



SERMON BO:¹
STANDING OUTSIDE

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 8 January 2022
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue
(Mental Health Shabbat)

- 1 Why all the faff with the ten plagues? Blood, frogs, lice... it seems like an awful lot of time and energy to devote to solving a problem that could have been much more easily solved by God simply going into Egypt and hoiking the Israelites out.
- 2 Well, a midrash contains a rather interesting answer. Focussing on the first verse of our Torah reading² from this morning, Rabbi Chaninah wonders: “Why does it say בארץ מצרים, God spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, rather than just במצרים, in Egypt?”³ His answer: “God realised, ‘It says later on in the Torah, בחוץ תעמוד: you should stand outside. So that is what I will do: in the land of Egypt, but not in the main body of Egypt itself.’”
- 3 The verse he imagined God quoting comes from much later on in the Torah: from the end of Deuteronomy.⁴ In full, the passage reads: “When you make a loan to your neighbour, you must not enter their house to



retrieve the security on it. You should stand outside while the person to whom you loaned brings the security outside for you.”⁵

- 4 The idea being presented here is fascinating: God is a creditor, Egypt a debtor, and the Hebrew slaves the security on the loan. But, to extend the analogy a little bit and to return to our initial question, why is it that God cannot simply march into Egypt – either directly or through bailiffs – and retrieve the security?
- 5 The commentators provide various answers to the biblical law against a creditor entering a debtor’s house. One idea is that it is to keep the debtor’s wife safe from aggressive and potentially predatory creditors,⁶ another that it was to try to avoid fights from developing.⁷ More relevant to our purposes, though, I think, is the notion that this rule was designed to allow the debtor a chance to bring the security out of their own volition,⁸ but most powerful of all are the words of the 13th-/ 14th-century commentator Rabbeinu Bachya: “This law is an example of God’s mercy. The Torah spares the debtor the shame of having strangers rummage through their things.”⁹
- 6 This feels especially relevant on Mental Health Shabbat. The ultimate goal of all forms of mental health treatment and mental health support



is to promote the dignity and autonomy of everybody, so far as is remotely possible.

7 In this country, even those who are least able to care for themselves have their dignity and autonomy protected by the Mental Capacity Act 2005, which, when it was going through Parliament, was described by the Bishop of Worcester as “a statement about a vision of humanity which I hope children in generations to come will study as one of the clearest and most eloquent expressions of what we think a human being is and how a human being is to be treated”.¹⁰

8 In particular, the Mental Capacity Act reminds us that “a person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision merely because they make an unwise decision”.¹¹ This is the supreme reflection of individual dignity and autonomy: this is the equivalent of the world being required to stand patiently outside the debtor’s house rather than marching in and rummaging through their things. Everybody has the right to a chance; everybody has the right to make a mistake; nobody loses these rights simply because they are affected by poor mental health. The Court of Protection, whose job it is to enforce the Mental Capacity Act, has said: “The healthy and moral human instinct to protect vulnerable people from unwise, indeed potentially catastrophic, decisions must never be permitted to eclipse their fundamental right to take their own decisions



where they have the capacity to do so. Misguided paternalism has no place here.”¹²

- 9 More pithily, Robert Perske, a Methodist minister and disability rights activist, came up with the idea of the ‘dignity of risk’. “Overprotection may appear on the surface to be kind, but it can be really evil. An oversupply can smother people emotionally, squeeze the life out of their hopes and expectations, and strip them of their dignity.”¹³
- 10 What does all this have to do with God and the Egyptians? I think the same principle applies. The law of בחוץ תעמוד was intended to prevent a debtor – a vulnerable person – from the overbearing intrusion of a more powerful individual. The Mental Capacity Act, likewise, is designed to make sure that the most vulnerable people in our society are not simply written off as functioning human beings, but are instead given as much agency and freedom as possible.
- 11 The Egyptians were vulnerable too. Pharaoh took a series of unwise decisions: not just potentially catastrophic, but actually catastrophic. But nonetheless, he had to be given a chance. He had to be granted some level of autonomy, rather than being directly controlled and manipulated by God who could, of course, directly control and manipulate anybody.



- 12 At the same time, we remember that God did not completely obey the law of בחוץ תעמוד. God did not stand entirely outside, waiting on the far side of the border with Ethiopia.¹⁴ Rather, God was closer to hand: not in the heart of Egypt, but still in Egypt. The vulnerable Egyptians were not left totally alone in their house, but rather knew that support was within reach. They had to take the first move to reach out for it, but had they done so, endless compassion would have been there.
- 13 As we mark Mental Health Shabbat, let us all seek to hover just inside the threshold, neither intrusive nor remote. Upholding the dignity and autonomy of those who struggle with their mental health, and yet accessible to them and endlessly willing to offer support. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

GKW 08.01.22

¹ Exodus 12:1-12

² Exodus 12:1

³ Exodus Rabbah 15:5

⁴ Deuteronomy 24:11

⁵ Deuteronomy 24:10-11

⁶ Bechor Shor to Deuteronomy 24:10

⁷ Malbim to Deuteronomy 24:10

⁸ Y'dei Moshe to Exodus Rabbah 15:5

⁹ Rabbeinu Bachya to Deuteronomy 24:10

¹⁰ House of Lords Debates, 10 January 2005, col 53

¹¹ Mental Capacity Act 2005 s 1(4), edited for gender-neutral language



¹² *Tower Hamlets Borough Council v PB* [2020] EWCOF 34, [2020] 4 WLR 94 at [51(iii)]

¹³ Cited in Elspeth Slayter, “Nothing about us without us: working with women who have disabilities”, in Shannon Butler-Mokoro and Laurie Grant (eds), *Feminist Perspectives on Social Work Practice: the intersecting lives of women in the 21st century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 212-236: 223.

¹⁴ Exodus Rabbah 10:2 confirms that Egypt bordered Ethiopia at the time