



SERMON EREV NASO: CLEARING THE CLOUDS

Erev Rav Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 3 June 2022
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue

- 1 I am about to celebrate one year of taking antidepressants. And I do mean ‘celebrate’. It has been truly lifechanging, and it is only thanks to this medication that I’ve been able to spend time with you here at NLS.
- 2 Depression makes one feel like a totally different person.
- 3 Tomorrow, we’ll read Parashat Naso, from which we take the words of the Priestly Blessing: “May God bless you and keep you. May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God reach out to you in tenderness, and give you peace.”¹
- 4 ‘God’s face will shine upon you’, it says – but there have been times when it didn’t feel like that.
- 5 The rabbis linked² those words from the Priestly Blessing, about God’s shining face, to a verse from the Book of Isaiah: “While darkness will cover the earth, and thick clouds the peoples, upon you the Eternal will shine.”³ This verse, in turn, was interpreted by the 19th-century commentator known as the Malbim as follows: “The thick clouds are like



vapour and smoke that completely fill the air even when the sun is shining.”⁴

- 6 I can't help having a slight suspicion that the Malbim knew what it was to suffer from depression.
- 7 It is indeed the case that, even when the sun is shining – even when life should be rosy and joyful, whatever 'should' means – depression can obscure happiness through layer after layer of seemingly impenetrable mist. This mist can cut us off from ourselves, from others, and from the Divine.
- 8 Antidepressants really were transformative. It provided the most enormous relief. It made me feel like me again. I can't even begin to put myself back in the shoes of the Gabriel who was heavily depressed, and that's a very good thing.
- 9 Initially, when I was first prescribed it, I went on a wonderful website called Open Siddur, which contains all sorts of interesting creative liturgy for different life experiences, and found a prayer for taking medication, and printed it out and pinned it up on the wall next to where I kept my pill-box.



- 10 But over time, I stopped saying the prayer when taking the pills. This is because I realised God wasn't really behind my recovery: the antidepressants were.
- 11 A beautiful medieval midrash tells us the following:⁵ Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva were asked how they dared to help cure the sick, when only God had rightful power over life and death and chose who would get ill and who would not. "You are trespassing on God's domain!" said their accuser. They asked him: "What job do you do?" "I'm a farmer," he replied, "See the sickle in my hand." "But who created the land you cultivate?" asked the rabbis. "God," he answered. "Then you are trespassing on God's domain!" replied the rabbis, "God created the land the way that it is." "But if I didn't plant and harvest," he argued, "we would have no food!" "You are a fool!" said the rabbis, "What is true of your world, farming, is also true of the world of medicine. The human body is a tree: if it is not tended, it will die."
- 12 In other words, Divine providence gets us halfway there, but human input is necessary to reap the full reward. In my case, the 'farmer' – the human being who turned God's raw materials into the resource that I needed – is a Danish scientist called Klaus Bogeso, who, in 1989, invented citalopram.⁶



- 13 The fact is, I couldn't lift the clouds on my own. The rather mean-spirited farmer who spoke to Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael may argue that God intended me to be surrounded by clouds and that it was wrong for me to turn to earthly means to dispel them, but we know that is nonsense. Our food supply depends on that argument being nonsense!
- 14 In fact, we find in our Torah reading itself that humans need to rely on humans. The words that introduce the Priestly Blessing are: כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת־ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, 'Thus shall you bless the children of Israel.' We can't bless ourselves with the Priestly Blessing. Human beings, in this case Aaron and his sons, had to act as intermediaries.
- 15 Just as Aaron's involvement in transmitting blessing to the Israelites did not cut out or reduce the spiritual dimension of what was happening, nor did my decision to drop the blessing before taking my pill each morning feel sacrilegious. The first half of the verse from Isaiah described my situation, living covered by thick cloud; antidepressants helped the clouds to clear and the Priestly Blessing's words once again to come true, God's face shining through.
- 16 May we take this opportunity to celebrate our own agency, our own power to change our own and our fellows' lives for the better, and our ability to intercede. May we bless and keep each other, shine our faces



upon each other and be gracious to each other. May we reach out to each other in tenderness, and give each other peace.

GKW 3.vi.22

¹ Numbers 6:24-26

² Sifrei B'midbar 41

³ Isaiah 60:2

⁴ Malbim ad loc

⁵ Midrash Shmuel 4:1, very loosely translated

⁶ Kyle MacNeill. "An interview with the guy who invented my antidepressants", *Vice* (6 February 2017): <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/eza5k7/meeting-the-maker-of-my-mind-an-interview-with-the-guy-who-invented-my-antidepressants>>