



SERMON KORACH:ⁱ RUNNING WHERE AND WHY?

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 17 June 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue – *bar mitzvah* of Davey**

1 Brighton and Hove City Council recently advertised for lifeguards to staff the beach this summer. Every year, Brighton's lifeguards save around 40 lives, and help more than 130 people who are in danger.ⁱⁱ

2 Of course, while these people get paid to hang out on the beach all summer, they are in fact quite extraordinary individuals. They have to have the unusual quality of wanting to run towards danger, not away from it. Any risk from a hazardous rip tide to a jellyfish calls them forwards.

3 Now, some people have the same temptation – to run towards danger – but for other reasons. They might be totally irresponsible and sense a potential thrill. They might be a rubbernecker, excited to see the drama of someone in trouble. They might have a vague intention to be helpful, but be so

untrained and unqualified that they end up making the situation worse or getting in the way of the professionals.

4 Dr Pat Bennett argues that there is a difference between bravery and courage. “Whereas ‘brave’ has its roots in Middle French and Italian words meaning *wild* or *savage*,” she observes, “‘courage’ comes from the Latin *cor*, meaning *heart*.”ⁱⁱⁱ It takes a certain kind of bravery to rush towards a dangerous situation, but true courage is doing so for the right reason: using one’s heart to feel compassion for a fellow human in distress.

5 In the Torah portion which Davey read so fluently this morning, we heard about the punishment of Korach and his followers, who were swallowed up by the earth. But then the Torah tells us^{iv} something strange: כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר סָבִיבֵיהֶם נָסוּ לְקָלָם – *all the surrounding Israelites fled to their cries*. ‘Fled to’ is a very unusual expression.^v We flee from, not to. Especially sudden sinkholes in the ground: we especially, and urgently, flee from



those. But the Torah very definitely says that the Israelites fled to those being swallowed up.

6 It's possible for us to imagine various reasons why the Israelites might have done that very unusual thing of running towards danger. They might have simply wanted to help, or rescue, the victims, who, whatever their crimes, would have been friends and relatives. They could have been supporters of Korach, who was, after all, arguing for equality in the running of the community. Running forward may even have been an act of protest against what was seen as an unfair punishment.

7 On the other hand, maybe they ran towards the disaster scene in order to gloat, jeer and sneer. Or to get a cheap, ghoulish, thrill. Or out of a fear of missing out on witnessing something extraordinary. Perhaps they wanted to learn lessons, so that they, themselves, might be sure to behave in a way which would not anger God.



8 Working out the reasons why people do things can be complicated – and the more unusual the thing, the harder it is to explain. Davey, you’ve done something stupendously unusual this morning, and indeed over the last couple of years. You’ve combined your usual life, that of a modern British teenager, with learning and practising ancient Hebrew.

9 But the fact is, you’ve run towards your bar mitzvah. It’s not something you’ve just done to please your mum or to get presents. You’ve taken it seriously, you’ve been so responsible about your learning, and, above all, you’ve confidently stood in front of a large congregation today to showcase your success. In doing, so you’ve displayed real courage: your heart has been in it, and everybody who’s here today can see that.

10 Today’s haftarah was Psalm 47. We chose it because it was, apparently, written a dozen generations later by the descendants of Korach. How did the descendants of such a pariah come to compose such an important part of the Bible? Come to



that, how did they escape the hole in the ground, since your Torah portion, Davey, said that Korach “and his household and his people” were swallowed up?^{vi}

11 Well, maybe his children were rescued by those who ran towards the scene of the disaster. And the Israelite lifeguards who ran towards danger helped build the future of Judaism: without their courage, there would be a long gap in the Book of Psalms.

12 You too, Davey, have run towards a challenging situation, and you too, Davey, are helping to build the future of Judaism. Your bar mitzvah places you into a long, long, long chain of tradition, and we wish you **מזל טוב**.

ⁱ Numbers 16:20-16:32

ⁱⁱ Brighton and Hove City Council, “Job details: seasonal beach lifeguard” (1 June 2023): <https://web.archive.org/web/20230613170740/https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/jobs/job-details?job_id=33748>

ⁱⁱⁱ Pat Bennett, “Courageous space”, *Spirituality of Conflict* (11 April 2020): <<https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/readings/244/holy-week-2020-holy-saturday>>

^{iv} Numbers 16:34

^v See eg Kli Yakar, *Oznayim la-Torah ad loc*

^{vi} Numbers 16:31

