



SERMON SH'MINI: I AM SERIOUSLY ANNOYING¹

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 10 April 2021
Oxford Jewish Community (Liberal section) & York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 I am – and I think most of my teachers at Leo Baeck College would agree with this assessment – seriously annoying. Unfortunately, this means that if the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill passes through Parliament in its current form, I could face a 10-year prison sentence.² Any form of protest, indeed “any act”, which is seriously annoying would be criminalised.
- 2 Oftentimes, rabbis (and student rabbis) are the ones causing serious annoyance. But sometimes, it’s the other way round. One such case was the amazing and little-known historical episode of the 1902 Kosher Meat Strike. It seems odd that kosher meat could inspire such passion in anybody; although today’s parashah, Sh’mini, is where we first find the lists of permitted and forbidden animals, I very deliberately chose not to read from it because it is, frankly, very dull.
- 3 And yet, millennia later, it all kicked off in the kashrut trade. A suspicious cartel that controlled New York City’s supply of kosher meat increased its prices from 12 cents a pound to 18 cents. Two Jewish women from the Lower East Side, a Mrs Levy and a Mrs Edelson, organised a resistance movement. They handed out Yiddish leaflets, blazoned with a skull-and-crossbones, urging a boycott of the meat industry. They targeted



butchers, grabbing packs of meat out of customers' hands and throwing them onto the ground. A *New York Times* article records how women “armed with sticks, vocabularies and well-sharpened nails” were out in force, and, my favourite line from the press coverage, one policeman “had an unpleasant moist piece of liver slapped in his face”.³

4 Actually, that’s my second-favourite line. My favourite is from when the women staged a pitch invasion in shul. On Saturday 17 May 1902, they streamed out of the women’s gallery and onto the bimah, right in the middle of the Torah service, to protest against the price hike. One man yelled at them that their actions were a chillul ha-Shem, a desecration of God’s name. Mrs Silver replied, “The Torah will forgive me.”⁴ And she was right: Mrs Silver was relying on a largely-forgotten ancient Jewish legal process which entitled those with a grievance to interrupt prayers and refuse to allow the service to continue until they had been heard by the community.⁵

5 In the passage of Parashat Sh’mini which we did read today, the Temple service was most definitely interrupted. Disrupted, indeed. Nadav and Avihu brought “alien fire” into the Mishkan and were incinerated on the spot by God.⁶ They did something unusual, something which challenged the detailed, standard way in which the Temple service usually took place, and they were punished for it. We can imagine that, just as with Mrs Silver, a man called out to Nadav and Avihu that they were desecrating the Divine name.

6 Sifra, an early rabbinic reading of the Book of Leviticus, suggests that the real wrong here was that Nadav and Avihu failed to consult anyone.⁷ They



didn't ask Moses as the community's leader, they didn't ask Aaron as High Priest, they just went ahead and did it. But really... so what? We don't have to consult other people about everything. We were all given independent minds so we can act for ourselves; sometimes, it's necessary just to do, at least for oneself, without waiting for a consensus.

- 7 That isn't the only irregular service in our parashah, however, because in the very same chapter we read the story of Aaron doing a sacrifice wrong, burning a goat carcass instead of eating its flesh.⁸ He also acted unilaterally, without consulting anyone, and moreover he actually contravened the rules. (Nadav and Avihu only did something "which God had not commanded",⁹ implemented an idea that they came up with,¹⁰ but Aaron did something which had been actively commanded against.) Yet somehow he got away with it.

- 8 These two approaches to altering the way that Israelite worship took place illustrate the classic difference between revolution and evolution. Aaron's style was very much about evolution. He wasn't one to shout or make a scene – even when his sons were consumed by furious heavenly fire, he remained silent¹¹ – so it was entirely in character for him to make his change to the sacrificial code quietly. He declined to eat the sin-offering, and his reason was that he was recently bereaved. Grief-stricken, he didn't think it appropriate to gorge himself on goat-meat. Perfectly rational, perfectly sensible, and, as he reasoned: "Would God not approve?" This was a small, incremental modification, and in making it, he was guided by what he thought would be well-received, what would be tolerable and acceptable to the community and to the system.



