



SERMON B'REISHIT:^a IRANIAN MEN, HALLELUJAH

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 22 October 2022
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* powerfully tells the story of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – and its impact on her, as a 10-year-old girl living in Tehran who had nurtured hopes of going to university in America. One particularly striking page shows the ayatollahs banning university education. Suddenly realising that her life-plan had been destroyed with a single decree, enacted by a regime hell-bent on turning women into baby-making machines, the young Marjane weeps: “I wanted to be like Marie Curie. At the age that Marie Curie first went to France to study, I'll probably have ten children...”^b
- 2 Astonishingly, very little has changed in Tehran since 1979. Iran's morality police – euphemistically named ‘guidance patrols’ – are still ruining women's lives. Not to mention ending them. Only last month, a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, died in police custody



after being detained for showing a few strands of hair under her headscarf.^c

- 3 One way or another, the conflict between those who support women having autonomy, and those who see women purely as an adjunct to mankind, has been raging ever since the dawn of the human race.
- 4 In this morning's parashah, we read about how Eve was created out of Adam's body, to be "a helper for him".^d The bible scholar Judy Klitsner has described the Eve depicted in our parashah as "derivative: she exists in relation to man, she is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh".^e So too was Marjane Satrapi 'derivative' in post-revolutionary Iran. Her role was to be a help to the masculine ruling elite, without independence or self-will.
- 5 When Adam awakes from his Divinely-imposed anaesthetic and beholds Eve for the first time, he declares: "זאת הפעם", this one is of my flesh."^f The words **זאת הפעם** are usually translated as 'at last', or 'finally': Adam's loneliness is eventually at an end. But they



literally mean 'this time'. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, one of my favourite Torah commentators, relies on the literal meaning. He understands Adam as praying to God that would be a one-off occurrence – only this time. "Just this once," he imagined Adam saying, "You created a woman via surgery on me. But from now on, let woman be born herself, and not subjugated to a man's body."⁹

- 6 This is a remarkable and subversive reading of the text, literal as it is. We see that the very first conflict in the history of humanity took place when Adam decided to take a stand on Eve's right to autonomy. He realised how wrong it was that, perhaps for the rest of eternity, woman would be created from and for man, as his helper, and without any sense of independence or personal identity. The first ever human found the courage to stand up to his Creator, to demand that God find a solution that would create parity between the sexes: when someone is born in the usual way, that allows for them to develop an identity, and not to be or feel dependent on a single individual or master.



- 7 Rabbi Sorotzkin's reading also allows us to understand the story that follows – the forbidden fruit – in a completely different light. A traditional interpretation would present Eve as the villain and Adam as a weak and clueless patsy: she lawlessly ate the fruit, and he feebly went along with her.^h Yet now we know about Eve's struggle for individuality, and Adam's yearning to do all he could to support her in her quest.
- 8 The start of Genesis, then, is indeed a story of rebellious humans challenging their Creator, but not in the way we might have supposed. This was no case of ungrateful, greedy people scrumping the forbidden fruit out of a sense of arrogant entitlement. On the contrary, this was a unique episode in which the whole human race – both of them – stood together to protest against the downgrading of women to second-class status.
- 9 Adam, representing the male half of humanity, showed himself to be a true ally by going one step further and doing what he could to help Eve develop individuality for herself, an opportunity she had



not had in the natural way through not having been born. When she had the idea of eating fruit off of the tree of knowledge, Adam enthusiastically supported her; and with the fruit came the enhanced self-awareness of which she had been deprived at creation.

10 Iran is currently alive with nationwide protests against its fundamentalist regime. This is hardly new; there have been protests on a regular basis ever since the 1979 revolution. But these particular ones are different, marked by their gender balance. When rights were originally stripped away from women – the right to work, the right to travel, the right to custody of a child – there was very little objection from Iranian men. But now women are protesting in the streets, burning their hijabs... and their menfolk are standing alongside them.ⁱ

11 Marjane Satrapi's life has moved on a long way from the 10-year-old girl watching her society crumble around her. Yet perhaps, with a little bit of the rebellious spirit of Eve, and borrowing the allyship



of Adam, the Iranian people will one day bring up a generation of 10-year-old girls without that fear. **בן יהי רצון**, may this be God's will.

^a Genesis 2:15-25

^b Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis: the story of a childhood* vol 1, trans Mattias Ripa (New York: Pantheon, 2000): 73.

^c BBC News. "Iran protests: Mahsa Amini's death puts morality police under spotlight" (22 September 2022): <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-62984076>>

^d Genesis 2:18

^e Judy Klitsner. *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: how biblical stories mine and undermine each other* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009): ebook edition, chapter 4.

^f Genesis 2:23

^g Oznayim la-Torah ad loc

^h Genesis 3:6

ⁱ Rana Rahimpour. "Iran grapples with most serious challenge in years", BBC News (23 September 2022): <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-63006664>>