



## **SERMON YOM KIPPUR AFTERNOON: SEA WHAT YOU'VE DONE NOW**

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Monday 25 September 2023  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

**1** The comedian Milton Jones has said: “*Never do any washing-up in your entire life. I’ve got three rooms full of the stuff. I’m just waiting for a close relative to die, then when a neighbour comes round and says, ‘If there’s anything I can do...’*”<sup>i</sup>

**2** Being taken advantage of is frustrating and hurtful. But it doesn’t just happen on a personal level, in the ‘do my washing-up’ sense. It happens to whole communities as well. One example that still sticks with me years later, was a moment at Prime Minister’s Question Time in 2019, when Jeremy Corbyn demanded that the government take stronger action on climate change. And what did Theresa May reply?<sup>ii</sup>

Before the right honourable gentleman stands up and parades himself as the champion of climate change ... he needs to apologise for his failure to deal with [antisemitism] in the Labour Party.

That is a deeply, deeply offensive reply. Antisemitism in the Labour Party under Corbyn was a serious issue, but it’s hard to believe that Theresa May really cared about the wellbeing of the Jewish community. If she did, she wouldn’t have used us as part of a wisecrack designed to get her out of answering a difficult, and entirely irrelevant, question. Using the Jews as a political football is wholly unacceptable.

<sup>i</sup> I can’t remember the episode in which this joke appears, and much as I’d like to cite it, I can’t justify spending hours and hours listening to comedy shows the week before Yom Kippur.

<sup>ii</sup> HC Deb 17 July 2019 c 826. A week earlier, she did exactly the same thing to evade questions about disability benefits, the Windrush scandal, and legal aid: HC Deb 10 July 2019 cc 308-309. See also HC Deb 16 January 2019 c 1155 (evading a question about police cuts); and HC Deb 5 September 2018 c 156 (evading a question about a no-deal Brexit).

3 Sometimes, though, Jews use Jews as a political football. In recent months, many in the Jewish community – including members of our shul – have joined Israeli comrades to protest against the dismantling of all checks and balances in the government of the State of Israel.<sup>iii</sup> The response from proponents of these so-called reforms, though, has all too often been to resort to extreme, life-or-death scenarios along the lines of, ‘You’re criticising Israel now, but you’ll need us one day. When the antisemites take over Britain, you’ll be begging us to take you in.’ Melanie Phillips called us “*traitors to the Jewish people*”.<sup>iv</sup>

4 Well, maybe we or our descendants will need to flee to Israel one day. Hopefully not, and it doesn’t look at all likely – especially not when we can lock ourselves into the shul – but fair enough, I accept that it’s a possibility. Yet... so what? Using our theoretical vulnerability to antisemitism to argue that we should support anti-democratic laws is insulting. And it’s a narrative in which we absolutely should not quiesce. Our vital interests are being instrumentalised against us, and that is not right.

5 The story of Jonah is full of people – and plants and animals – being instrumentalised against their interests. Jonah himself, of course, didn’t take the wisest decisions, but he was still treated pretty shabbily. (The educator Clive Lawton summarises his story as: “*Chapter one: talks to God. Chapter two: in the fish. Chapter three: spat out. Chapter four: pissed off.*”)<sup>v</sup> Then there are the sailors, who did nothing wrong at all yet had their lives placed in the most serious mortal peril. It’s hard to imagine that the fish had any real desire to store a living human in its belly for several days. The gourd was brought into existence for the sole purpose of dying shortly afterwards to teach Jonah a lesson. And the worm, likewise, was pushed around and told what to do as part of the same Divine ‘gotcha’.

<sup>iii</sup> See, generally, [5783] GKW Serm 19.

<sup>iv</sup> Melanie Phillips, “Israel’s protesters are the real threat to its democracy now”, *The Jewish Chronicle* (24 August 2023): <<https://www.thejc.com/lets-talk/all/israel%27s-protesters-are-the-real-threat-to-its-democracy-now-Hxk4kDp1OoRYOzo6LVpCQ>>

<sup>v</sup> Personal memory.



**6** The Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, in his book *Five Biblical Portraits*, reserves much of his ire for the sea. “If God wishes to punish or test Jonah,” he points out:<sup>vi</sup>

[T]he sea has no reason to offer its services ... Could it not argue with God: “Listen, Almighty God, I understand that I must help You test Jonah, but he is not alone aboard that ship! There are other people on it! And they are not participants in this game, are they? I understand that You might want Jonah to become seasick, but why them? I understand that You might want Jonah to sense death approaching, but why them? You want me to help You punish or at least worry Jonah – so be it! But do not expect me to deliberately frighten innocent bystanders!”

It’s a shame that the sea had to split an infinitive, but other than that, Elie Wiesel is quite right. The sea should have stood up for itself. So should the worm, and the fish, and Jonah himself.

**7** As it is, though, everybody in the story goes along, ultimately, with being instrumentalised. True, Jonah tries to flee, but he doesn’t speak up. And he ends up displaying a particularly nasty and malicious side to his character, demanding that the repentant Ninevites be smited solely to save his blushes. The fish is nasty, because it tortures Jonah. The worm is nasty, because it destroys the gourd. Everybody is spiteful, and acts spitefully in turn.

**8** Obviously Milton Jones’s scenario about washing-up is a ridiculous fantasy, but if it actually happened – if a bereaved neighbour did pull that trick – I think we would probably be extremely marked off, and express it, and then be made to feel guilty for doing so. Nobody profits when intelligent beings take advantage of each other.

**9** The fundamental theme of the Jonah story, I think, is that all are reprehensible and all are guilty. And all only became reprehensible, and guilty, as a result of having been slighted in their turn. Ultimately, somebody in this cycle of persecution and hostility has to take the moral high-ground and break the chain of evil. In the chain of evil in the world in which we live, that someone can be us. כן יהי רצון, may this be God’s will.

<sup>vi</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984): 141-142.

