



**SERMON CHUKKAT:¹
FOREVER BLOWING BUBBLES**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 19 June 2021
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 There will now be a short interlude while I play a sketch from the Radio 4 comedy programme *John Finnemore's Souvenir Programme*.²

Viewable at <<https://youtu.be/xWlcg5RUp7U>>

- 2 There are two approaches to studying history. We can emphasise the similarities, or we can emphasise the differences. We can focus on how nothing ever changes – how our ancestors were exactly the same as us – or we can focus on how radically, unrecognisably alien the past would have looked. In the sketch we just heard, the comedian John Finnemore was clearly satirising the former approach (they went on trips to the spa and so do we!) as pedestrian and uninteresting. But that's my approach. I am unashamedly that teacher.
- 3 What excites me about studying Jewish texts, whether from the Bible or from more recent times, is how much the world has stayed the same, how much of my own sphere of existence I can recognise in the past. There's a left-luggage stall in the Book of Samuel.³ There's a spork in the Mishnah.⁴ There's a bent copper in the Talmud.⁵ There's a community tutting about their rabbi's personal religious practices in the responsa of the Chatam Sofer.⁶ Nothing ever changes! And I find this comforting: the trials and



tribulations and petty annoyances we face today are not unique. Our forbears suffered them too. There is nothing new under the sun.⁷

- 4 Perhaps my favourite example is from Tractate Machshirin, a book of the Mishnah, from around the 2nd century, discussing the various ways in which liquids can spread impurity. It addresses the case of the splashes from **העושה צפור במים**: one who ‘makes a bird’ in the water.⁸ Now what does that mean? Well, a 14th-century commentary from Rabbi Asher ben-Yechiel gives us the answer.⁹ He says that ‘making a bird’ refers to someone who **מכניס פיו למים ונופח ועושה אֶבְעָבוּעוֹת ע"פ המים**: introduces their mouth into the water, blows, and makes bubbles across the surface of the water.
- 5 It’s someone doing duck noises in the bath! A parallel passage in the Tosefta¹⁰ records a serious legal dispute, a three-way dispute no less, between Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yose, about the halachic consequences of someone making duck noises in the bath! Three serious, learned sages, sitting in a study hall in the 2nd century, debating the Jewish law of bubble baths.
- 6 This is comical, but it’s also somewhat endearing. It’s hard to think of something more blandly familiar to our modern lives. It’s not a symbol of the times. It’s something universal, that links all generations. People were doing it in ancient Israel; I did it last week with Omri, in the swimming pool. And as I did so, I could feel the presence, behind me, of the three rabbis, watching closely, continuing their debate. Humanity has, very literally, been forever blowing bubbles.
- 7 The familiar connects us to the past; the unfamiliar distances us.



- 8 Turning to Parashat Chukkat, I could have given a sermon about the exciting exoticism of the Israelites' bronze serpent totem that had miraculous healing powers.¹¹ How alluringly alien it was! But actually, the meaningful parts of the parashah, for me, are the ones about identifiable life. The verses that speak about the rituals which take place upon a person's death.¹² Negotiations over passage into another country's borders.¹³ A rebellion against communal leaders.¹⁴
- 9 Of course, the real crescendo of our reading comes with the miracle at the rock.¹⁵ What was it that Moses got out of the rock? It wasn't some mystical, magical substance. It was our old, unremarkable friend, water – unremarkable, but life-giving.
- 10 The Torah is our rock, and we extract life lessons from it. These life lessons are, of necessity, about our own lives, so they rely on us being able to distil references to recognisable experiences from its ancient words.
- 11 This interpretive approach is hardly dry and boring, though, as the schoolchildren in the Roman baths thought. True, we come across a miraculous rock, and all we take away from it is familiar old water... but we can always enliven the experience by blowing bubbles into it. May Torah always continue to yield for us the water that sustains our lives, and may it always be fizzing with the bubbles of our creativity. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

GKW 19.06.21



¹ Numbers 20:1-12

² “Series 3, episode 3”: *John Finnemore’s Souvenir Programme*, BBC Radio 4 (17 September 2013):
<<https://youtu.be/xWlcg5RU7U>>

³ 1 Samuel 17:22

⁴ m.Keilim 13:2

⁵ b.Shabbat 116a-b

⁶ Chatam Sofer, Choshen Mishpat, responsum 162

⁷ Ecclesiastes 1:9

⁸ m.Machshirin 5:2

⁹ Rosh ad loc

¹⁰ t.Machshirin 2:13

¹¹ Numbers 21:8-9

¹² Numbers 19:14-15

¹³ Numbers 21:21-23

¹⁴ Numbers 20:2-5

¹⁵ Numbers 20:7-12