- 9 Nadav and Avihu, on the other hand, were different. While completely non-violent, they nonetheless used a revolutionary approach. They simply marched into the Mishkan and did what they wanted, introduced their innovation, and the rest of the Israelites could either like it or deal with it. They didn't wait to feel out the lie of the land, to get a sense of where communal opinion lay. They just went for it. Consultation be damned!
- 10 Aaron was the gently-worded petition, Nadav and Avihu were the raucous protest march.
- 11 The kosher meat martyrs of the Lower East Side were most definitely of the school of Nadav and Avihu. They could have been silent, like Aaron – and, indeed, like they had been trained to do their whole lives as women born in the 19th century. They could have gently and gradually spread the word, slowly built a coalition, asked the rabbi whether he could make an announcement at kiddush. But no: they stormed onto the bimah to be sure that they could make their point in their way. They invoked their ancient right to disrupt prayers. They introduced alien fire into the sanctuary; frankly, a woman speaking up in a synagogue was extremely alien fire. They wanted things to be done differently and, armed with pieces of liver, sharp nails and “vocabularies”,¹² they did not shy away from making those demands in what must have been a seriously annoying way.
- 12 “Serious annoyance”. We all understand the word ‘annoyance’ to be fairly weak. An unhelpful recorded message on a helpline is an annoyance; someone playing their music too loudly on public transport is an annoyance. The word, though, actually comes from the Latin ‘in odio’,



meaning ‘it is hateful to me’.¹³ That seems far stronger, yet the consistent theme is people being jolted out of their complacency. Something annoying, whether slightly irksome or utterly hateful, makes us sit up and pay attention to it, even if it’s attention we don’t want to devote.

- 13 And that’s why protest needs to be seriously annoying. A protest which isn’t annoying isn’t a protest. If it passes people by, if those in power are able to ignore those issues which they choose to ignore, nothing has been achieved. Aaron’s mild and microscopic change to the Temple procedure went unnoticed by everyone except the beady-eyed Moses. Nadav and Avihu, though, made absolutely sure that their cause, the need for innovation in worship, became the sole talking point amongst the Israelites. So too the women of the Lower East Side.
- 14 The current attempt to ban the ‘annoying’ is easy to parody as pettiness – as we’ve said, it’s often a fairly weak word used to refer to trifling irritations – but it is actually deeply sinister. Banning the annoying enables those in power to shut their eyes and their ears to anything from which they choose to withhold their interest. Any cause, no matter how important, how righteous, how absolute its basis in Jewish values, will fall flat if its proponents are barred by law from trying to catch the eye of politicians and the press.
- 15 The calm and patient wisdom of Aaron is to be admired, and we have much learn from it. But that’s a sermon for another year. Right now, when the ancient Jewish rite=right of ‘interruption of prayers’ is under threat, when the alien fire which we could use to shine a light on injustices is about to be extinguished, this is the year when we need to focus on the



brash courage of Nadav, Avihu and the kosher meat martyrs of 1902. May we all inherit their audacity and their boldness. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

- 16 Oh, and, by the way, twenty days after the bimah protest in New York City, the shadowy meat cartel were forced to make a U-turn and drop their prices once again.¹⁴ How annoying for them.

GKW 10.04.21

¹ Leviticus 10:1-4, 16-20

² Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (House of Commons, bill 268 of 2019-21), clause 59(2)(c).

³ Marjorie Ingall. "Lessons from the Kosher Meat Boycott", *Tablet* (6 May 2019): <<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/lessons-from-the-kosher-meat-boycott>>

⁴ Paula E Hayman, "Immigrant women and consumer protest: the New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902" in Jonathan D Sarna (ed), *The American Jewish Experience* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986; 2nd ed), 153-165: 160; Scott D Seligman, *The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902: immigrant housewives and the riots that shook New York City* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2020; ebook edition), chapter 11.

⁵ Louis Finkelstein. *Jewish Self-government in the Middle Ages* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1924; reprinted Greenwood Press, 1975): 15-18, 128-129.

⁶ Leviticus 10:1-2

⁷ Sifra, Acharei Mot, parashah 1:1: Weiss ed, p 79b

⁸ Leviticus 10:16-20. This is a fairly confusing passage but it is well-explained ad loc in Adeyemo Tokunboh (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006).

⁹ Leviticus 10:1

¹⁰ Ibn Ezra ad loc

¹¹ Leviticus 10:3

¹² Ingall, *ibid.*

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary* online, sv 'annoy'

¹⁴ Ingall, *ibid.*