



SERMON B'HA'ALOT'CHA:ⁱ IMAGINATION

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 6 May 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue - *Library Shabbat***

1 One summer evening about ten years ago, I was struggling to induce a dormitory full of 8-year-old boys on LJY-Netzer's summer camp Kadimah to say goodbye to a busy, fun-packed day, and get some sleep. I asked everyone to go round and say what their bedtime routine was at home. One child said that they liked to read scary stories before bed. "Does that help you relax?" I asked. "No," they replied, "it helps me get imaginative."

2 Leaving aside scary stories' dubious potential as a soporific, it's beyond question that books do help us to get imaginative. Books, fiction or non-fiction, have a remarkable power to liberate. Books can be a form of escapism, allowing a reader to enter a world beyond the one in which their real life is constrained. Books can empower

the reader to imagine a better, freer world, inspiring them to fight to improve their own society. Books can motivate readers to travel, to move on, to dream.

3 That is no doubt why books get banned, not just in the past but in our present. It may be true that, these days, when a book gets banned by, say, an American public library district, it goes viral and its sales increase, its impact is still limited. As the author Elana K Arnold has said: “In a library, kids can stumble across something they didn’t know they needed until they picked it up and read it. But if something is missing, they don’t know. It’s not there. It’s just a quiet disappearance.”ⁱⁱ

4 People who don’t have the opportunity to browse a library, and the corresponding chance to read widely and trigger their imaginations, are impoverished.

5 In this week’s parashah, we read about the Israelites’ craving for meat in the wilderness, at a time



when they had nothing but manna to eat. Yet there is a rabbinic tradition that manna would, in fact, appear, feel and taste like any food that the eater wanted.ⁱⁱⁱ This feels like a contradiction. Why were the Israelites whinging about their restricted diet, when they had no shortage of manna which would, effectively, turn into meat at will?

6 Rav Zalman Sorotzkin explains: “Those grumbling about lack of meat had no real complaint, because if they wanted to taste meat they could do so: they could find its taste within the manna.”^{iv} In other words, this mob’s issue was that they lacked imagination. When they sat down to a meal of manna, they did so grumpily, telling themselves that they would not enjoy it and that it would be no substitute for the meat they craved. If only they had approached it with minds open to the imaginative potential of a miracle that could turn into any foodstuff, the whole stand-off described in this morning’s parashah need never have happened.



7 Today, BHPS is taking a moment to celebrate our library. Our library allows us to do what the manna did: create something out of nothing using just our minds as a vehicle.

8 It lets us eke out a space for ourselves where we are: mid-way between past and future. It helps us to be rooted, and it helps us to be radical. The books on its shelves enable us to relive tastes and experiences from our people's past, and they enable us to project those tastes and experiences onto our aspirations for the future. You won't find meat in the library, but you'll find books about meat. You won't find prophets, but you'll find books about prophets. You won't find love or grief, but you'll find books about love and grief.

9 The 2nd-century rabbi Yosei ben-Yo'ezer used to say: "Let your house be a meeting-place for the sages."^v But Yosei ben-Yo'ezer is no longer with us. We can't invite him into our synagogue for a meeting. Or can we? Yosei ben-



Yo'ezer was also unlikely to drop into synagogues in 19th-century Lithuania, yet there, the great Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin observed: "Although our teachers' souls rest on high, their works are still with us. By virtue of the books on our shelves, our houses become meeting-places for the sages."^{vi}

10 Upstairs, in this ordinary-looking building in Hove, Moses Maimonides and Golda Meir cohabit; Anne Frank is just a few feet away from Spinoza; and Sigmund Freud engages in dialogue with Shimon bar-Yochai.

11 Our library empowers us to meet people who are far-away, and people who are long-dead. By opening its books, you'll be bringing to life not only the world in which the author lives or lived, but the world in which the author's imagination and soul lived. Your imagination will revive both. כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.



ⁱ Numbers 11:4-15

ⁱⁱ Tovia Smith, “Plot twist: activists skirt book bans with guerrilla giveaways and pop-up libraries”, *NPR* (23 March 2022): <<https://www.npr.org/2023/03/23/1164284891/book-bans-school-libraries-florida>>

ⁱⁱⁱ See eg Sifrei B’midbar 87

^{iv} Ozneyim la-Torah to Numbers 11:5

^v m.Avot 1:4

^{vi} Ruach Chayyim *ad loc*

