



## TOWARDS A CROOKED RIGHTEOUSNESS


Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Wednesday 14 December 2022  
Liberal Judaism

- 1 On 14 October 2022, eco-activists from the Just Stop Oil campaign group threw tomato soup over Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* painting in the National Gallery.<sup>1</sup> The activists' Twitter account claimed that they had "ch[osen] life over art".<sup>2</sup> While none of us doubt the vital importance of climate action to the preservation of human life, the tweet doesn't really explain anything. Their motivation for throwing soup at a van Gogh remains wholly unclear – was it a protest against oil painting? Sunflower oil?
- 2 Critics of the protest would argue that such actions are, at best, pointless, and at worst likely to alienate potential supporters of eco campaigns. However, it is impossible to deny that the activists were sincere and genuine believers in their cause, and that they were willing to risk the most severe personal consequences – criminal prosecution<sup>3</sup> – in order to promote it.
- 3 Now, Judaism knows a thing or two about climate emergencies. And if there was one person in the whole of our lore who had the

<sup>1</sup> Damien Gayle. "Just Stop Oil activists throw soup at van Gogh's *Sunflowers*", *The Guardian* (14 October 2022): <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/14/just-stop-oil-activists-throw-soup-at-van-goghs-sunflowers>>

<sup>2</sup> Just Stop Oil. Tweet dated 14 October 2022: <[https://twitter.com/juststop\\_oil/status/1580883249228046336](https://twitter.com/juststop_oil/status/1580883249228046336)>

<sup>3</sup> Christy Cooney. "Just Stop Oil protesters charged with criminal damage to van Gogh painting", *The Guardian* (15 October 2022): <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/oct/15/just-stop-oil-protesters-charged-van-gogh-painting-soup-sunflowers>>



greatest opportunity to be an effective eco-activist, it was Noah. And yet he wasn't. At no stage in his story did he protest against God's plan to flood the world and drown all its inhabitants. What went wrong?


### ***Innocently righteous***

- 4 Noah was, we are told by Genesis, **אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדוֹרֹתָיו**. The JPS translates this as: “a righteous man, blameless in his age”.<sup>4</sup> That seemingly superfluous word **דוֹרֹתָיו**, ‘in his age’, at the end of the verse has always been slightly puzzling. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan takes it to be a mild criticism of Noah: he was considered righteous in his particular generation, but in any other generation – any less evil time – Noah would not be particularly special.<sup>5</sup>
- 5 It's possible, though, to be even more critical of Noah, and that is exactly the line taken by the 20th-century commentator Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin. His commentary *Oznayim la-Torah* was published in the 1960s and is by far the best commentary you've never heard of. It's shamefully little-known, yet full of the most beautiful and varied gems of learning.
- 6 Rabbi Sorotzkin interprets our verse completely differently. While everyone else takes it to say: **אִישׁ צַדִּיק**, a righteous man, comma, **תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדוֹרֹתָיו**, who was blameless in his age, it can also be read such that Noah was an **אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים**, an innocently righteous man. What does it mean to be ‘innocently righteous’?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 6:9

<sup>5</sup> b.Sanhedrin 108a. It is only fair to note that Reish Lakish takes the opposite view: if Noah was righteous in his generation, how much more praiseworthy would he have been in any other generation. But I find this rather less convincing.

<sup>6</sup> Oznayim la-Torah to Genesis 6:9




There are two ways of worshipping God. Firstly, the path of innocence: one who chooses this isolates themselves from everything except Torah and prayer, and does not engage with other people even for the purpose of bringing them closer to God ... Secondly, living life as a battle against wrongdoing. The righteous ones who choose this option go out and reprove evildoers to their face without fearing the consequences. Thus the phrase 'innocently righteous' denotes one who worships in innocent solitude, who does not confront the tribulations of everyday life.

Elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> he elaborates:

There is something quite remarkable about Noah's life: his complete lack of influence on the people around him ... Here we have someone who was the greatest of his generation, whose entire life was guided by his belief in God, which gave him the strength to swim against the current [of his wicked fellows], yet we find that he has not a single friend or student who was won over by him. This is extraordinary! ... A father, who knew how to raise and educate three upstanding children in an age of wickedness ... he must have been a teacher and a skilled mentor like no other ... so why didn't he manage to influence the people of his generation? ... We must conclude that Noah did not try to teach his contemporaries about God, or morality ... He would stay away from them and their misdeeds, seclude himself in his house, and worship God from there ... He lacked the courage to go outside and speak with the evildoers and oppressors, and to rebuke them, afraid that they would argue back ... After all, it is easier to worship God while resting in one's room, than to step into the shuk and wage a harsh war against the wrongdoers there.

