everyone could, simultaneously, extend their hand towards the flaming piece of trousers hanging in their courtyard, and know that they and all their fellow Jews were all being warmed by a sacred flame from the same source. Their cousin on the other side of the city had a wick made from the same garment. The priests on duty in the Temple were the ones who originally wore them. It was a true moment in which everyone was united in one experience.
- 11 The Jewish community's transition online over the last 11 months has been a little bit shaky, but ultimately served us well. If the pandemic had happened even five years earlier, we would not have been able to connect and continue with the ease that 2020s technology has enabled.
- 12 The big question on my mind, though, is what comes next?
- 13 I don't mean 'when'. I have no idea when we will be able to gather together again in person; we'll just have to wait and see. But what happens next is a question we need to start considering now. Because the days of our services being confined to those people physically present in the Friargate meeting house are over. We yearn to have physical services once again, but online participation is here to stay.
- 14 And online participation is here to stay for good reason: it's the 21st-century equivalent of the priests' trousers, beaming the flame of Judaism into our homes, welcoming those unable to travel, and enabling us to



carry out the drudgery of our household tasks alongside a Zoom service running in the background.

- 15 But making a hybrid community work – with some of us there in person and others tuning in from home – is much more challenging. We need to find ways of ensuring that both the heat and the light of our in-person services reach those who are physically distant. The easy option would be to stick an iPhone in front of the lectern and stream the leader’s face for anyone to watch online. But that’s only the light (and, if it’s my face, barely even that).
- 16 The heat requires some level of feeling. Some level of relationship. Some level of two-way experience. Especially for those who are housebound and lonely, the important thing is not so much seeing other people – one only has to switch on the TV to do that – but to be seen and feel like there’s been a connection. A service you just watch without being able to participate, or to be seen and welcomed to, is sub-optimal. And I think we can do better.
- 17 Clergy Facebook groups are buzzing with discussions about how to achieve our next miracle. Big screens in the sanctuary? Reserving some mitzvot for those who are at home? And are we worried that people will choose to tune in from home, out of convenience, depleting our physical spaces?
- 18 It’s time for us to start this conversation. I’m posting a series of questions in the chat.³ Please don’t answer them in the chat right now, or when we’re chatting after the service, but give them a read and start thinking. Talk about them with your family. They’ll also be sent out to the email list.



I'd love to start hearing people's thoughts. My email address is in the chat as well. Let me know what you think. Nobody's making any decisions right now, but this is our chance to start dreaming about what our post-covid community could look like.

- 19 The priesthood was an institution thoroughly based in the Temple. All their rites had to be carried out there. Many of them lived there and barely left. Yet they found a way to share the holiness of their physical space with those who were unable to join them in person.
- 20 Today, we begin to work out how we can do the same.

GKW 27.02.21

¹ Torah portion: Exodus 28:36-43. Haftarah: y.Sukkah 5:3, 55b. The haftarah read:

תני מבלאי מכנסי כ"ג היו מדליקין את הנרות שבפנים ומבלאי מכנסי כהן הדיוט כהן הדיוט היו מדליקין את הנרות שבחוץ. א"ר שמואל בר רב יצחק כתיב (שמות כז ב) להעלות נר תמיד שיערו לומר אין לך עושה שלהבת אלא פשתן בלבד ... תני לא היה חצר בירושלם שלא היתה מאירה מאור בית השואבה. תני יכולה אשה לבנור חיטיה לאור המערכה. ולא היו מועלות. לאו. דאמר רבי יהושע בן לוי הריח והמראה והקול אין בהן מעילה.

It is taught: From the worn-out trousers of the High Priest they made lights for inside the Temple, and from the worn-out trousers of regular priests they made lights for other places. Rav Shmuel bar Rav Isaac said: "It is written, A lamp should burn continuously (Exodus 27:20). They calculated that nothing produces as good a flame as linen." It is taught: There was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illumined with the light of the Temple. It is taught: It is thus possible that a woman could sift wheat by the light of a Temple fire. Is this not a violation of sacrificial law? No. For as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: "Smells, sights and sounds: these are not subject to sacrificial law."

² See above.

³ 1. At the start of lockdown, we moved from two-services-a-month to one-service-a-week; is this something we want to continue? 2. Should all of our events be hybrid, or should some of them be online-only? Should some of them be in-person only? 3. How are we going to deal with membership and charging issues, when some people will be attending physically and some over the internet? 4. How will we ensure that there is some equality of experience, so that tuning in from home isn't a second-class option? What technologies might help us? Would we need to invest in any equipment? 5. Are we worried that people will take the easy option of joining virtually, and our physical services will be a bit empty? 6. Do you have any other thoughts on this?