



SERMON SH'LACH L'CHA:¹ DEADNAMING

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 5 June 2021
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Emily Thornberry MP is married to a man called Sir Christopher Nugee. In 2018, while she was Shadow Foreign Secretary, the Foreign Secretary was answering one of her questions in Parliament, and he referred to her as “Lady Nugee” (to be precise, he referred to her as “Lady... Baroness... whatever it is, I can’t remember what it is, Nugee”). The Speaker was having none of it: “We do not address people by the titles of their spouses. The Shadow Foreign Secretary has a name, and it is not Lady something. We know what her name is. It is inappropriate and frankly sexist to speak in those terms.”²
- 2 The default of referring to women by the name of their husband certainly is outdated, but even more fundamental than that, there’s the basic discourtesy of calling someone by a name they don’t want to be called. Emily Thornberry has chosen to use the name Emily Thornberry; the only conceivable reason to call her “Lady Nugee” – something nobody ever calls her, something that cannot possibly have been an innocent mistake – is to upset her deliberately.
- 3 The way we refer to other people is extremely important. In the last few weeks, there’s been a lot of discussion of the *Forstater* case.³ Maya Forstater worked for an international development consultancy on a



temporary contract, which was not renewed. She is arguing, before the Employment Appeal Tribunal, that “the relationship came to an end because she expressed ‘gender critical’ opinions” – in other words, because she doesn’t recognise the right of trans-women to be recognised as women.⁴

- 4 One particular aspect of the case caught my eye, however, and that relates to pronouns. In her witness statement, Ms Forstater wrote, referring to trans-women as ‘male people’: “I reserve the right to use the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’ to refer to male people. While I may choose to use alternative pronouns as a courtesy, no-one has the right to compel others to make statements they do not believe.”⁵ The judge was clearly as alarmed by this line as I was, saying: “She will refer to a person by the sex she considered appropriate even if it violates their dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. The approach is not worthy of respect in a democratic society.”⁶

- 5 I agree. Liberal Judaism is proud to be an inclusive movement, and the most basic, bare-minimum form of inclusivity is not being intentionally hostile. Someone is more comfortable being called “she”? Call them “she”! Safeguarding individual dignity is the paramount duty with which all of us are entrusted, and to treat it as a mere “courtesy”, something we do as an indulgence, rather than as a way of supporting another person to thrive – something we could capriciously choose to stop doing no matter what impact it has on our fellow, who was also created in the Divine image – is, in my view, horrendous.



- 6 In this week's parashah, Joshua becomes Joshua. The biblical text doesn't explain why, but Hosea bin-Nun becomes Joshua bin-Nun.⁷ Oddly, though, Joshua tends to be referred to by both names – Hosea and Joshua – fairly interchangeably throughout the Torah, despite this being the moment identified as the change. Rabbeinu Bachya, a 14th-century commentator, suggests that the Torah was being sensitive to the change-of-name, and applied it retrospectively. The text, he suggests, doesn't want to refer to Joshua by a name that isn't his current one, even when writing about times before the change came about.⁸
- 7 Rabbeinu Bachya refers to this as being about **כבוד**: respect, courtesy. Those are certainly part of it, but I think it goes beyond that. Calling people by the correct name isn't just about preferences, like we might try to comply with someone's preference for tea with two sugars, or for the seat by the window. It's far deeper than that. Pronouns – he, she, his, hers – are very important to trans-men and trans-women. Being referred to in accordance with how one identifies is key to being able to maintain one's dignity. Deliberately calling a trans-woman “he” when she identifies as a “she” can be seriously harmful to the individual's wellbeing. It's a form of what's known as ‘deadnaming’, which means referring to a trans-man or trans-woman using their previous name.
- 8 We get a little taste of this later in our parashah. If you look at any translation of Numbers 14:10, it will say something like: “And the whole community threatened to pelt them with stones.”⁹ But the actual Hebrew is a little different: **ויאמרו בל־העדה לרגום אתם באבנים**. The verb is simply **ויאמרו**, they said. Just ordinary saying. **ויאמרו** doesn't imply an aggressive



tone to the voice. It doesn't mean 'yelled' or 'screamed'. It certainly doesn't mean 'threatened'. Literally, we have: "And the whole community said to pelt them with stones."

- 9 How can ordinary speech, in an ordinary tone of voice, free from any trace of overt threat or malice, possibly put someone in fear of violence? Well, we all know the answer to that: hate speech is the classic example. But so too is deadnaming. So too is intentional misgendering. The journalist Sam Riedel has written movingly about how deadnaming is a form of violence, because it so directly leads to physical attacks on trans-people.¹⁰
- 10 Words matter, and have real-world impacts. If even the Torah was so careful to accommodate Joshua's change of name, we must certainly strive to do the same. The odd mistake or slip-up is inevitable, but the vital task is to take upon ourselves a sense of responsibility. Calling people what they want to be called is not just something we do as a matter of courtesy. It's something we do to validate the Divine spark within them.

GKW 05.06.21

¹ Numbers 13:1-18

² HC Deb, 27 March 2018, c 640

³ *Forstater v Centre for Global Development* (2200909/2019)

⁴ *Ibid* at [3]

⁵ *Ibid* at [35]

⁶ *Ibid* at [90]

⁷ Numbers 13:16

⁸ Rabbeinu Bachya *ad loc*

⁹ New JPS translation

¹⁰ Sam Riedel. "Deadnaming a trans person is violence – so why does he media do it anyway?", *The Huffington Post* (17 March 2017): <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/deadnaming-a-trans-person-is-violenceso-why-does_b_58cc58cce4b0e0d348b3434b>