- 7 This is a character assassination of Noah, but, I think, one that is eminently justified. There is something infuriatingly self-satisfied and holier-than-thou about his refusal to peer outside the bubble of his own, perfectly moral and upstanding, family. The irony he never understood, though, is that living in self-imposed seclusion from the real world, and turning one's back on the affairs of wider society, in fact disqualified him from being judged perfectly moral.

<sup>7</sup> Ha-Deah v'ha-Dibbur 2:23 (7th ed, pp 255-257, 264)

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- 8 As long ago as 1953, Rabbi Israel Mattuck, one of the founders of our own Liberal Judaism, wrote that “the knowledge of God includes a moral dynamism: it generates the power for righteousness”.<sup>8</sup> Noah was not dynamic and he exercised no power. He understood right and wrong. But he didn’t tell anyone. That was his misjudgement: he had deep ethical understanding but failed to use it in any sort of practical way. When you’ve got it, flaunt it!

### ***Jews in the shuk***

- 9 In contrast to Noah’s self-indulgent inaction, there are countless examples of Jews who have boldly stepped out into the public domain: into the shuk. Let us focus on two: one ancient, one modern.
- 10 Even before his revelation at the burning bush, Moses felt himself duty-bound to improve the lives of Egypt’s Hebrew slaves. A midrash<sup>9</sup> records three different ideas of how he might have gone about this:

Moses would see the Israelites’ suffering and weep ... There is nothing more demanding than carrying clay! So he would take it upon his own shoulders, and help them with their burdens [...An alternative –] he would see a heavy burden on the shoulders of a child, and a light burden being borne by an adult ... and he would leave his attendants and go and swap their burdens, while pretending that he was carrying out Pharaoh’s orders ... An alternative ... he saw that the Israelites never got any rest, so he went to Pharaoh and said: “If we do not allow the slaves even a day’s rest, they will surely die! But if we release them for one day a week, they will not die.” Pharaoh replied: “Go and do as you have suggested” ... Thus Moses invented Shabbat, to give them rest.


<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Israel Mattuck. *The Thought of the Prophets* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953): 82.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:27-28



- 11 These three alternatives denote hugely contrasting approaches to enacting social change. In the first scenario, Moses simply pitched in to offer direct, if limited, help to individuals. In the second, he used his institutional power (or purported power) to offer targeted support to those who were especially vulnerable. And in the third, he used his privileged access to decision-takers to create lasting change.
- 12 Yet what they all have in common is Moses discerning that the wrongness of slavery imposed on him an obligation to step outside the confines of his own life and take active steps to do what he could to ameliorate the conditions of the slaves around him. It was not enough that Moses himself did not keep or mistreat slaves; sitting idly by and feeling pleased with his own moral standards was not an option, all the more so given the power that he had, as a prince, to advocate for change. This is consistent with the Talmudic dictum: “When the community is deeply suffering, nobody may say: ‘I will go home, and eat and drink, and revel in the peace of my own life.’”<sup>10</sup>
- 13 The modern example is Helen Suzman. A Jewish politician born to a family of Lithuanian immigrants, she spent three decades as South Africa’s only anti-apartheid member of parliament. Famed for her sharp tongue and fearless pursuit of justice – in one debate, she told John Vorster, the Prime Minister, that he could only learn what it was like to live life as a black South African if he went to visit the

<sup>10</sup> b.Ta’anit 11a. See also b.Shabbat 54b: “Anyone who has the ability to protest the sins of their household and does not protest – they are accountable for the sins of their household. For the sins of their city [and does not protest] – they are accountable for the sins of their city. For the sins of the entire world – they are accountable for the sins of the entire world.”



black townships “heavily disguised as a human being”<sup>11</sup> – she spent her career enduring threats and misogynistic abuse.

