



## **SERMON YOM KIPPUR MORNING: LITERACY**

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Wednesday 5 October 2022  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 Ruth Rendell's murder mystery *A Judgement in Stone* is not really a mystery. Its opening words give away the entire story, for it begins with the provocative sentence: "Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family because she could not read or write." She continued: "Literacy is one of the cornerstones of civilisation."<sup>a</sup>
- 2 It's fair to say that this book of grisly mass-murder is a rather extreme example of the potential ills of illiteracy. But, equally, there is no doubt that illiteracy is harmful. The OECD reports that British adults who struggle with literacy feel disenfranchised from public life. The children of literate parents have considerably better life chances than the children of illiterate parents.<sup>b</sup> Illiterate people tend to earn 30-40% less than their literate counterparts, and struggle to access training to improve their prospects. Lacking the ability to understand and implement public health guidance, illiterate



households show a much higher rate of disease, accidents and other health issues.<sup>c</sup>

3 And, of course, illiteracy does not fall evenly across the population.

It is concentrated in those parts of society which are already marginalised or vulnerable. This has only been exacerbated by the effects of the coronavirus lockdowns: research has shown that private schools continued to teach more-or-less to the same standard, and for the same number of hours, as before, whereas state schools did not. An astonishing 25% of children across the UK received no education during lockdown whatsoever.<sup>d</sup>

4 That is a shameful indictment of our society. Just pages ago, we reflected on how we had “taken advantage of people weaker than ourselves, and treated with condescension those whom we suppose to be inferior to us”. We atoned for “keeping the poor in the chains of poverty”.<sup>e</sup> Illiteracy, and an inequitable education system, is at the root of all these.



- 5 The Torah is peculiarly concerned to avoid inequality in access to learning. This theme arises in both of this morning's readings, Torah and haftarah. Our haftarah opened with rousing words reflecting the Israelites' yearning to study: "They seek Me daily, Eager to learn My ways."<sup>f</sup> And our Torah reading contained the inspiring and powerful commandment that our holy texts and obligations should be accessible not only to powerful men but to "children, women, sojourners and those who chop your wood and draw your water".<sup>g</sup> All of the vulnerable groups afflicted by educational inequalities in modern Britain – children, women, immigrants and those with low incomes – are explicitly included in the community's opportunity to learn directly from the mouth of God.
- 6 Maimonides was particularly concerned that low-income workers should not be disregarded on account of their supposedly menial status: "Some of the greatest sages of Israel," he wrote, "were woodcutters and water-drawers. Despite all the difficulties and hurdles involved, they occupied themselves with Torah in their



spare time and became vital links in the chain of tradition all the way back to Moses.”<sup>h</sup>

7 Everyone, no matter how they might be viewed by a prejudiced person or an inequitable system, has something to contribute to the world (and, if Jewish, to the Jewish people). If they are not nurtured to be able to do so – if they do not have the necessary support and education, encouragement and reassurance – their potential contribution will be forever lost. As the midrash says: “From the moment a foetus forms in its mother’s womb, their portion of learning is reserved for them.”<sup>i</sup>

8 Years ago, Rabbi Elli told me that someone at another synagogue had been surprised to learn that she, the rabbi, taught a basic Hebrew class herself. “You don’t really sit there listening to adults going אֵ-אָ-אָ, בּ-בּ-בּ do you?” they asked. But of course she did, and how obviously right that is. The fact that someone has reached adulthood without knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet isn’t reason to distance them from the community. It’s a call to embrace them,



and welcome them in, and, moreover, treat them with the utmost respect due to somebody who's made an active and courageous choice to learn (and, by implication, to admit their existing lack of learning).

- 9 Illiteracy has an enormous impact on every level. It harms lives. It stifles opportunity. It damages health. On a Jewish level, it intimidates and alienates and can make people hesitant to enter Jewish spaces for fear of looking ignorant.
- 10 We must strive to include, to educate and to be compassionate to those who struggle. Our prayer that we be recorded for good in the book of life surely carries with it a prayer that we, and everybody else in our society, will be able to read the book of life, or else to have as much assistance as they need in order to do so, regardless of social station. **בן יהי רצון**, may this be God's will.

<sup>a</sup> Ruth Rendell. *A Judgement in Stone* (1977; repr New York: Bantam Books, 1979): 1.



<sup>b</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. “Survey of adult skills: first results, England and Northern Ireland” (2012): <<https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20United%20Kingdom.pdf>>

<sup>c</sup> World Literacy Foundation. “The economic and social cost of illiteracy: a snapshot of illiteracy in a global context” (24 August 2015): <[https://web.archive.org/web/20150906004815if\\_/http://worldliteracyfoundation.org:80/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/WLF-FINAL-ECONOMIC-REPORT.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20150906004815if_/http://worldliteracyfoundation.org:80/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/WLF-FINAL-ECONOMIC-REPORT.pdf)>

<sup>d</sup> Richard Blundell, Jonathan Cribb, Sandra McNally, Ross Warwick and Xiaowei Xu. “Inequalities in education, skills, and incomes in the UK: the implications of the covid-19 pandemic”, Institute for Fiscal Studies (undated): <<https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BN-Inequalities-in-education-skills-and-incomes-in-the-UK-the-implications-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>>

<sup>e</sup> *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*: 262.

<sup>f</sup> Isaiah 58:2

<sup>g</sup> Deuteronomy 29:10

<sup>h</sup> h.Talmud Torah 1:9

<sup>i</sup> Midrash Mishlei 2:7