



SERMON MIKKEITZ:^a WAKING UP FROM TWITTER

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 24 December 2022
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 As many of you will know, for many years I've been a prolific user of Twitter. But that's about to change.
- 2 Since 2011, I've found it an invaluable resource for finding news, hearing directly from interesting experts, connecting with the wider world, and, importantly in a synagogue context, connecting with congregants and potential congregants. I've lost count of the number of times someone's reached out to me on Twitter – having seen my name pop up in some conversation unrelated to Judaism – and said: “Oh, you're a rabbi? I'd like to find a Jewish community to join but I'm worried I won't be accepted because I'm gay/ my mum isn't Jewish/ I don't speak Hebrew/ whatever, can you recommend anywhere?”



- 3 To be fair, I've also found it infuriating, offensive, frustrating and needlessly time-consuming. There are parts of Twitter that are cesspits of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Holocaust denial, covid denial and general evil.

- 4 Social media giants like Twitter have always reminded me of a famous dispute between the school of Rabbi Hillel and the school of Rabbi Shammai.^b They spent two-and-a-half years arguing over whether or not it was a good thing that humanity had been created. Eventually they reached a compromise – it would have been better if humanity hadn't been created, but now we're here, let's try to make the best of it.

- 5 I think something similar could be said for the spicier corners of the internet: they provide a platform for a lot of wrongdoing, and inspiration for a lot of wrongdoing, but social media is now so closely ingrained in the way of the world that we simply have to do what we can to turn it into a tool for good. In our case, that may well mean presenting a strong and confident Progressive Jewish



voice in spaces that would otherwise be shorn of the benefit of our values.

6 But I no longer think that this analysis works, at least in the case of Twitter. And the reason can be summed up in two words: Elon Musk. Since Elon Musk bought Twitter at the end of October, things have gone very wrong. He's sacked almost half of his workforce – in many cases breaching their employment rights.^c And his arrival has undoubtedly emboldened those who promote hatred and intolerance: researchers found that in the first 12 hours after Musk's takeover, abusive tweets using the N-word increased by 500%.^d

7 Yet what is in some ways more alarming than these big things are the smaller things. Things that indicate Elon Musk's megalomania. His petulant decision to ban from Twitter anyone who criticises him.^e His offer to engage in single combat with Vladimir Putin.^f He is the very epitome of toxic masculinity (or should that be, toxic Muskulinity?) – as the columnist Arwa Mahdawi has observed:



“There could never be an ‘Elona’ Musk.”^g He only gets away with his ridiculous behaviour because he’s a man.

8 And that’s where Pharaoh comes into it. Pharaoh, as described in our Torah portion this morning, was absolutely an ancient Egyptian equivalent of Elon Musk.

9 Our parashah started with the words: “Pharaoh was dreaming.”^h The commentators note that this sentence is in the present tense: not “Pharaoh dreamt” but “Pharaoh was dreaming”. Rav Zalman Sorotzkin attached great significance to this:ⁱ “Pharaoh was dreaming all the time,” he wrote. “His whole life was one long dream. He thought that his people were created to serve him. We see that his ministers – the most senior people in the kingdom – were not responsible for such matters as education or foreign affairs, but instead they brought him liquor and cooked his meals. All his officials were there to fulfil his private interests, which were placed above matters of state. And nobody dared tell him that his dreaming was at the root of the people’s suffering!”



- 10 Living in a dream world is always bad. But it is especially bad for those who are in a position of vulnerability, when the dreamer is in a position of power. The ideal would be for society to wake the dreamer up and tell them some home truths. But nobody dared wake Pharaoh up, and in my case, there's nothing I can do to wake Elon Musk up. He's beyond my reach.
- 11 What is within my reach, though, is to leave him to sleep. He has dreamt that Twitter exists now solely as a platform for his own self-aggrandisement, and for the free promotion of hate-speech, and he has reached that conclusion without any regard for the suffering that his decision will cause. For my part, if I can't wake him up, I certainly won't prop him up. I no longer want to be part of his dream. My Twitter journey has been enjoyable and frustrating, hilarious and ridiculous, but it's now reached an end-point.^j
- 12 Professor Sandreo Galea, dean of the School of Public Health at Boston University, recently made a similar decision, to withdraw both himself and his school from Twitter. In a serious and



thoughtful article, he said: “Twitter is not essential, only free speech is. We can leave the former and continue embracing the latter. And that is what we will do.”^k

13 Society often lionises dreaming. ‘Follow your dream!’ ‘Dream of a better world!’ ‘You may say that I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one!’^l But today’s parashah is a salutary reminder that dreams can often be dangerous, especially if they take in, or fool, the one dreaming them into smugness and self-importance. Joseph’s dreams of superiority got him thrown into a pit.^m Pharaoh’s dreams of being a god resulted in his kingdom falling into disarray.

14 We need to be able to stand up to powerful figures who are lost in their own dreams. Only then can dreams be shared across the whole of society. **כִּן יִהְיֶה רָצוֹן**, may this be God’s will.

^a Genesis 41:1-14

^b b.Eirubin 13b



^c Clare Duffy. “Former employees suing Twitter speak out on Elon Musk’s ‘clumsy and inhumane’ layoffs”, CNN (8 December 2022): <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/08/tech/twitter-employees-lawsuits-elon-musk/index.html>>

^d Rashawn Ray and Joy Anyanwu. “Why is Elon Musk’s Twitter takeover increasing hate speech?”, Brookings Institution (23 November 2022): <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2022/11/23/why-is-elon-musks-twitter-takeover-increasing-hate-speech/>>

^e Shirin Ghaffary. “Elon Musk can’t take a joke”, Vox (16 November 2022): <<https://www.vox.com/recode/2022/11/16/23461217/elon-musk-twitter-fired-employees-free-speech-contradictions-joke>>

^f Jordan Mendoza. “Elon Musk challenges Vladimir Putin to single combat on Twitter: ‘stakes are Ukraine’”, *USA Today* (14 March 2022): <<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2022/03/14/elon-musk-putin-fight-ukraine/7036541001/>>

^g Arwa Mahdawi. “There could never be an ‘Elona’ Musk – women are held to far higher standards than men”, *The Guardian* (19 March 2022): <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/19/there-could-never-be-an-elona-musk-women-are-held-to-far-higher-standards-than-men>>

^h Genesis 41:1

ⁱ Oznayim la-Torah ad loc

^j But you can still find me on Mastodon: @rabbigabriel@social.oxgoad.page – <<https://social.oxgoad.page/@rabbigabriel>>

^k Sandro Galeo. “Reconsidering our School’s engagement with Twitter”, Boston University School of Public Health (13 December 2022): <<https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2022/reconsidering-our-engagement-with-twitter/>>

^l Some song from the LJY-Netzer Shiron

^m Genesis 37:5-24