- 14 Despite a secular upbringing, she freely ascribed her commitment to racial equality as stemming from her Jewish background: “My knowledge of the Jewish experience of persecution,” she wrote in her autobiography, “heightened my awareness of the evils of race discrimination.”<sup>12</sup>
- 15 Yet there were plenty of other Jewish South Africans, with the same ethnic history of persecution, who somehow missed the lesson about racial equality. Rabbi Ben Isaacson was in the middle of delivering an anti-apartheid sermon to his synagogue in Johannesburg when he was sacked on the spot (literally) by the congregation’s president, Percy Yutar, who later went on to be the prosecutor at the trial of Nelson Mandela.<sup>13</sup> Apparently he never got the memo! The official leadership of the Jewish community may not have been actively pro-apartheid, but quiesced in it and did not want to rock the boat.<sup>14</sup> In my view, this was unforgiveable – and in some ways even less creditable than Percy Yutar’s active support for apartheid. At least he did what he believed in, vile as those beliefs were; most of the rest of the communal leadership sat quietly in their synagogues and stifled their moral instincts.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Suzman. *In No Uncertain Terms: a South African memoir* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993): 78.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid: 10.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Sackstein. “Rabbi Ben Isaacson – a maverick soul finds rest”, *South African Jewish Report* (10 December 2020): <<https://www.sajr.co.za/rabbi-ben-isaacson-a-maverick-soul-finds-rest/>>

<sup>14</sup> Gideon Shimoni. *Community and Conscience: the Jews in apartheid South Africa* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2003): 44.



## ***The opposite of innocence***

- 16 Neither Helen Suzman nor Moses sat on their laurels being innocently righteous. But what actually is the opposite of ‘innocence’?
- 17 The word used to describe Noah, תַּמִּים, comes from the root תִּמַּם, meaning ‘perfect’ or ‘blameless’,<sup>15</sup> but it means this in the sense of childlike innocence; alternative definitions of the same root might include ‘simple’, ‘innocuous’ and ‘artless’.<sup>16</sup> Do we actually want to be these things? Even setting aside ‘artless’, it’s hard to read “Here lies Rabbi Gabriel, he was simple and innocuous” as being a complimentary epitaph.
- 18 In a few biblical verses,<sup>17</sup> the opposite of תַּמִּים is given as עִקְוֵשׁ, typically rendered in English as ‘twisted’ or ‘crooked’. It may seem strange to adopt such a word as a positive, but then again it is seems strange that the Torah uses תַּמִּים, ‘innocent’, as a damning criticism.
- 19 And there is, after all, something intrinsically crooked – cunning or wily – about many forms of political engagement. Helen Suzman made extensive use of parliamentary procedure’s various quirks in order to get her points across despite the apartheid government’s attempts to silence her.<sup>18</sup> Moses persuaded Pharaoh to lighten the Hebrew slaves’ burdens under the pretence of making the workforce more efficient.<sup>19</sup> Whenever we go out into the shuk, to


<sup>15</sup> Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, sv תַּמַּם

<sup>16</sup> Jastrow, sv תַּמַּם

<sup>17</sup> Eg Proverbs 11:20, 28:18; Job 9:20

<sup>18</sup> Suzman, *ibid*: 113.

<sup>19</sup> Exodus Rabbah, *op cit*



confront the world as it is, we must be shrewd and keep our wits about us.

- 20 Liberal Judaism, I believe, demands that we become **צדיקים עקובשים**, crookedly righteous, combining the moral purity and unabashed virtue of Noah with the moral courage and tactical ingenuity of Helen Suzman.

### ***Political engagement as a religious act***

- 21 Rabbi Shoshanah Conover has written:<sup>20</sup>

We perpetuate humanity and holiness by humbling ourselves to one another ... We need ... people who can help us most by challenging us to live up to our Divine potential. Our intelligence and will must be employed in service of life, compassion, and righteousness. Our recognition of each other's equal value must compel us to act to ensure that this truth is represented in every society. We must use our power to amplify the power of others.

