



SERMON HA'AZINU:ⁱ GROWING UP

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 23 September 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue – *bat mitzvah of Saffron***

1 Whenever my mum pours me a drink, she only ever pours me half a glass. This is a habit she got into when I was a toddler – less in the cup means less for me to spill if I started messing around – and, for some reason, she can't change now.

2 And to this day, I never ever developed the skill of drinking whole cups of liquid without spilling them.

3 OK, that's not true. But the importance of letting children and young people make mistakes – as a way of boosting their self-identity, promoting their growth and development, and as a form of education – is undoubted.

4 In Saffron's Torah portion, we read God telling the Israelites: "*I will hide My face from [you]. And I will see how that turns out for [you].*"ⁱⁱ That line is often understood as a threat: 'OK, fine, let's wait and see how you manage on your own!' – or even: 'You think you can manage without Me, let's see how you do without My help!'ⁱⁱⁱ

5 Yet as threats go, it's a particularly petulant, whining sort of threat. It sounds like what a frustrated IT helpline assistant would say to a headstrong customer, not like a serious part of the great theological give-and-take between humans and their God.

6 And, in fact, there are other, more positive, and, I think, more persuasive, interpretations out there. An 18th-century Sephardic Torah commentary, Me'am Lo'ez, suggests that the second sentence of

ⁱ Deuteronomy 32:18-30

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 32:20

ⁱⁱⁱ See eg Chizkuni *ad loc*

the verse – “*I will see how that turns out for [you]*” – isn’t an example of Divine sarcasm but an example of Divine care.^{iv} In other words, although God is warning the Israelites that they are about to lose some of their miraculous support (“*I will hide My face*”), the covenant is not going to be shattered altogether. Rather, God is still going to be keeping an eye out for them, watching over them, and overseeing their progress.

7 The Israelites in this parashah are the descendants of the last generation who slaved in Egypt. Many of them would have been children, and even those who were older, would have been childlike in many ways. They had never needed to exercise any sort of responsibility; never needed to organise their own lives; never needed to grow food; never needed to administer a government. But, although like children, they were on the cusp of adulthood: on the verge of entering the Promised Land wherein the Israelite people would reach maturity and liberty.

8 And as children grow up, what do we give them? More responsibility and more freedom. We don’t treat our offspring exactly the same from the ages of nought to 18 and then, suddenly, pack them off to university with a hurried goodbye. No, it’s a transitional process. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires parents to act “*in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child*”.^v Priscilla Alderson, a professor of childhood studies, argues that this is a powerful concept which should be interpreted in “*quite emancipating ways: as children gradually become more competent and independent, there is a dwindling need for adult control*”.^{vi}

9 Children gradually get to make more choices the older they grow, and, once they become adults, they continue to receive love, support and, let’s face it, funding, from their parents. And, indeed, they continue to receive half-full glasses of orange juice. Loving parents always, eventually, reduce the support they offer to their

^{iv} Me’am Lo’ez *ad loc*

^v United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, art 5

^{vi} Priscilla Alderson, *Young Children’s Rights: exploring beliefs, principles and practice* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000; 2nd ed, 2008): 87. Prof Alderson attributes her use of word ‘dwindling’ to the judgment of Denning MR in *Hewer v Bryant* [1970] 1 QB 357 (CA).



children, and by doing so allow their children to develop their own identities. But the parents also watch out to see what happens.

10 Saffron, you may be turning 13 rather than 18, but there is no question that today marks another step on your journey towards independent adulthood. Your parents' need to control you has dwindled. (Sorry, Cheryl and Toby.)

11 When you wrote to me, you told me that you're looking forward to becoming a Jewish adult and to the ability that comes with it to take your own decisions. And that's a very valid and important part of the process you've just undertaken.

12 But as we've said, that process isn't binary, it's a spectrum, and there's no doubt at all in my mind that you are already making your own decisions about Jewish life. Becoming bat mitzvah is a choice. There is no force on this earth that can compel a pre-teen to learn Biblical Hebrew over a period of two years, and then recite it in public. Saffron, you embraced that challenge by your own decision.

13 God, meanwhile, like your parents, kept an eye out to see how you'd get on. And how well you fulfilled the trust placed in you. We wish you מזל טוב!

