



SERMON MIKKEITZ:ⁱ STRANGER THINGS

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 16 December 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

1 A couple of weeks ago, I was honoured to be invited to preach at St Nicholas of Myra's Church down the road from us.

2 Then I went home to tell Manuella about my experience. It was a special occasion for them, I told her, the first Shabbat of Advent. So I sat in a place of honour on the bimah, listened to a reading from Mark's Gospel and a haftarah from Isaiah, then – after they'd said prayers for those marking *yahrzeit* – I gave my *d'rashah*. Then there was some mingling at *kiddush*.

3 Now, Father Dominic might not recognise that description of his service, but it's a pretty accurate account of what happened. All I did was translate it into Jew-comprehensible language: and, indeed, I did it subconsciously really. Of course the raised platform at the front is a bimah. Of course their secondary scriptural reading is a haftarah.

4 The tendency to try to explain things in familiar terms doesn't just work in that direction. How many times have we explained to visitors to this synagogue that our prayer-books 'open from the back'? They don't open from the back at all: page 1 is, by definition, the front. But humans always have an instinct to understand ourselves by reference to the other, and to understand the other by reference to ourselves.

5 The theme of otherness runs through today's Torah reading. We read how *When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them, but he acted like a stranger towards them.*ⁱⁱ But there's something rather odd about that verse. וַיִּכְרַם – *and he recognised them* – וַיִּתְנַבֵּר – *and he made himself a stranger*. Two consecutive words, one after the other,

ⁱ Genesis 42:1-12

ⁱⁱ Genesis 42:7

and both have the same Hebrew root, ג-כ-ר. Yet they appear to have precisely opposite meanings: ‘to recognise’, and ‘to be a stranger’.

6 There are words like that in various languages. They’re called contradictanymy.ⁱⁱⁱ A good English example is ‘to dust’: it can mean removing fine particles (I need to dust my bookshelf) or adding fine particles (Prue Leith needs to dust the cake with cocoa powder). Similarly, ‘suspicious’: to exude suspicion (police officers are often suspicious by personality) or to attract suspicion (a few weeks ago we found a suspicious package on the doorstep).

7 וַיִּכְנַר and וַיִּתְנַכֵּר are often understood as being Hebrew contradictanymy.^{iv} But that isn’t the only possible reading. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a great 19th-century German commentator on the Torah, argued that there is no contradiction between ‘to recognise’ and ‘to be a stranger’ at all:^v

These are seemingly two opposites sharing one root. But only seemingly ... One who recognises something [or someone] separates it from its surroundings. They say: “*I recognise you as being strange.*” The more we recognise the characteristic signs of something, the more we are able to recognise its uniqueness. With each additional sign we commit to memory, we differentiate something more and more from other entities, from other genera, from other species, and, eventually, from all other individuals of its species. This is what it means to treat someone as a stranger: we separate them from everything else, and we see in them something special, something that distinguishes them from all others.

In other words, to recognise someone, they must, by definition, be a stranger. If we can’t see anything in them that makes them different to others, we can’t recognise them. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and so is strangeness and uniqueness.

8 Christina von Braun, a professor of cultural history, has observed that “[a]n ‘identity’ always emerges in dialogue with others. ‘Ethnicity’, as well ... has no existence apart from interethnic relations.”^{vi}

ⁱⁱⁱ Ben Schott, *Schott’s Original Miscellany* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002): 40.

^{iv} See eg Rabbi Jan Urbach, “Strangers to ourselves”, Jewish Theological Seminary (18 December 2020): <<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/strangers-to-ourselves/>>

^v Hirsch to Genesis 42:7-8

^{vi} Christina von Braun, “To see or not to see: the gaze and gender in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures”, in Ulrike Brunotte, Anna-Dorothea Ludewig and Axel Stähler (eds), *Orientalism, Gender and the Jews* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 230-242: 230. Internal citations omitted.



We can only define ourselves in relation to – or in distinction from – the other. To someone visiting our community from outside, our books do open at the back. When I heard Father Dominic read prayers for those “*at year’s mind*” of having lost a loved one, it was a yahrzeit.

9 Yet even though we understand, now, why these two meanings share a root, there is still a difference between the words וַיִּבְרַח and וַיִּתְנַבֵּר. וַיִּתְנַבֵּר is a reflexive verb: Joseph made a stranger of himself. Normally, we identify the other by assimilating signs and indicators until we can place them somewhere in our mental horizons. But Joseph wasn’t playing by the rules. He hid his identity. He deliberately rendered himself unrecognisable. He made himself a wall of artifice.

10 The verse we’ve been looking at seems very binary: either one is recognisable or one is, deliberately, unrecognisable. In fact, we strive to be somewhere in between the two. As Jews, we are different to other parts of society. Our language is different. Our services look different. Our customs are different. Yet none of these differences are ‘for the sake of it’. We’re not distinct for the sake of being distinct, but because it is, authentically, who we are.

11 And in understanding who we are, we can understand who others are as well. בֶּן יֵהִי רְצוֹן, may this be God’s will.

