



SERMON B'HAR-B'CHUKKOTAI:ⁱ THE POWER OF THE MINORITY

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 13 May 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue – *Volunteers' Shabbat***

1 “Imagine if churches and other places of worship removed their time, money, creativity and energy from public life,” challenged the Bloom Review into how government engages with faith. “What would happen to food banks, and youth clubs, and parent and toddler groups? What would happen to the army of volunteer chaplains in prisons, universities and hospitals? What would happen to those faithfully doing their visits to the vulnerable and housebound? How much would it cost government to replace everything that people of faith do for free?”ⁱⁱ

2 It’s a frightening prospect, but the value ‘doing things for free’ doesn’t just manifest itself in the public sphere. It happens here in this building as well. Here’s one tiny example. Because there’s a good chance that our new baby will be born in a way that clashes with the High Holy Days – planning ahead is not one of my

strong points – Avodat ha-Lev and I have been carefully working through how to sort out paternity leave. And people have been falling over themselves to offer support and cover. That’s just as well: without those offers of help, there’s every possibility that our High Holy Days would have to be cancelled.

3 Of course, the High Holy Days roll around every year. A somewhat rarer occasion is that outlined in today’s Torah portion: the **יובל**, or jubilee, year. Twice a century, there would be a year of freedom and celebration. But it could be cancelled! The Talmud explainsⁱⁱⁱ that three things had to happen in order for the scheduled jubilee year to take place. Firstly, the return of property to its original owners; secondly, the release of slaves; and thirdly, the sounding of the shofar. It was a triple lock: without all three elements, the jubilee could not begin.

4 Rav Zalman Sorotzkin was baffled by this. In his Torah commentary,^{iv} he points out that while the authorities could guarantee the sounding of the shofar, the other two elements were in the hands of private individuals. He found it remarkable and

inexplicable that a tiny number of wrongdoers could, by digging their heels in and simply refusing to release their slaves, cancel the jubilee year for everyone. After trying, somewhat halfheartedly, to find a loophole, Rav Sorotzkin conceded: “This matter will require much further study.”

5 Now, I don’t actually find it baffling at all. It seems to me that there’s a really clear lesson here: the goodwill of a minority of people is required in order for the community as a whole to enjoy good things. This principle applies throughout life and on many levels. One person’s failure to pick up dog-mess can spoil a park. One person’s decision to play loud death metal music at night can disrupt a neighbourhood. And so on.

6 This Shabbat, BHPS celebrates its volunteers – and our volunteers are another illustration of this principle. And a better illustration, indeed, involving neither dog-mess nor death metal. Our volunteers are a minority of our members: a very large and significant minority, but still less than half. And without you, we would have to cancel the synagogue. Without security volunteers,

we simply couldn't open the building. Without lay service leaders, we couldn't offer a full programme of Shabbat services every month. Without our pastoral care group, we would be unable to call ourselves a compassionate Jewish community. Without our meet-and-greet team, visitors would feel alienated and unwelcome and they'd go elsewhere. Without Karen, our entire operation would grind to a halt.

7 All of these people – not to mention our education team, green team, library team, and many more – are depicted in the Torah as the minorities with the power to cancel the jubilee year. You, our volunteers, have that power, but choose not to use it, and instead, you give your time to keep BHPS going. But why? Why do people give their time? As with all forms of altruism, it can seem unfathomable.^v Why would people do something for other people, for free, from which they themselves don't benefit?

8 Well, firstly, of course, it isn't true to say that volunteers don't benefit. A member of our security team will be on duty every so often, but the rest of the time, thanks to their colleagues, they

have a synagogue available which they can enjoy. But the benefits of volunteering go deeper than that. It provides social connection. Company. Activity. Even exercise!

9 The Israeli professor Debbie Haski-Leventhal has observed^{vi} that having a religious background significantly increases the chance that a person will volunteer. “Religious affiliation,” she says, “increases a feeling of belonging, a psychological sense of community, and the visibility of the voluntary acts of other members. The more that a person has a collective identification with others, the more she or he will volunteer.”

10 The word **יובל** comes from a Hebrew root meaning ‘to bear along’, ‘to bring forward’.^{vii} That is precisely what our volunteers do for us. We take this opportunity to thank you for the work that you do and for the example that you set – and may you long continue, and grow in number and strength. **כֵּן יִהְיֶה רָצוֹן**, may this be God’s will.

ⁱ Leviticus 25:8-21

ⁱⁱ Colin Bloom, *Does government 'do God'?: an independent review into how government engages with faith*, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (26 April 2023): <<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-faith-engagement-review-call-for-evidence>>

ⁱⁱⁱ b.Rosh Hashanah 9b

^{iv} Oznayim la-Torah to Leviticus 25:11

^v Debbie Haski-Leventhal, "Altruism and volunteerism: the perceptions of altruism in four disciplines and their impact on the study of volunteerism", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 39 (2009): 271-299.

^{vi} Ibid: 283.

^{vii} BDB sv יִבֹּל