SERMON TAZRIA-M'TZORA:[1]
A MIXTURE OF IT AND US

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 2 April 2022
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue

1 Take a look at this:

2 These photographs were taken by the Candian visual artist Kelly Jazvac. They show a form of material that she and the earth scientist Dr Patricia Corcoran jointly discovered in 2014.[2] It is a substance formed of plastic

particles drifting in the sea, which have, over time, combined with sand, rock and coral to become hard clusters. Named plastiglomerate, it is, essentially, "a new type of stone".[3]

3 Note that word: "stone", not "rock". Rock is an entirely natural material, so as Kelly Jazvac points out, this hybrid is more correctly termed stone.[4] Almost 2,000 years earlier, the Mishnah drew the same distinction:[5] a house of rock, סלע, is immune from the mysterious biblical disease about which we read this Shabbat, but a house of stone, אבן, can catch it. The difference is about processing: סלע is natural, unprocessed bedrock; אבן is what bricks or blocks are made out of.

4 When a house catches tzara'at, all of its component parts – stones, timber, plaster – are infected, and after demolition, the rubble has to be disposed of in a secure location away from human settlement.[6] This is because they are tamei. Tumah is that strange untranslatable word often unhelpfully said to mean 'impurity' or 'uncleanness'. A tamei brick can transmit its tumah to people, foodstuffs, cooking utensils… almost anything with which it comes into contact or with which it shares space.[7]

5 But the thing about untranslatable words is that any attempt to translate them is doomed. In fact, the rabbinic idea of tumah leaves us with a big mystery: did they understand it as real – physical – or merely spiritual?

6 I think we can only answer by concluding that umah is real (or, at least, the rabbis understood it as being real) rather than just some sort of spiritual status.[8] Right and wrong, forbidden and permitted: the rabbis were clear that these are just adjectives. Tumah, though, had or has a physical existence. The order of the Mishnah dealing with tumah feels almost scientific. Just like Newton's laws of motion explain how forces act upon an object, Seder Tohorot describes how tumah flows from one source to another: what size of hole it can pass through, what substances can and can't block its progress. This material forms not a law book but a physics book, albeit a form of physics that bears no relation to modern science.

7 Crucially, though, it's a <u>human</u> form of physics. Tumah only appears around human beings. Human sexual fluids. Human disease. Human corpses (and, admittedly, mermaid corpses, as we've discussed before).[9] Human cooking utensils, building materials, carts and tools. Tumah somehow knows the difference between a beetroot that fell into a river by mistake, in which it has no interest, and a beetroot that was deliberately washed in a river to make it fit for human consumption;[10] a

lump of unprocessed rock and a human building stone. Tumah is, then, man-made. Not directly: there's nothing I can do to snap my fingers right now and generate some tumah. But it only comes into existence through us.

8 Which brings us back to plastiglomerate. Because another common translation, or mistranslation, of tumah is 'pollution'.[11] And just as tumah is a man-made physical entity which radiates out from human activity, so too is pollution – and, especially, plastiglomerate. As Kelly Jazvac wrote: "These are objects that I could never make myself, given all of the forces, distances, and politics at play in their creation. Yet I had inadvertently and passively contributed to plastiglomerate's making."[12]

9 This new substance will inevitably become embedded into the planet's crust itself, forming a permanent stratum in the bedrock which will show future geologists (if humanity survives that long) exactly when our current anthropocene era began.[13] The moment when humans began mining, when we began turning rock into stone, סלע into אבן, will be marked. "Earth and our impact upon it are irrevocably intertwined. Our planet has become a mixture of it and us."[14]

10 Tumah only comes into being when humans interface with the natural world and our animal side: moments of birth, reproduction and death.

Yet it is only transmitted when we interface with each other, our anthropological side: once in existence, tumah travels between people via benches and beakers, tents and tombs.

11 And these human-to-human connections are positive. It is good that we relate to each other in a closer and more sophisticated way than do animals. Tents allow us to explore our surroundings, and tombs show the deep emotional response we have to death.

12 Yet every positive carries with it a negative. The philosopher Paul Virilio noted that "to invent the sailing ship is to invent the shipwreck",[15] but he may as well have said that to invent the bench was to invent bench-tumah – and to invent plastic was, unthinkable as this may have been to Leo Baekeland when he originally did so, to invent plastiglomerate.

13 Human-to-human connections are, for the most part, positive, but when they are indelibly and harmfully etched into reality, such that our descendants will not only be noticed by them but actively harmed by them, that is when the march of progress becomes unconscionable. How did we reach the depths of degradation whereby we are birthing a generation of babies whose bodies are, while still in the womb, full of microplastics,[16] all the while the earth's crust with the melted remnants of water bottles and fishermen's rope?

14 The Torah directed that tzara'at-infected building materials be dumped in what was, essentially, a biblical out-of-town landfill.[17] I think that was an early version of the mistake we're making with plastics today. It set traps for the future. Just as, decades later, somebody might stumble across one of these piles of rubble and try to salvage some of it, clueless of its diseased origins, the plastic deposits we are leaving in the bedrock will, sooner or later, pollute and poison the ingenuous.

15 The fact is, we don't just interface with the natural world and we don't just interface with one another. We also interface with the future, with our unborn descendants. The earth is a mixture of it and us; the mixture we leave behind is the mixture the future of our civilisation will have to reckon with… and, perhaps more importantly, it is the message they will receive from us.

GKW 02.04.22

[1] Leviticus 14:33-45

[2] Patricia L Corcoran, Charles J Moore and Kelly Jazvac. "An anthropogenic marker horizon in the future rock record", *GSA Today* 24 (2014): 4-8.

[3] Kelly Jazvac. "Plastiglomerate" in *Fueling Culture: 101 words for energy and environment*, Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yaeger, eds (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 275-277: 276.

[4] Ibid.

[5] m.Negaim 12:2

[6] Leviticus 14:45

[7] Shlomo Feldman. *Sha'arei Da'at*, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Tzuf Books, 2001) [Hebrew], vol 1: 405-406.

[8] There is considerable modern scholarly debate over this point, which I have massively oversimplified here. However, I have cherrypicked one scholar who supports my position: Martin S Cohen, "Rabbinic self-confidence: bending the world to the word," *Zeramim* 2 (2018): 44.

[9] Sifra, Sh'mini parashah 3:7, Weiss edition p 49b

[10] Martin S Cohen. *The Boy on the Door on the Ox: an unusual spiritual journey through the strangest Jewish texts* (New York: Aviv Press, 2008): ebook edition, ch 3.

[11] As discussed by Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014): 52ff.

[12] Jazvac, ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid: 277.

[15] Paul Virilio. The Original Accident (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006): 10.

[16] Damian Carrington. "Microplastics revealed in the placentas of unborn babies", *The Guardian* (22 December 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/22/microplastics-revealed-in-placentas-unborn-babies>

[17] Leviticus 14:45