



**SERMON EREV TERUMAH:<sup>1</sup>**  
**JEWS OF MANY PARTS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 4 February 2022

- 1 A post recently appeared in a Facebook group called *Jewish Britain*. It read:  
“Maybe in Israel there should be an Avenue of the Unrighteous, with the names of all the enemies of the Jews... but I guess that would be a major highway rather than an avenue!”
- 2 The psychology underlying this post is fascinating. All of us are sadly aware of how much hatred the Jewish people have faced over the years, and continue to face – but to be motivated to go to the lengths of making a proposal like this suggests more than an awareness. It seems that they almost revel in a sense of victimhood, relish it, want others to be able (or forced) to stroll down a street full of reminders of just how awful it is to be a Jew in the 21st century. My suspicion is that this is one of those people, and there are a number of such people, whose Jewish identity revolves entirely around a sense of being hated and targeted.
- 3 It cannot be denied, of course, that Jews are sometimes victims. But that isn’t anything like the entirety of the Jewish experience. To make it,



artificially, the entirety of one's Jewish experience, is a form of deliberate self-improvement. There has to be more to Jewish life than the downsides!

- 4 Our parashah today is not necessarily the best proof that Judaism can be vibrant and inspiring. Verse after verse of incessantly technical building instructions, it is about as stimulating as an Ikea manual translated into a dead language with no vowels.
- 5 And yet... as always, in amidst the dross, there is a glint of gold, a glimmer of an idea that is relevant and spirited and able to give us a message about something more useful than how to construct a big tent.
- 6 In the verse<sup>2</sup> dealing with the cloth coverings of the Mishkan – cloth coverings plural – the 13th-century commentator Chizkuni wonders why this piece of fabric had to be split into multiple parts.<sup>3</sup> He theorises that God's reason for commanding this was to make the Mishkan נוח, easier to carry. Manageable. Non-burdensome.
- 7 The root נוּח can, however, mean something beyond 'manageable' and 'non-burdensome'. It can convey the same sort concept, but in warmer, more human terms: pleasurable, satisfying, positive, pleasing.



- 8 God took the trouble to instruct the Israelites to make the covering of the Mishkan into two parts so as to make carrying it around the wilderness נוח. In doing so, God gave us a metaphor for Judaism on two levels.
- 9 Firstly, Judaism should be non-burdensome. It should be doable, without being made artificially difficult. Why lug one massive roll of heavy fabric around the desert when it could be broken down into multiple pieces without any loss of amenity? Why would a religion be designed to be crushingly difficult and completely unachievable? As it is, the Israelites who had the privilege of carrying parts of the Mishkan did not buckle under their weight, and were able to take pride and pleasure in their role in sustaining the spiritual life of their community. So too, if living out Judaism is made feasible, rather than being a terrifyingly large and ambitious stressor, we can take pride and pleasure in it.
- 10 Secondly, and more importantly, the Mishkan was composed of multiple parts, just like our Jewish identities. Joy and sorrow. Prayer and social action and music and food and Yiddish and Ladino and history and theology. There are countless aspects of, and angles to, a Jewish identity. And sooner or later, all of these components are essential. At any given moment, we can compartmentalise and focus on one rather than another. But eventually, we need the whole.



- 11 For convenience, the Mishkan could be split and each individual allocated their own piece. But that was a temporary measure, for transport purposes only, and everyone will have been acutely aware that while it was happening, the structure as a whole was incomplete.
- 12 We don't have a Mishkan any more, and our synagogues are strong, permanent, indivisible structures. And yet the idea of separability continues, because the rabbis said that Jewish people should have "a heart of many rooms".<sup>4</sup> One of these rooms is, sadly, a consciousness of the hazards of being a Jew, and of the number of people out there who wish us ill. But that can (or should) never be the only room in our Judaism, or else we have an incomplete heart, and a joyless one at that.
- 13 Following the horrific events at Congregation Beth Israel in Texas last month, there was an understandable drive to encourage as many people as possible to attend synagogues the following Shabbat. But as Rabbi Joshua Lesser observed: "Daring people to come to synagogue to prove they are not afraid isn't the pastoral invitation needed by many people. Utilising antisemitism and guilt as a long-term strategy for Jewish participation doesn't work."<sup>5</sup>
- 14 People have many reasons for attending synagogue. Some come to pray. Some come to sing. Some come to meet friends. Some come to meet



anyone. Some come to drop something off at the food bank. Some come to set up the technology. Some come to get out of the house. All of these reasons are fine. But if somebody's only reason for attending synagogue is to spite antisemites, I don't think that's fine. I think that turns Judaism into something narrow, defensive and, frankly, spiky.

- 15 Let us cultivate our own hearts of many rooms. Each heart will be different. The sizes of the rooms will vary. The floor-plans and configurations will differ. Maybe some will put tikkun olam upstairs in a tiny cupboard, whereas others will make it the centre of their reception suite. But whatever the layout, let us be Jews of many parts.

## **GKW 04.02.22**

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 26:1-11

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 26:4

<sup>3</sup> Chizkuni ad loc

<sup>4</sup> t.Sotah 7:7

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Joshua Lesser. Twitter (21 January 2021): <<https://twitter.com/rabbijosh/status/1484471403772616713>>