



SERMON B'MIDBAR: FLAGGING

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 14 May 2021
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 One of my mum's favourite embarrassing stories about my childhood is about the time I made her come with me to the annual general meeting of the Flag Institute as my plus-one, when I was about 8 years old, for a day of lectures, slide-shows and discussions. (She was the only woman present apart from the tea-lady.)
- 2 Hard though it may be for you to believe that, as a child, I had unusual interests, I was a huge flag enthusiast – even today, I can describe any national flag you choose to name – and joined the Flag Institute, aged 7, for access to its quarterly journal.
- 3 I was a collector, as well. My mum will tell you that my bedroom at home looks rather like the United Nations, filled with all sorts of flags: some I bought on holiday, some others bought me on holiday... one, a friend pinched off the car of the Ambassador of Benin when they found it parked outside their office block.
- 4 And it would be hard to deny that this passion has come in handy from time to time. When my dad slipped on his way home from work one time, and arrived at the front door with a broken arm, we didn't have a sling, but we did have two suitably-sized flags: Iran and Israel. He made his



choice based on which he thought would be least perplexing for the ambulance crew when they arrived.

- 5 But aside from emergency first aid, flags have many uses. They identify teams at the Olympics. They identify languages on leaflets and tourist maps. They identify embassies and armies and ships. For many people, they are also a badge of identity. Walk down any street in small-town America and you'll see a lot of stars-and-stripes flapping proudly in the breeze, and on Yom ha-Atzma'ut, many Jewish people around the world dress in blue and white to mark the sense of connection they feel with Israeli independence.
- 6 The BBC's last annual report, on the other hand, didn't contain any flags at all. I only know this because the MP James Wild brought it up in Parliament.¹ He told the director-general of the BBC: "Maybe in the annual report for this year perhaps you could include some imagery around the union flag. It might be welcomed by some of my constituents."
- 7 Sadly, the Torah has to take some of the blame for the current obsession with the union flag. In this week's parashah, we read that the 12 tribes each had their own banner,² and a midrash adds that this was the very first occasion on which flags were used as symbols for a group:³ "From the tribes' flags, the nations of the world learned to do the same, to have flags in different colours."
- 8 Of course, the tribes' banners were largely indicative as symbols. They weren't about showing group pride; they weren't about showing which team somebody supported; they weren't about any sort of patriotism or nationalism. These banners were a practical measure. They hung above



the area of the camp in which each tribe lived (so that Israelites would be able to find their way 'home' easily). They were carried during journeys through the wilderness (so people would know where to march and who to follow). They were almost more like colour-coding than flags.

- 9 The union flag, though, isn't like that. It's a substantive symbol. When we're urged to use it – whether as a backdrop for media interviews or as an illustration in an annual report – it isn't as a convenient way of indicating 'UK'. It's to denote some sort of, perhaps ill-defined, national pride.
- 10 However, as David Mitchell has written:⁴ “The flag means no more or less than Britain and Britain, as a historical entity, is terrible, wonderful and every gradation in between. It is a mistake to seek to take ownership of what that flag makes people feel. It is at once an aggressive usurpation of imagery and a reckless flirtation with extremism.”
- 11 It's important to understand the limits of what he's saying. He doesn't argue that the union flag is as an extremist symbol, or that those who choose to use it are extremists. He doesn't say that Britain is wonderful or that Britain is terrible. His objection is about attempts to mandate use of the union flag as a substantive symbol.
- 12 Flags as indicators are great. One day, when we get to travel again, and are standing in a tourist office in France or Spain or Austria, it will be extremely useful to be able to find the English-language leaflets quickly and easily by scanning for a union flag.
- 13 But flags as substantive symbols – as a badge of pride, as a representation of support for a football team or a government or historical



achievements or future hopes – that’s personal. Those who choose to use the flag in this way are most welcome to do so, and shouldn’t be derided or mocked for doing so. It doesn’t denote far-right attitudes. Those who choose not to do so, likewise – and this is not proof of hatred of Britain. David Mitchell’s problem is with those who try to harass, hassle or bully others into using flags in precisely the same way that they do.

- 14 If we are to believe the midrash – and of course we should almost never treat a midrash as a historical record, but go with this one – the 12 tribes’ banners were the first flags. And there was one of each. There were precisely 12 flags, one per tribe.⁵ Nobody flew them off their own tent. Nobody had them as a Zoom background. Nobody stuck them on their car aerials. These more flexible uses of flags are modern developments, the midrash tells us – and, like my dad’s decision about whether to have his broken arm dressed with an Israeli flag or an Iranian flag, a matter of individual choice.

GKW 14.05.21

¹ Rajeev Syal. “BBC chief told to use ‘more than one union jack’ in annual report”, *The Guardian* (22 March 2021): <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/mar/22/bbc-chief-told-to-use-more-than-one-union-jack-in-annual-report>>

² Numbers 2:2

³ Midrash Tanchuma, B’midbar 12

⁴ David Mitchell. “Actually, we were laughing at Robert Jenrick, not his tiny flag”, *The Guardian* (4 April 2021): <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/04/robert-jenrick-government-patriotism-union-jack-flags>>

⁵ Actually maybe there were 13, because the tribe of Joseph split between his two sons, but that isn’t the point.