



SERMON VAYEITZEI:^a **LISTEN**

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 3 December 2022
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 Just before the record-beating fraudster Bernie Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison, something rather special happened. The people he'd defrauded were given a chance to speak in court.^b A widow testified movingly about how hard her late husband – a respected doctor – had worked all his life, only to be shorn of their savings by Madoff's scam.^c Someone else explained how she was no longer able to pay for her children's college education.^d Someone else told the story of their disabled brother: the money his family had lost had been earmarked to provide lifelong care.^e
- 2 This was all part of a process called, in America, victim allocution. These victims were only able to attend and tell their stories thanks to the work of a law professor called Jayne W Barnard. Professor Barnard had long advocated for those who had been hurt by



economic crimes to be able to testify, for three reasons: “Firstly, it permits the victim to regain a sense of dignity and respect rather than feeling powerless and ashamed; secondly, it requires defendants to confront – in person – the human consequences of their conduct; and thirdly, it helps the court system to understand the serious harms – harms that go well beyond issues of money – that economic crimes often impose.”^f

- 3 The most important of those reasons, I think, is the first one. People have an innate need to be heard. People’s stories need to be listened to. It is only by communicating with each other – telling our own stories – that we can acquire and shape an identity for ourselves.
- 4 Listening skills, then, are amongst the most important qualities a person can have. It isn’t enough simply to listen: we need to reassure others that we are listening, helping them to feel heard. Listening must not only be done, it must be seen to be done.



- 5 In this morning's parashah, we see Jacob telling his story – the story of stealing a birthright (perhaps the first ever recorded economic crime...) and fleeing from furious Esau – to Rachel, and then, after that, to her father Laban. But the language the Torah uses is very careful, and very different. When it came to Rachel, we are told: **וַיַּגֵּד יַעֲקֹב לְרָחֵל**. And to Laban: **וַיִּסְפֹּר לְלָבָן**.^g
- 6 Both words mean something along the lines of 'tell' or 'recount'. Both, actually, are terms familiar to us: **וַיִּסְפֹּר** comes from the same root as **סֵפֶר**, 'book'. And **וַיַּגֵּד** comes from the same root as **הַגְּדָה**, 'haggadah', or, more literally, 'story'.
- 7 Yet there must be a difference. The Torah only uses two different words when it means two different things. A 19th-century commentator called the Malbim suggests a solution:^h the first word, **וַיַּגֵּד**, used for Jacob's conversation with Rachel, is for matters that "touch" the listener, stories that they want to hear. Whereas the second, **וַיִּסְפֹּר**, used for Jacob's conversation with Uncle Laban, is



for matters that do not interest the listener in any way at all. Laban, we are told, had no affection for Jacob whatsoever.

- 8 In light of this interpretation, it is easy to imagine the difference between these two modes of listening: Rachel is attentive, paying close regard to every word, digesting what she's been told and asking meaningful and helpful questions. Laban, on the other hand, doesn't really care about the goings-on in his relatives' household, nods and says "Mmmm" at random intervals, and has his mind on other things throughout the narrative. I almost picture him playing on his 'phone while pretending to listen!
- 9 But there's another little wrinkle here. The two different words are not different verbs for 'to listen'. That might make good sense, having distinct words for 'to listen attentively' and 'to listen inattentively'. In fact, the two words are different verbs for 'to tell'. Jacob is the subject of both verbs. Jacob, then, is telling his story slightly differently depending on how engaged his listener is.



10 And, in fact, this shouldn't be surprising. All of the benefits of being able to tell one's story – all of the benefits which Madoff's victims reaped by having their day in court – only accrue if the listening is genuine and active and focussed. A Laban-like attitude on the part of the judge would not only have been rude, it would have stifled the Madoff victims' testimony.

11 This parashah, then, comes to teach us that the ability to speak is worth less – even worthless – without the ability to be heard. May we go back to our lives reinvigorated with the desire to hear what others say, and, in turn, to be heard. כן יהי רצון: may this be God's will.

^a Genesis 29:10-21

^b Jayne W Barnard. "Listening to victims", 79 Fordham L Rev 1479 (2011).

^c Ibid: 1484.

^d Ibid.

^e Ibid: 1485.

^f Ibid: 1483, quoting an earlier article by the same author.

^g Genesis 29:12-13

^h Malbim to Genesis 29:13