



**SERMON TZAV:
CLAY OR COPPER?¹**

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

- 1 “How would Omri Kanter-Webber describe their national identity?” asked the census. He’s 12 weeks old, so be completely honest he’d probably describe it as: “Miiiiillllk!”
- 2 But even for a grown-up, it’s an incredibly complicated question. For me, a bit of British, a bit of English, a lot of Other. I could tick all three, but they’re far from equal. I needed to be able to write an essay, instead of having to just select options. And that’s before we even get into other fluid areas of identity like religion, sexuality and gender.
- 3 Picture a heap of sand. Take a pair of tweezers, carefully remove one grain. Is what’s left still a heap? Clearly yes. Remove another grain. Still a heap? Yup. And another. And another. Eventually we’ll be down to just two grains of sand, which clearly are not a heap, yet we’ll never quite be clear when we crossed the line. Surely the difference between ‘heap’ and ‘non-heap’ isn’t so specific that removing precisely one grain can change things. Exactly how much sand makes a heap? This is the sorites paradox, first recorded by the Greek philosopher Eubulides. We encounter it in our lives every single day: perhaps the most obvious example at the moment is the seeming arbitrariness of many of the lockdown rules. Standing 2m apart is OK, but standing 199cm apart isn’t. From Monday, meeting five friends is safe, but meeting six friends is dangerous. Come to that, what’s so special about Monday? If it’s safe on Monday, it’s surely safe tomorrow



afternoon. The sarcastic question one so often hears is: “How does the virus know?”

- 4 It’s an incredibly unfair question. The fact is, drawing lines is always tricky. Someone will always be able to point to cases close to the line and argue that they’ve been wrongly categorised.² But what can we do? Perfection is impossible. And it’s hugely important that we have lines: lines that are clear, communicable and universal. A plain, unmistakable instruction that the speed limit is a round number like 30mph is vital for road safety, even if sometimes it would actually be safe to drive at 32 and other times it would be better to stick to 29.
- 5 A sharp, comprehensible line is a value in and of itself... sometimes. Other times, there is simply no need to kettle complex concepts into ill-fitting categories. Human beings – ourselves – are probably the best illustration of this. No matter how many options in the drop-down menu, no matter how detailed the questions on the census, it’s never quite possible to distil a human soul into a series of data. National identity, gender... there are things that just don’t lend themselves to convenient categorisation.
- 6 Now we come to Parashat Tzav and its instruction on what to do with various sorts of pot after they’ve been used for sacrifices. If the priests boiled the sin-offering in a clay pot, they have to smash it; if they used a copper pot, they can wash and reuse it.³
- 7 What about other sorts of pot? Wooden ones, stone ones? Iron, gold, silver? The Torah looks like it’s silent on this, yet Malbim, a 19th-century commentator, tells us otherwise.⁴ Clay pots and copper pots, he says, are being used here as broad categories – almost as a spectrum. For other



materials, we have to judge for ourselves whether they're more like clay or more like copper.

- 8 Fair enough: in some cases, this isn't too challenging. Clearly any type of metal is going to be treated like copper: washed and reused, rather than destroyed and thrown away. But what about wood? It's not really like either clay or copper. Maybe we'd say it also gets washed and reused, like copper, because we can't smash it which would be a big difference from clay. But then again what other materials can be smashed? If the Malbim is right, the Torah must have had at least something else in mind, otherwise it would have referred to clay pots and other pots, not clay-like pots and copper-like pots.
- 9 The fact is, this is a completely pointless, meaningless exercise. This whole area of halachah belongs to a category called chukkim – laws for which we don't know, and never will understand, the reason. Some laws are self-explanatory, such as laws against false testimony, and these are called mishpatim; laws about how killing an animal can make our sins go away are not, and all these mysterious topics are collectively labelled chukkim.⁵ And it's no surprise that it's an arbitrary, nonsensical area of halachah in which we're set about the crazed exercise of categorising non-clay, non-copper pots as either clay or copper. Hey, why not? We might as well; all this sacrificial stuff is so weird, anything goes.
- 10 The Malbim actually started his explanation of this verse with a human analogy: the difficulty of classifying people by skin colour. "Some people are very white," he says, "some are reddish white, some bright red, some black as charcoal, some have red dimples, some have green dimples..."



- 11 Although a few of his examples seem slightly strange – might Omri actually identify as being part of an ethnic group that has green dimples? – the Malbim correctly makes the point that pigeonholing open-ended groups into narrow categories is both pointless and impossible. Like the varied materials that may make up a pot, sometimes alone, sometimes in combination, we're all different. We all exist on a spectrum: in fact, on multiple spectra. Some of us might be more like clay than copper, some more like copper than clay, some a mixture, some so completely unlike either that it's pointless to try to find a suitable label.
- 12 Outside of the restrictive intricacies of sacrificial laws, and outside of the necessity for clear, if stark, lines around speed limits, disease control and other such areas, these differences aren't a problem to be ironed out with blunt categories. Differences are a reality to be celebrated. Being a clay person or a copper person is fine; so too is being an iron person, a wood person, a stone person, a green-dimpled person – and, come to that, a sand person, a polystyrene person or a tinfoil person.
- 13 Copper pots were washed; clay pots were smashed. Whatever sort of person you are, nobody except you decides whether you want to have a wash or get smashed, or to do anything in between. Humans are special and unique beyond categories: a nightmare for census-takers, a joy and a blessing for the rest of us.

GKW 27.03.21

¹ Leviticus 6:17-7:6



² Oliver Wendell Holmes. *Collected Legal Papers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920): 233.

³ Leviticus 6:21

⁴ Malbim to Leviticus 6:21

⁵ This division itself is maybe a little too stark to capture, fully, the reality...