



## **SERMON YOM KIPPUR MORNING: SITTING IN POSITION**

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

- 1 There's a drama game from *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, also popular at Jewish youth events, called 'One Standing, One Sitting, One Lying Down'. Three people have to act out a scene, and at any given moment, one of them has to be standing, one of them sitting, and one of them lying down. If one of them changes position – for instance, if they were lying down 'asleep' and decide to wake up – another must immediately change position as well, to maintain the balance. There can never be two people lying down at once, never two standing, never two sitting.
- 2 We read **אתם נצבים**: you are stood.<sup>1</sup> And we read the **עמידה**, the standing prayer. **נצב, עמד**: two Hebrew roots, both meaning 'standing'. But what's the difference? Why does the Torah use one in this morning's parashah, and the machzor use the other for the daily prayer?
- 3 The difference is one that really messes up the *Whose Line is it Anyway?* game: one of the roots for 'standing' is, oddly, not incompatible with sitting. But how can one person stand and sit at once?
- 4 Throughout this High Holy Day period, I've been thinking about the different ways we use our bodies when it comes to benches and seats. The Mishnah<sup>2</sup> lists five ways in which one is considered to be 'using' a



seat, and these correspond to five moments in the High holy Day journey. Last night we contemplated standing – standing awaiting judgment – and this morning is all about sitting.

- 5 What does it mean to sit? When and why do we sit? We might sit for convenience – to eat a meal or to drive a car. We might sit because it's what feels expected of us, in class or in shul. We might sit out of boredom, or out of tiredness. Sometimes, too, we sit a little helplessly: on receiving bad news, or in a waiting room.
- 6 We're all in a waiting room right now, awaiting Divine judgment, awaiting the moment when we end our Yom Kippur and rejoin the ordinary, mundane, secular world out there. And most of the day is spent sitting.
- 7 עמד literally means standing in a physical sense. נצב means to stand, but not to stand up.<sup>3</sup> It means more, to stand ready, to be in position, to be stationed. To stand firm. To present oneself.
- 8 We can and do do these things while seated. A person who is sitting down can be just as attentive, just as ready, just as in-place, as a person who is standing. And they can be ready in comfort, in a convenient way – maybe in a helpless way, like one sitting in a hospital waiting room.
- 9 An 8th-century midrash, the Midrash Tanchuma, speaks of our parashah, with its powerful imagery of all Israel standing together, but it speaks in rather interesting language. “Only on account of one righteous person amongst you does the whole world stand acquitted.”<sup>4</sup>
- 10 So everyone stands acquitted, but not really on our own merit. Only because of the merit of one righteous person, somewhere in our midst. In



reality, then, we aren't standing. We're sitting, and the fact that one amongst us is standing righteously is what sustains our lives, and gives us the illusion that we survive on our own merit.

- 11 We don't know who this righteous person is. They don't know who they are. And, anyway, their identity may change from time to time. Today the righteous individual may be Person A, next week, Person B may be the one who keeps us all going. Maybe they're in this room, maybe they're not. What the midrash tells us, though, is that the rest of us live under an illusion: we're acquitted each year on Yom Kippur, and we think ourselves innocent, but that's not so.
- 12 Yom Kippur is a time to recognise that it is impossible for any of us, truly, to see ourselves clearly and objectively. We all engage in self-deception of one sort or another. Once a year, we have this opportunity, this heaven-sent opportunity, to reach humbling realisations.
- 13 We are imperfect. We are sitting, on our laurels, while somebody who is not us stands righteously and does the good work that preserves our life. But there is nothing special about that person: we can be them, whether for a minute or for an hour or for a year. Let this Yom Kippur give us the space to reflect on how we can strive to stand, stand ready, נצב, but also stand, עמד, on our own two feet. We can turn אתם נצבים into אתם עומדים, we can all stand together as equals, all genuinely acquitted. We can help turn the tide in the world, we can choose life, holding fast to God and practising lovingkindness.<sup>5</sup>

**GKW 16.09.21**



<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 29:9

<sup>2</sup> m.Zavim 2:4

<sup>3</sup> David J A Clines (ed). *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press), vol 5: 735ff.

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 2

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19-20