



SERMON KOL NIDRE: RESIST!

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Sunday 24 September 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 One of the joys of having a toddler is that I can inflict on him some of my own favourite pieces of classic children's television. Omri and I have been working our way through old episodes of *Sooty*; *Chucklevision*, which he thinks is called *Picklevision*; and *Arthur*. For those who don't remember *Arthur*, it's an American cartoon series about a group of 8-year-olds – who are all animals. (It's never really explained why they're all animals, but there we are.) One of the characters is Francine, who, as well as being a monkey, is Jewish.

2 One episodeⁱ is set on Yom Kippur, when Francine is determined to fast, despite being a young child, so as not to be outdone by her older sister. And in many ways, that stubbornness makes her even more of a Jewish character. We can't characterise her motivation as strictly religious, but her sheer obduracy in 'doing Jewish' in the face of insurmountable odds has echoes throughout our history.

3 The Machzor is full of inspiring stories of spiritual and emotional resistance. There's the story of Rav Nachman of Bratslav, refusing to give in to despair on hearing reports of antisemitic violence.ⁱⁱ The story of the shipwrecked exilee from Spain, who, on losing both his children, cried out to heaven that he would stubbornly cling to his Judaism no matter what.ⁱⁱⁱ The story of the Jewish community of Mainz, who chanted *Aleinu* as they were led to the slaughter.^{iv} The story of Rabbi Yehudah ben-Bava, who gave his life to ordain a group of young rabbis as the Romans closed in on him.^v I could go on.

ⁱ Alan Neuwirth (writer), *Arthur!* series 12 episode 1a, "Is That Kosher?", PBS (6 October 2008).

ⁱⁱ *Machzor Ruach Chadashah* p 321.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*: 320.

^{iv} *Ibid*.

^v *Ibid*: 319.

4 Resistance takes many forms. Even in those four examples, we see resistance against temptation, resistance against God, resistance against oppressors and resistance against unjust laws. We can resist temptation. We can resist our own darker sides. We can resist illness or suffering. We can resist rivalrous siblings. We can even resist the inevitable!

5 Repentance is itself a form of resistance. When we take time to reflect, to look back, to look within, and to atone, we are resisting against what would otherwise be a mindless drift through life. What we are going to do, together, over the coming day, takes real willpower and real courage. Ultimately, we seek to be steadfastly ourselves, in the face of our last year of deviating from being the best we can be.

6 First, we need to identify what, or who, our true self is. What are the values we believe in? For what behaviours do we wish to be remembered? And then, we need to identify a path back to that true self.

7 Like any good set of Ikea instructions, those two steps are deceptively simple and conceal a lifetime of effort, failed attempts, successes and setbacks, triumphs and frustrations. As Rabbi Ellen Lewis puts it: *“You cannot change what happened. You can change only your emotional relationship to what happened. And it might very well be the hardest thing you ever try to do.”*^{vi}

8 The story of the shipwrecked exilee from Spain deserves retelling in full:^{vii}

A shipload of [Jews exiled] from Spain, swept by the plague, was compelled to land on a desolate coast. Among them was a man, his wife, and two children. As they struggled on through the waste, the wife died. The man carried his two sick children, but at ... last he fainted from fatigue and hunger. When he awoke, he found his two children dead by his side. He rose to his feet and said in his grief: *“Sovereign of the universe, much have You done to make me forsake my faith. But know for a certainty that nothing You have brought, or may still bring, upon me will make me change. In spite of it all, a Jew I am, and a Jew I shall remain.”*

^{vi} Ellen Lewis, “Changing your past: reflections on forgiveness” in *Mishkan ha-Nefesh: machzor for the Days of Awe* vol 2 (New York: CCAAR Press, 2015), xxiv-xxvii: xxiv.

^{vii} As above.



He was absolutely right. God, omnipotent as God is, cannot stop us from being Jews. But we can stop ourselves from being Jews, just as we can struggle over what it means to be a Jew.

9 Francine Frensky ultimately gave up her fast, and had a mid-afternoon slice of pizza. But in the end, she didn't feel too bad about it. Like the shipwrecked exilee, Francine knew that whatever God threw at her – no matter how much pizza God sent her way on what she was hoping would be a fast day – a Jew she was, a Jew she would remain, and a lifetime of opportunity to prove it lay ahead of her. The lifetime she had remaining may have been longer than that of the dying father on the beach, but it only takes a second, under the right conditions, to assert or reassert our true selves.

10 The ultimate form of resistance is what we do – or can do – right here. Spiritual resistance against the randomness of the universe. Steadfast Jewishness in the face of temptation, hostility and adverse conditions. Jewishness in a religious sense, or Jewishness in an ethical sense; Jewishness in the music we listen to, or the food we cook, or the way we spend our time, or the causes we take up. Whatever is meaningful on an individual level and whatever brings us closer to our membership of this amazing, stubborn people. Regardless of what it is that pushes our buttons, Yom Kippur offers each of us – aged eight or 88 – an unrivalled opportunity to return to our true selves and to resist the world around which constrains us.

11 Tonight, our vows are no longer vows. Our promises are no longer promises. We have a chance to resist the people we were this time last year, and, indeed, this time last week. May we take it, and support each other to take it. גמר חתימה טובה: may we be inscribed in the book of life for blessing.

