



SERMON SHAVUOT: BLANKETY BLANK

*Erev Rav Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Sunday 5 June 2022
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue*

- 1 My long-suffering Access to Judaism class are nearing the end of their course. As anyone who's gone through the process of learning Hebrew will know, one of the biggest Hebrew-reading traps for the unwary is the four-letter word Yud-hey-vav-hey. Sometimes it appears with vowels, sometimes it appears without vowels, but it's never ever pronounced as written.
- 2 In fact, of course, the tradition explains that we don't know how to pronounce it. The first of the Ten Commandments, which we read this morning, is an affirmation of faith that Yud-hey-vav-hey "is your God".¹ But the fact that we don't really know or understand the Name in that verse leaves what might be seen as a strange gap in the commandment.



- 3 Why don't we know the authentic pronunciation of the Divine name? A midrash suggests:² “It can be compared to the case of a king who threw a banquet, and invited guests. After they had eaten and drunk, they said to him: ‘Give us swords and spears so that we can sport with them.’ Instead, he gave them myrtle-branches. And they struck and wounded each other with them. The king said: ‘If this is what you did with branches, imagine what harm you would have done if I’d given you swords!’ Likewise, God said: ‘If this is what you do when you don’t know My real name, imagine what it would be like if I revealed it to you!’”
- 4 Now, difficult as it may be for us to believe that people partying in a national leader’s home have a tendency to get carried away and engage in reprehensible behaviour, I’d like you to take a look at this photo:³



- 5 What do we notice about it? One of the most prominent features, it seems to me, is the pixelated faces of the five or six people standing to Boris Johnson's right.
- 6 Anonymity is a fascinating concept. It can be desired or undesired. It can be a mercy or a punishment. It can be a simple expression of disinterest.
- 7 We find many anonymous characters in Tanach. Most of them are simply what the bible scholar Adele Reinhartz calls "bit-players..."



obscure, incidental figures who make only fleeting appearances in the narrative”.⁴ A random man in the desert helps Joseph to find his brothers,⁵ Job loses ten anonymous children,⁶ and, in a little-known detail of the story of the death of Goliath, before going out to fight the giant, “David left his things with the [un-named] man in charge of the left luggage”!⁷ Realistically, these people’s names are not specified in the biblical text either to provide realism – Joseph would not have known personal details about the man he asked for directions – or because the information would simply be irrelevant. Additionally, of course, it is not unusual for female characters simply to be described as someone’s wife or someone’s daughter.⁸

- 8 Occasionally, though, anonymity is more significant. A really significant example appears in the Book of Ruth, which we read this morning. The relative of Ruth, from whom Boaz sought to release her, is addressed as Ploni Almoni.⁹ Ploni Almoni is not a name; it is the biblical equivalent of Blankety Blank, So-and-so, or Joe Bloggs. The author of the biblical text took a very deliberate decision to



make clear that they were omitting to disclose this person's true identity.

9 Rashi suggests¹⁰ that this was because Ploni had no desire to take Ruth as his wife, as was his right and arguably duty; since he chose to distance himself from his family affairs, he would also have his name erased from the narrative.

10 But Adele Reinhartz has a wider theory behind anonymity in Tanach: "Anonymity launches us into an uncertain realm in which the stability of identity cannot be taken for granted. But anonymity does not suppress the personal identities of the anonymous; it does not prevent us from seeking them out and fashioning their individuality. The ways in which we construct anonymous character identity involve us in the text as more than innocent bystanders. In allowing ourselves the freedom to engage the characters, we not only construct their identities but also our own."¹¹

11 There is a massive gap at the heart of the Torah, indeed at the heart of Judaism. We do not know God's name. We cannot identify



our God by name. We fill this gap by throwing ourselves into the text and the story, by understanding the character of God each in our own way.

12 Yet the midrash about the banquet, and its strange similarity to partygate and the Sue Gray report, gives us another important message as well: nobody is absolutely trustworthy. There must always be some limits, some accountability. The Ten Commandments are the beginnings of Jewish accountability, and, as with the anonymous characters littering Tanach, we have spent all of the time since revelation using our best endeavours to fill in the gaps. Long may this continue: kein y’hi ratzon, may this be God’s will.

¹ Exodus 20:2

² Ecclesiastes Rabbah 15:3

³ Sue Gray. *Findings of Second Permanent Secretary’s investigation into alleged gatherings on government premises during covid restrictions* (Cabinet Office: 25 May 2022), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1078404/2022-05-25_FINAL_FINDINGS_OF_SECOND_PERMANENT_SECRETARY_INTO_ALLEGED_GATHERINGS.pdf>: 47.

⁴ Adele Reinhartz. *Why Ask My Name: anonymity and identity in biblical narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 19.

⁵ Genesis 37:15, 17



⁶ Job 1:2-3

⁷ 1 Samuel 17:22

⁸ Reinhartz, *ibid*: 22. See also [5782] GKW Serm 7.

⁹ Ruth 4:1

¹⁰ Rashi *ad loc*

¹¹ Reinhartz, *ibid*: 191.