



## SERMON CHOL HA-MO'ED PESACH:<sup>i</sup> I'M JEWISH AND I CAN WALK WHERE I WANT

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 27 April 2024  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

**As usual, this sermon contains my own views and does not purport to represent the position of anybody else, or of BHPS itself.**

**1**       *“I’m Jewish ... and I can walk where I want.”*

**2**       Last Friday, the Campaign Against Antisemitism released video footage of a Metropolitan Police officer threatening to arrest a man wearing a kippah for causing a breach of the peace by being “*openly Jewish*” in the vicinity of a pro-Palestine march.<sup>ii</sup> On the one hand, this was a concerning line to hear from the mouth of a policeman. On the other hand, the man in question was Gideon Falter, the chief executive of the Campaign Against Antisemitism, and I couldn’t help being a teeny bit dubious about the coincidence that such a thing should happen to such a person at just such a time as he had a video camera with him.

**3**       On Monday, these suspicions were, sadly, justified. A longer version of the video emerged.<sup>iii</sup> It showed Gideon Falter, accompanied by four bodyguards and a videographer,<sup>iv</sup> trying to walk straight through – perpendicular to – the pro-Palestine march. The police officer, quite politely, pointed out that wading through a demonstration, instead of waiting patiently for the march to pass, might not be a brilliant idea. He offered to escort Mr Falter to the other

<sup>i</sup> Exodus 12:1-13

<sup>ii</sup> Reemul Balla, “Police threaten to arrest ‘openly Jewish’ man yards from pro-Palestine march as his presence was ‘antagonising’”, *Sky News* (19 April 2024): <<https://perma.cc/VPG5-SD9H>>

<sup>iii</sup> “Sky News footage reveals new details of exchange between police and antisemitism campaigner called ‘openly Jewish’”, *Sky News* (22 April 2024): <<https://perma.cc/V5K3-7THM>>

<sup>iv</sup> Rivkah Brown, “Did an Israel lobbyist confect an antisemitism story about a Palestine demo?”, *Novara Media* (22 April 2024): <<https://perma.cc/Q8YV-BAFL>>

side of the road via a different route. But Mr Falter turned down this extremely reasonable offer, and then he uttered the immortal words: “*I’m Jewish ... and I can walk where I want.*”

**4** Just... no. It is shameful that someone who purports to be a leader of the Jewish community should behave in such a way and then released edited-down video footage which didn’t show anything like the whole story. At a time when the Jewish community is facing rising antisemitism and hostility, it only makes things worse, much worse, when a public figure comes out with petulant, entitled lines like: “*I’m Jewish ... and I can walk where I want*” – which are now spread, embarrassingly, all over the national press.

**5** It is far from the first time in our history that we have been surrounded by hostility, of course. And it is even far from the first time that Jewish people have foolishly rejected efforts to help keep them safe.

**6** In today’s Torah reading, we retell the story of the Israelites marking their doorposts with blood to keep themselves safe from the tenth plague. But a 19th-century commentator, the Netziv, asks<sup>v</sup> why the whole lamb’s-blood routine was needed at all, given that God, being omniscient, was perfectly capable of distinguishing between Israelite and Egyptian without help.

**7** The answer, he says, lies in the verse warning: *No person shall go beyond the threshold of their house before morning.*<sup>vi</sup> The lamb’s blood marking each doorway was to emphasise the importance of the Israelites staying indoors that night, in family groups, away from the Egyptians. Any Israelite foolhardy enough to go wandering around Egyptian areas of town, he said, would be punished by God.

**8** Importantly for our purposes, he explained why it was so vital for the slaves to follow the instruction to stay at home. It was, the Netziv said, a time of real tension, where emotions were running high, wrath easily kindled, and the threat of punishment never far away.

**9** In other words, God’s intention was to send a message to the Israelites saying: don’t push your luck! Bad things are happening,

<sup>v</sup> Ha-Amek Davar to Exodus 12:13

<sup>vi</sup> Exodus 12:22



everyone's on edge, and there's nothing to be gained by prancing about in front of the Egyptians, flaunting your plague-free status to them while they're in mourning for their dead firstborn. Saying, "*I'm an Israelite and I can walk where I want,*" would not provide any justification at all.

**10** The same goes for the pro-Palestine march. Emotions run high at any demonstration, especially one dealing with such viscerally divisive issues as the Middle East. The marches are an environment where anger flows close to the surface, and they are certainly not something to be messed with for the sake of it. And of course it is antagonistic and deliberately provocative for a well-known pro-Israel campaigner<sup>vii</sup> to cut through a pro-Palestine march, accompanied by bodyguards and a camera, trying to make the point that they can do whatever they like!

**11** By way of comparison, the Brighton Jewish community has been holding regular vigils for the Israeli hostages in Palmeira Square. Just think how upsetting it would have been had a Palestinian activist and five burly bodyguards barged their way through one of these vigils, wielding a camera. No disingenuous claim that they were simply trying to get from one side of the square to the other would assuage our distress at the disruption. The Campaign Against Antisemitism would certainly be unimpressed by the line: "*I'm Palestinian and I can walk where I like!*"

**12** In fact, the very notion of, "*I can do what I like,*" is a fundamentally un-Jewish idea. The Torah gives us 613 examples of where we cannot 'do what we like', and basic common sense provides countless more. A better creed would be the Talmudic dictum: "*A person must not stand in a place of danger and say, 'A miracle will save me.'*"<sup>viii</sup> Kal v'chomer, one must not create or exacerbate a place of danger through deliberately bellicose behaviour.

**13** Unfortunately, in the eyes of Gideon Falter and his Campaign Against Antisemitism, there is a genuine perception that

<sup>vii</sup> See eg Gideon Falter, *Twitter* (26 April 2023): <<https://perma.cc/RVQ7-ACH4>>; Charlotte England, "Free speech on Israel is under threat from groups conflating criticism of country with anti-Semitism, say academics", *The Independent* (1 March 2017): <<https://perma.cc/8NLD-SYEV>>

<sup>viii</sup> b.Ta'anit 20b



life for Jews in modern Britain is comparable to life for the Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt.<sup>ix</sup> Stunts like the one at the march fuel such a perception by providing so-called ‘evidence’ that this worldview is justified. That ‘evidence’ percolates through the press and social media, sowing fear and anguish, even when – as here – it is later exposed as a sham.

**14** In actual fact, on a scale of ‘Egypt’ to ‘Promised Land’, life for Jews in modern Britain most definitely flows with milk and honey. As Liberal Judaism’s own chief executive Rabbi Charley Baginsky has said, we must “*recognise that Jewish life in the UK is thriving: our synagogues are full and congregations vibrant*”.<sup>x</sup>

**15** Those of you who celebrated seder at home did so in freedom and safety. Those of you who came here, to an openly Jewish building, for seder, did so in freedom and safety. We even gathered in public, in a local park, for a matzah ramble, and we rambled for nearly two hours in freedom and safety. We’re Jewish and we can walk where we want!

**16** Let us remember all of our successes, and let no performative act of engineered victimhood deter us from celebrating every dimension of this זמן חירותינו, season of our freedom. בן יהי רצון, may this be God’s will.

<sup>ix</sup> See eg “Antisemitism barometer”, *Campaign Against Antisemitism* (2021), <<https://perma.cc/3322-RAHR>>, 20, warning that “[f]ewer than six in ten British Jews believe that Jews have a long-term future in the UK”.

<sup>x</sup> Lee Harpin, “Claims of ‘no-go zones for Jews’ in London ‘total and utter fiction’ says Shomrim president”, *Jewish News* (8 March 2024): <<https://perma.cc/9VV8-LV78>>

