



**SERMON R'EH:<sup>a</sup>**  
**YES! WE'RE ALL INDIVIDUALS!**

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 27 August 2022  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 “You’re all individuals,” shouted Brian. “Yes!” replied the crowd.  
“We’re all individuals!” “You’re all different!” “Yes! We are all different!” “I’m not...” said one man – only to be shushed by the throng.
  
- 2 That dialogue, from one of the most famous scenes in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*,<sup>b</sup> is an excellent satire of the herd instinct that sometimes binds us together. As with all good blasphemies, it raises a genuinely interesting question: where do we draw the line that divides individuals from groups?
  
- 3 Some groups are more than the sum of their parts; some are less. And we also have to factor in ‘groups’ that are, in reality, just a selection of people who happen to share a street, or a workplace, or



have something else in common, without really being united together in any sense.

- 4 Different types of social grouping have different levels of cohesiveness. A neighbourhood watch scheme is different to a political party, which is different to a cult.
- 5 And it's something rather cult-like which we encountered in our parashah this morning. Parashat R'eh sets out the rules for how to deal with an **עיר נידחת**, a subverted town, an entire community which has gone astray – been led astray – after other gods. It is subject to the most brutal of biblical penalties: complete obliteration. Everybody in it, including at least some of the innocent, is executed. All of their property is burned. All of the buildings are destroyed. The entire settlement will be reduced to a heap of dust, never to be rebuilt.
- 6 The Lubavitcher Rebbe, who I suspect has never before been quoted in a sermon alongside a Monty Python film, explains the



uniquely cruel nature of this punishment as follows: “Once the whole town, or a majority of it, has been subverted, the people are no longer individuals living in the same city. Rather, they become a **נייע מציאות**, a new entity, a collective.”<sup>c</sup>

- 7 A new reality. This is a powerful and meaningful phrase. It is the nature of a community that it is distinct from, and greater than, the individuals it comprises. BHPS is a reality separate from the individual lives of the people in this room. We are a **קהילה קדושה**, a holy congregation. We call ourselves **עדת שלום ורעות**, a community of peace and friendship.
- 8 But of course, these are just taglines that we choose to attach to what we are. In what way is our being a new entity separate from our components different from, or better than, the way that an idolatrous town is a new entity separate from its components?
- 9 The fact is, the subverted town belongs in the same category of ‘group’ as the riot, the terrorist organisation, the baying mob, the



pack of hunting animals. Those groups are entirely about strength and numbers. They don't especially care who makes up their numbers, so long as they have them and can use that extra muscle to their advantage. For an entire town to be led astray requires a Pied Piper-like mentality where nobody exercises any personal judgement, any individuality.

10 It comes back to the question of the individual. As the poet Alicia Suskin Ostriker put it, what is important is the combination of “a sense of personal identity and shared community”.<sup>d</sup> Membership of BHPS does not negate or take away anybody's individual identity.

11 On the contrary, as a synagogue, BHPS actively values, appreciates and seeks to retain and nurture everyone's individual identity. We depend on those individual identities for our wellbeing as a community. The mutual support that we offer to each other, the atmosphere of inclusion and welcoming, is partly about the might of the group – the statistics, the size of our membership database, the amount of money we have in the bank – but it's much more about



the who, the attributes and personalities and skills and hopes and dreams of everyone who makes up this community.

- 12 The rabbis, clearly uncomfortable with the barbarous law of the subverted town, wrote that it was never actually intended to be used. “None has ever existed,” they wrote, “nor will one ever occur in the future. So why is it written in the Torah? So that we can learn from the matter and gain a reward.”<sup>e</sup>
- 13 Hopefully the reward we can gain, at least this year, is a recognition of the power of the group – both for good and for evil – and an appreciation for the way that BHPS is a beautiful and holy fusion of the personal and the collective, taking the best of both to build something sacred. I am truly excited to be joining this journey with you. **בן יהי רצון**: may this be God’s will.

<sup>a</sup> Deuteronomy 13:7-19

<sup>b</sup> *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, directed by Terry Jones (1979: HandMade Films).

<sup>c</sup> Likkutei Sichot 9, R’eh 2: p 109. With thanks to my mum for help with Yiddish translation...



<sup>d</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker. *The Nakedness of the Fathers: biblical visions and revisions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994): 160.

<sup>e</sup> t.Sanhedrin 14:1