



**SERMON YOM KIPPUR AFTERNOON:
BEING LIFTED UP – OR, BEING UPLIFTED**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Thursday 16 September 2021
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 So far, this High Holy Day period, we've looked at the Mishnah's list¹ of ways in which we are considered to be 'using' a seat or bench. On Erev Rosh Hashanah, we contemplated leaning – leaning forward into the new year, leaning on God for support. And on Rosh Hashanah morning, we thought about lying down, mutely trusting, maybe forced to trust. Last night, we stood as part of a legal ritual, and this morning, we realised that, when we think we're standing, we may in fact be seated.
- 2 There's a fifth way the Mishnah lists in which we 'use' a seat. But it's a weird one. It's called נתלה, 'being hung'. Being suspended. The example given in the commentaries² is of a giant set of weighing scales: a person is in one pan, a chair is in the other, and if the chair is heavier, lifting the person in the other pan up, then the person is using the chair for נתלה.
- 3 This scenario seems completely ludicrous. Sitting on a bench, we all understand. Lying, leaning, standing: these are all normal things that we all do every day. But actually, the theme of נתלה is writ large across the story of Jonah, and indeed across the whole of Yom Kippur.
- 4 Jonah fondly imagines himself to be the man in the upper pan of the scales: lifted up against his will, no control over what befell him. Entirely



at the mercy of natural and Divine forces. He saw himself as entirely lacking in agency, buffeted about by the wind (a literal wind, on two occasions: firstly while on the storm-tossed boat,³ secondly while suffering heatstroke outside Nineveh).⁴

5 There's a little bit of that Jonah inside everyone. We all, sometimes, like to cast ourselves as being helpless and hapless. It can be comforting to feel that we're in a predicament wherein we have no choice. But as Rabbi Israel Mattuck z"l wrote: "When we do something which shows some moral weakness, the act is frequently condoned by the comment, it's human. But there is another side to our nature. It is not only human to be weak but it is also human to have 'a touch of the Divine'. It is human to be weak, it is also human to be strong."⁵

6 Yom Kippur is a time when we're all in the weighing scale, being weighed against the weight of our good and bad deeds over the last year. Maybe we do get outweighed by the natural and Divine forces in the other pan. Maybe we do get lifted up without any say in the matter. But this needn't be us being lifted up in an unwelcome way. It could, on the contrary, be uplifting.

7 Jonah was chosen for a vital, holy mission. He was empowered to carry it out. God had faith in him. But instead of treating himself as uplifted – instead of allowing himself to feel uplifted – he played the victim, and made himself the man who was lifted up against his will.

8 He did all five of the Mishnah's listed actions: he stood on a jetty, negotiating an escape plan. He lay down and slept in the boat. He sat out



side Nineveh. He leaned, exhausted, on the gourd. And he let himself be hung, immobile, feeling impotent.

- 9 Yom Kippur provides us all with the opportunity to do something different. It lets us seize on those moments when we feel disempowered, when we're feeling buffeted around by the world, when we have the last confidence in our ability to decide, to change, to do – and lets us turn them into moments of being uplifted. To celebrate a glimpse of a different form of being. To glimpse the Divine.
- 10 Be uplifted. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

GKW 16.09.21

¹ m.Zavim 2:4

² See eg Tiferet Yisrael ad loc

³ Jonah 1:4

⁴ Jonah 4:8

⁵ Rabbi Israel I Mattuck in *The Liberal Jewish Monthly* (April 1954), quoted in *Siddur Lev Chadash*: 356.