- 22 In other words, engagement with the world around us – leaving the seclusion of our homes and going out into the shuk to grapple with intolerance, inequality and oppression – is not just a moral duty but a religious act. It is just as much ‘doing Jewish’ as reciting the Amidah is ‘doing Jewish’.
- 23 A recent illustration of this principle is a lawsuit filed by three Reform rabbis in Florida challenging abortion restrictions as a breach of their right to freedom of religion. For Reform Jewish women, choosing whether or not to have an abortion is a religious

<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Shoshanah Conover. “B’tzelem Elohim: a Divine mandate to humanity” in Seth H Limmer and Jonah Dov Pesner (eds), *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority: our Jewish obligation to social justice* (New York: CCAR Press, 2019): ebook edition.





act. For Reform rabbis, counselling congregants in such a situation is a religious act. Such acts, runs the plaintiffs' persuasive argument, should be protected by the right to freedom of religion with the same strength as the right to wear a kippah or light Shabbat candles.<sup>21</sup>

- 24 The instinct to draw an artificial distinction between political acts and religious acts, though, rests not solely with the State of Florida – nor solely with Noah. All of us, myself included, have some tendency to distinguish between our political life, if we have one, and our religious life.
- 25 This is a tendency to be challenged. Judaism is, and is supposed to be, all-encompassing. We are inheritors of blessings not just for overtly 'religious' occasions such as putting on a tallit or blowing the shofar, but for all the other and varied experiences that life throws at us. There are b'rachot for seeing a tall person and b'rachot for doing a wee.
- 26 Why should they not be joined by b'rachot for us to recite when engaging with the political world, such moments being just as much emanations of the Divine as a trip to the toilet?
- 27 Voting is a religious act:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר נִתְּנָנוּ יְכוּלֵת בְּחִירָה.

*We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, for giving us the capacity to choose.*

<sup>21</sup> Complaint in *Pomerantz, Fisher and Rosenberg v State of Florida* (July 2022): <[https://jayaramlaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Complaint\\_1.pdf](https://jayaramlaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Complaint_1.pdf)>



28 Writing to an MP or councillor is a religious act:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר לִימְדָנוּ לַחֲשׁוֹב, לִכְתּוֹב וּלְקַנְטֹר אֶת  
גְּדוּלֵי הַדּוֹר.

*We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, for teaching us to think, to write, and to chide the powerful.*

29 Making a Freedom of Information Act request is a religious act:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא סִקְרָנוֹת וְשִׁתּוּפִיּוֹת.

*We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, Creator of curiosity and co-operation.*

30 Attending a protest or demonstration is a religious act:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ, „לֹא תֵעַמְד“.

*We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, You sanctify us by Your commandments, and enjoin us against standing by.*

31 I wrote all of these b'rachot, and you can make of them what you will. But what is absolutely certain is that Judaism has never come up with a b'rachah for sitting at home quietly and doing nothing. That simply isn't the Jewish way – and it particularly isn't the Liberal Jewish way.

## **Conclusion**

32 Just as Noah cannot claim to have truly known God without understanding the moral dynamism (in Rabbi Mattuck's words) that that knowledge required of him, nor can we truly claim to believe in our values if we treat them merely as abstract concepts but never seek to apply them to our fellow human beings.



- 33 LJV-Netzer is perhaps the part of our movement that is most active in this area: take, for example, its recent protest outside the inhumane Manston Camp detention centre. But it shouldn't just fall to our young people. As Liberal Judaism enters its next 120 years, I would like to see us going on more protests, filing more lawsuits, seeking more legislative amendments, writing more columns in the national press.
- 34 In many ways, Britain today is far more broken than it was in 1902. Granted, there have been many vital improvements: universal suffrage, a minimum wage, a Human Rights Act. Yet we now find ourselves in a nation marred by inequality, filled with bigotry, and heating up to the extent that life itself is under threat. It cannot be anything but incumbent on us, as Liberal Jews, to reach back into our tradition and pull out those teachings – and those stories – which will strengthen and embolden us to push for change.
- 35 Rabbi Sorotzkin said one more thing of interest to us:<sup>22</sup>

Noah's excuse for failing to reprove his contemporaries properly, and lead them in ways of righteousness, is that he simply chose a path of seclusion and innocence. But it is difficult to accept this. For while a private individual may choose such a life, a leader – one who was tasked in the womb with teaching their values, walking before the Divine and making known God's providence – may not.

Liberal Judaism is a leader. Since its very earliest days, in the womb of Lily Montagu's mind, Liberal Judaism has been the radical edge of our religion, going out into the shuk of the real world to promote our values and advocate for our principles. We have never been content to stay secluded indoors, muttering our prayers and then

<sup>22</sup> Ha-Deah v'ha-Dibbur, op cit (p 262)



shedding our Jewish identity at the door. Rather, we have been crookedly righteous, for 120 years – and long may it continue!

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