



SERMON VA-YIKRA:ⁱ DIRTY MONEY

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 23 March 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 In the 1960s, the leadership of an un-named synagogue in the United States wrote to the Central Conference of American Rabbis to ask for advice:ⁱⁱ “A man known or reputed to be a gangster wishes to make a contribution to the [shul]. Should his gift be accepted?” The answer given was ‘yes’, primarily based on a teaching of Maimonidesⁱⁱⁱ that contributing to synagogue life is a mitzvah, and discouraging a sinner from carrying out a mitzvah only makes matters worse.^{iv}

2 I’m not wholly convinced by that argument, but in any case, such reasoning could not avail Frank Hester,^v because donating to the Conservative Party – or any political party – is not a mitzvah. So the question remains open: should the Conservatives return Hester’s donation?

3 Now, unlike the synagogue with the member who was “reputed to be a gangster” (I wonder if he helped out on their security team...), the Conservatives can legitimately point out that they didn’t know just how ghastly Hester was at the time. Although his disgusting racist attack took place some years ago, it only came out much more recently. So we might conclude that the situation that they now face falls squarely within the field of ‘unintentional sin’, a topic canvassed extensively in this morning’s Torah portion.

ⁱ Leviticus 4:32-5:7

ⁱⁱ Solomon B Freehof, *Current Reform Responsa* (New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 1969): 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ h. Tefillah 15:6

^{iv} Freehof, *ibid*: 54-55.

^v See eg Faye Brown, “Tories ‘have drawn a line’ under Frank Hester race row and should keep donations, Kemi Badenoch says”, *Sky News* (18 March 2024): <<https://news.sky.com/story/tories-have-drawn-a-line-under-frank-hester-race-row-and-should-keep-donations-kemi-badenoch-says-13097440>>

4 Even in the case of unintentional sins, the Torah calls for sacrifice. It is not enough just to shrug one's shoulders and move on, nor to announce, as Kemi Banedoch MP did this week, that one has unilaterally “*drawn a line*” under the episode^{vi} and thereby consider oneself cleansed of wrongdoing.

5 Transgressors are expected to offer a sacrifice not just for the sake of mutilating some animals, but to provide themselves with a tangible – and often pricey – moment and lesson of transition. Sometimes, the transgressor can, if poor, bring a smaller offering, but only in the case of those sins from which they did not profit.^{vii} If they sinned and did profit, even unintentionally, there is no doubt that they must disgorge themselves of their ill-gotten gains before they can even think about making atonement.

6 As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg has said in her excellent book *On Repentance and Repair*:^{viii}

Someone who refuses to be accountable for their actions not only leaves those first threads damaged, but also, without at least beginning to make an earnest effort to learn and grow, remains the same person who hurt others to begin with.

This idea aligns very closely with the Hebrew word for ‘unintentional’: *בשגגה*. The opposite of *בשגגה* is *בזדון*, which, although it is used to mean ‘intentional’, actually comes from a root encompassing ideas of arrogance, impudence, pride.

7 What I find fascinating about those two words, *בשגגה* and *בזדון*, is that we can imagine it being possible for a single act of wrongdoing to be both at once. It may have been *בשגגה* – unintentional – in its factual genesis, and yet the reaction of the perpetrator, when they find out about it, can almost convert it into something *בזדון*, flagrant, arrogant, maybe so problematic as to make it, in reality, morally indistinguishable from something done deliberately.

8 The government's reaction to the Frank Hester scandal exemplifies this. The excuses they are using to keep, and continue

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Leviticus 5:7 and Da'at Z'keinim *ad loc*

^{viii} Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: making amends in an unapologetic world* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022): 90.



profiting from, Hester's £15million^{ix} donation, are getting worse and worse. They're going to keep the money because they've "drawn a line".^x They're going to keep the money because Hester's apologised.^{xi} They're going to keep the money out of a sense of "Christian forgiveness".^{xii} They're going to keep the money because they are "one of the most diverse Governments in this country's history".^{xiii} They're going to keep the money because when Keir Starmer used to be a criminal barrister he offered legal representation to criminals.^{xiv} They're going to keep the money because Jeremy Corbyn was once leader of the Labour Party and allowed antisemitism to run rife.^{xv}

9 That last one is particularly important, because it reminds us that the Conservatives' leadership would never have accepted – would never accept – any of these excuses, were the boot on the other foot and it was another party was planning to keep a donation from a bigot. If Jeremy Corbyn had said he was offering "Christian forgiveness" to an antisemite, they would have pilloried him, and rightly so. If Humza Yousaf had had an anti-black racist in his ranks, but said it was OK because his cabinet was diverse, they would have ridiculed him, and rightly so.

10 It is impossible to characterise the government's approach to Frank Hester's donation, then, as anything but בודון. They are being arrogant. They are being impudent. They are acting pridefully and as if accountability is a foreign concept.

11 And that is where we come back to today's parashah. The Torah demands a sacrifice "when a person touches any impure thing".^{xvi} It's not the person's fault that the thing is impure, and it may well not be their fault that they touched it. But once they have touched it, they

^{ix} Catherine Neilan, "Exclusive: Tory party 'sitting on' further £5m from disgraced donor Frank Hester", *Tortoise* (14 March 2024): <<https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2024/03/14/exclusive-tory-party-accepts-a-further-5m-from-controversial-frank-hester/>>

^x Brown, *ibid.*

^{xi} HC Deb 13 March 2024 c 294

^{xii} Eleni Courea, "Gove: Hester remarks not extremist and warrant 'Christian forgiveness'", *The Guardian* (14 March 2024): <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/mar/14/gove-hester-remarks-not-extremist-and-warrant-christian-forgiveness>>

^{xiii} HC Deb 13 March 2024 c 297

^{xiv} *Ibid.*: c 292

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} Leviticus 5:2



are under an obligation to cleanse themselves. And if they choose not to do so, that, second, choice is not an unintentional sin, but an intentional one.

12 We need, and deserve, a government which adheres to the highest moral standards. The Book of Leviticus, if we can put aside all the gore, provides a powerful message for how wrongdoing and mistakes can be rectified. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

