



SERMON SHOFTIM:^a WHAT'S SAUCE FOR THE CHUS

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 3 September 2022
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue – *bat mitzvah of Electra*

- 1 In her book *Constructing the Enemy*, Professor Rajini Srikanth recounts the story of when one of her students, an Indian American, left his bag unattended at an airport. He'd popped to a coffee shop on the other side of the concourse, and when he came back, his luggage was gone. He asked the white woman opposite if she'd seen what had happened. "Oh," she said, "I called security to take away your bag." Disaster! Luckily, there was a happy ending: in the distance, he saw a guard carrying his bag away, chased after him, and got it back.^b
- 2 This is a fascinating little story, because, with a little creativity, it's possible to empathise with everyone – and to condemn everyone. We can empathise with the student because he was only doing what other people had done, he was young, he wanted a coffee, he didn't deserve to lose his luggage just before a long-haul flight.



Nobody deserves that! Moreover, as someone of Asian appearance, he lives his life in America under constant suspicion and prejudice, this being a perfect example. But we can also empathise with the woman opposite: even if swayed by the student's skin colour, she was, no doubt, genuinely afraid, and turning to the rules for protection – and, after all, the rule that we don't leave our bags unattended in airports is a serious and important one.

- 3 But as Professor Srikanth says: "In this morality play, the true 'hero' is the security guard who returned the bag without further fuss." She speculates about why he may have done so: "Perhaps he empathized with the student's youth and gender, understanding the harmless carelessness and recklessness common to the twenty-plus male; perhaps he felt affirmed in his power by the student's contrition; perhaps he had developed expertise in 'reading' people and felt confident that this man posed no threat; perhaps his conversation with the white woman who reported the bag led him to believe that she had reported it out of a sense of obligation



rather than fear; perhaps he saw her action as motivated by prejudice rather than caution.”^c

- 4 The fact is, that security guard did an amazing job in balancing everybody’s interests, and showing compassion to all involved. He helped the white woman to feel safe; he helped the Indian American student to hold onto his luggage.
- 5 Of course, strictly speaking, maybe he shouldn’t have given the bag back. When I first read the story, I’d assumed the luggage would disappear forever. I didn’t even know you could beg to recover your bag after it was confiscated for being left unattended! After all, airport security is a serious business and rules are there for a reason. But, in this case, the security guard had mercy.
- 6 In the parashah which Ele read so brilliantly this morning, we come across one of the most famous phrases in the bible: ‘an eye for an eye’.^d But very few people have a clue as to its context. Can anyone



now, without looking, remember what words come immediately before ‘an eye for an eye’? (Not you Ele!)

- 7 The verse begins with the words: **לא תחוס**. Do not have mercy.
- 8 Now, there are several Hebrew words for mercy/ compassion/ pity/ empathy/ sympathy. **רחם**. **חונן**. **חמלה**. And, in this case, **חוס**. On first glance, they’re all used quite interchangeably. But there are some patterns. In relation to our word, **חוס**, the Vilna Ga’on, an incredibly influential 18th-century rabbi, explains that **חוס** is for when we worry about people or objects that we’re close to, or that we have personal feelings for.^e
- 9 But then how does it apply to Ele’s verse about ‘an eye for an eye’? Surely we’re not imagining that the judge in a particular case will have a close personal relationship with a suspect! Yet apparently the Torah apprehended a risk that the judge would show the suspect **חוס**.



- 10 I think the key lies in the origin of the word **חוס**. Rather oddly, it's only ever used with the word 'eye' following it: the literal phrase from our verse is **לא תחוס עינך**, 'do not let your eye show mercy'. A very, very heavy book called the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* guesses that the word used to mean something like 'cry', and only later came to refer to the emotions that prompt us to cry.^f
- 11 Now it makes quite a lot more sense. It's the equivalent of the callous modern phrase, "Don't shed a tear for..." You know the sort of thing: "Don't shed a tear for prisoners kept in horrible conditions, because they must have done something wrong to be there," "Don't shed a tear for the Palestinians, because they have a terrorist government."
- 12 All very unpleasant and unempathetic. But I think there's a hidden compliment in there: why do people tell us not to shed a tear? Because they know that we otherwise might! Human beings feel an innate connection to, and sympathy for, other human beings, even if we don't know them personally. The security guard in Ronald



Reagan Airport in Washington DC didn't know the student personally, but he felt a natural human pang at the idea of depriving a pleading fellow human of their luggage.

- 13 That is why the authors of the Torah were worried about a judge feeling **חוס** towards someone suspected of a crime. They knew that judges have human feelings. Telling them to suppress their human feelings may not be very nice, but admitting that they have those feelings is a great tribute!
- 14 Ele, your journey to bat mitzvah has been a very human one. You've juggled Hebrew practice with schoolwork and holidays, exams and swimming pools. You've been aware of the strict need to work on your Torah portion, but also aware of your human need to live a normal life at the same time. I know that everyone here has **חוס** for just how difficult and daunting it can be for a 21st-century teenager to learn a new alphabet and have to read from it to a packed room. How well you did – and we wish you **מזל טוב**!



^a Deuteronomy 19:15-21

^b Rajini Srikanth. *Constructing the Enemy: empathy/ antipathy in US literature and law* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012): 10-11.

^c Ibid: 12.

^d Deuteronomy 19:21

^e *Siddur Ishei Yisra'el im peirush Avinu Eliyahu* (2008): 190, sv 'Chus v'rachem aleinu'.

^f Siegfried Wagner. "Chus" in G Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol 4 (1980; repr Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans, 1997), 271-277: 271.