



SERMON EREV VAYIKRA: FINDING A FAST HORSE

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 19 March 2021
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 “When a person commits a trespass, being unwittingly remiss about any of God’s holy things, they shall make restitution and add a fifth.”¹
- 2 In what circumstances could one accidentally be ‘remiss’ about priestly offerings (by which, here, we primarily mean agricultural offerings: tithes and so on? In what circumstances might someone have to pay this 20% penalty?
- 3 The Mishnah contains a series of maybe far-fetched examples: “If a priest’s wife was eating priestly produce, and they came and said to her, ‘Your husband is dead,’ or ‘He divorced you,’ so that she is no longer of a priestly family; or, if a priest’s slave was eating priestly produce, and they came and said to him, ‘Your master is dead,’ or, ‘He sold you to an Israelite,’ or, ‘He gave you away as a gift,’ or, ‘He freed you,’ so that he is no longer of a priestly household; and so too if a priest was eating priestly produce and it became known that he was the son of a divorced woman, so not eligible to be a priest at all... Rabbi Eliezer says they pay the 20% penalty. But Rabbi Joshua exempts them.”²
- 4 It’s important to recognise that, while everyone in this Mishnah is ultimately eating priestly offerings to which they’re not entitled, there are actually three different situations taking place. First, a case where someone’s status changes while they are eating – if the woman’s



husband literally dies during her meal, then she was eligible during the first few sips of priestly wine, but then circumstances changed. Second, a case where became ineligible before eating but only learned this while eating – if the slave was freed an hour earlier but the news only reached him mid-mouthful. And thirdly, a case where someone was never eligible in the first place – the man who thought he was a priest but went on BBC *Who Do You Think You Are* and made a shocking discovery about his lineage while tucking into a nice lunch.

- 5 I say it's 'important' to recognise these distinctions... of course, in many ways, it's not important at all, because this whole parashah, and indeed much of the Book of Leviticus which we start reading this Shabbat, is completely alien to us. We don't recognise a priesthood. We don't give them hefty percentages of our crops to remunerate them for their work in the Temple. We don't even have a Temple. And we certainly don't do animal sacrifices.
- 6 What changed? It was partly historical circumstance, in that the Temple was destroyed and we had to come up with another solution. But there was also moral realisation. Mutilating animals simply isn't kind; nor was it spiritually fulfilling.
- 7 Was it ever spiritually fulfilling, or is it more like the case of the disqualified priest who was never really a priest but just unintentionally play-acted as one?
- 8 Surely the answer is that these practices were never fulfilling, never a part of an ideal Judaism. Nasty, bloody, exclusionary, cruel. Designed to



empower a superior caste of men to hold the laity spellbound while extracting generous offerings from them.

- 9 Then we came to realise a better way of doing things: a more inclusive way, a more egalitarian way. Meritocratic. Meaningful.
- 10 Who was it who came to give us the news? Who was the figure who came and said not, “Your husband is dead,” but, “Your practices are distasteful and could do with modernisation”?
- 11 In part, it was the rabbis. We have a touching story in which Rabbi Joshua (the same Rabbi Joshua as exempted the woman and the slave from the 20% penalty) was weeping at the sight of the Temple in flames, but was reassured by his colleague Rabbi Yochanan ben-Zakkai: “Do not be distressed, for we have another option, no less effective: acts of lovingkindness.”³
- 12 In part, it was earlier than this: it was the prophets. Hosea told us how God declared: “I desire lovingkindness, not sacrifices.”⁴
- 13 That said, neither the early rabbis nor the prophets really get the credit for the abolition of the Temple system. The rabbis were involved in a power-grab, seeking to marginalise the priesthood and set up an alternative regime with themselves at its head; they wanted to see a restored Temple one day, one run by priests under rabbinic supervision and acting according to rabbinic codes of law. They certainly never “questioned the value of the cult”.⁵
- 14 And Hosea, of course, was speaking metaphorically. None of them were proposing a permanent restructuring of Judaism.



- 15 But if we look at the Affirmations of Liberal Judaism, we find a commitment to this permanent restructuring: “We affirm our belief that the Synagogue has permanently replaced the Temple.”⁶
- 16 Let’s think back to the Mishnah, and that poor woman who suddenly found herself eating forbidden foods. How did the authors envisage her coming by the news of her change of circumstances? The Palestinian Talmud hazards a guess: “She said to an agent, ‘Go and fetch my divorce writ from such-and-such a place,’ which was ten days’ journey away, but the agent found a fast horse and managed it in five days.”⁷ The process of her divorce was accelerated, and as soon as it was finalised – notwithstanding that it was sooner than anticipated – she immediately stopped eating priestly produce. The unexpected introduction of a fast horse helped to bring reality home quicker than would otherwise have been the case.
- 17 The disqualified priest was, all along, a disqualified priest. Judaism’s sacrificial practices were, all along, inauthentic expressions of what God wanted from us. Progressive Judaism was a fast horse that brought the message. No prophets. No prophecy. Just ordinary human ingenuity – and extraordinary human ingenuity – finding a fast horse and discovering deep truths about the optimal conditions for our spiritual existence.
- 18 Prophets are great. But even without God directly whispering in our ear, we can do it too. We can find a fast horse, and change Judaism into something more meaningful, more authentic, and closer to what God wants of us.



19 And we should all be thinking of ways to do so, all the time – and then we will make sure that we are not remiss in any holy matter.

GKW 19.03.21

¹ Leviticus 5:14-15

² m.Terumot 8:1

³ Avot d’Rabbi Natan 20a

⁴ Hosea 6:6

⁵ Rabbi Bernard Bamberger. “Laws of sacrifice: introduction” in Gunther Plaut (ed), *The Torah: a modern commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 750-755: 753.

⁶ Affirmations of Liberal Judaism, 30

⁷ y.Terumot 8:1, 45b