



SERMON CHAYYEI SARAH:^a RING IN THE NEW

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 19 November 2022 – Harry's bar mitzvah
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 There is a synagogue where they have a custom of parading the scroll around the sanctuary; that's not so unusual. But they also have a custom that whoever is holding the scroll during its procession bows at the knee when they reach the halfway point of the room. That is very unusual. Why do they do it? What is the religious origin of inserting an extra bow into the Torah service? Well, it turns out, there is none. The truth is that the synagogue used to meet in a different building, where there was an archway halfway down the room, and the Torah wouldn't fit under it unless its carrier bent at the knee. But people just assumed that was the tradition, and kept it going even in a new building with no arch.^b
- 2 That's an example of a 'tradition' that emerged naturally, even if accidentally. Judaism is full of such things: practical concerns or arrangements gradually, over time, evolve into 'just the way we do



things'. This causes an enormous problem for traditional rabbis who like to pretend that Judaism has been constant and unchanging for thousands of years.

- 3 For example, in last week's Torah portion, Abraham welcomed some guests into his tent, and fed them beef with milk curds.^c Rather than crediting him with inventing the cheeseburger, this passage alarmed the rabbis of old, because how could they convince the Jews of their generation to avoid mixing milk and meat when it says, right there in the Bible, that the great Abraham did exactly that?! Well, they came up with a contrived and implausible explanation that Abraham actually served a dairy course followed by a meat course, with a sufficient gap between them to satisfy medieval standards of kashrut.^d
- 4 While we, as Progressive Jews, have the luxury of being able to say that the Torah records the human experience, and that of course Abraham served meat and milk together at the start of Genesis,



because the commandment not to do so didn't emerge until towards the end of Exodus, our ancestors were more constrained.^e

5 The American theologian Judith Plaskow describes the rabbis' approach as "contemporary practice being projected back into earlier periods so that the chain of tradition can remain unbroken". She continued: "The links between past and present were felt so passionately that any important change in the present had to entail a new understanding of history."^f

6 But sometimes it happens the other way around, and the past gets projected into the future!

7 Harry, this morning, you read to us – extremely well – the story of Rebekah receiving her first gifts from Abraham's family. One of them was a gold ring that weighed in at **בְּקֶעַ מִשְׁקָלוֹ**, half-a-shekel.^g That phrase only appears in one other place in the Torah: describing the half-shekel tax that each Israelite had to pay into the communal pot.^h



- 8 The 14th-century Torah commentary called the Ba'al ha-Turim, which is full of anagrams, acronyms and other forms of wordplay, draws a direct link between these two appearances of the half-shekel. Abraham chose the weight of the ring he would give his daughter-in-law, suggests the Ba'al ha-Turim, "as a hint that her future descendants would merit to be part of the Israelite people and paying the half-shekel tax".ⁱ
- 9 In other words, the gift of jewellery was not just a gift of jewellery. It laid the seeds of a custom yet to be born: the half-shekel tax that symbolised true membership of the Israelite nation. Moreover, it allowed Rebekah the true gift of knowing that she was not merely the inheritor of a tradition, but that she would be the progenitor of a tradition. She was in the middle of the chain, no longer just its youngest and newest end, but a key link between the world that had been and the world yet to come.
- 10 When you wrote to me, Harry, you said you found the journey towards bar mitzvah to be meaningful because it shows that you're



part of a chain of generations before you. And you're quite right.

But also, never forget that you're also part of a chain of generations after you.

11 Today you qualified as a bar mitzvah, as a son of the commandments, and became an adult member of the Jewish people. And for a split-second you were the newest adult member of the Jewish people. But that split-second will have passed by now: someone else will have just finished their bar mitzvah service in some other synagogue in some other city, and you're now in the middle of the chain.

12 We wish you **מזל טוב** – and we look forward to seeing the Jewish life you build for yourself in the years to come!

^a Genesis 24:10-25

^b Rabbi Jonathan Romain. *Confessions of a Rabbi* (Hull: Biteback Publishing, 2017): ebook edition, ch 8.

^c Genesis 18:7-8

^d Da'at Z'keinim to Genesis 18:8

^e Exodus 23:19



^f Judith Plaskow. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a feminist perspective* (New York: Harper, 1990): 30-31.

^g Genesis 24:22

^h Exodus 38:26

ⁱ Ba'al ha-Turim ad loc and to Genesis 24:22, based on Genesis Rabbah 60:6