



SERMON T'TZAVVEH:ⁱ
ALL RABBIS ARE GANGSTERS

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 4 March 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

1 If only I'd been born a century earlier, I would have had the opportunity to combine my rabbinic career with work for the Mafia. Specifically, from 1920 to 1933, America prohibited everybody from producing, importing or selling alcohol... everyone, that is, except for Jews. The prohibition law included a special exemption for “sacramental wine”, that is, kiddush wine.

2 Leaving aside the serious question of just how desperate for alcohol somebody would have to be before they'd willingly drink Palwin No 11, the historian Marni Davisⁱⁱ explains how the religious exemption opened up new career prospects for the American rabbinate. “Before Prohibition, rabbis had done side work within their areas of expertise: performing circumcisions, preparing boys for bar mitzvah and so on. When Prohibition became law, rabbinic access to alcohol became a means to achieve

genuine financial comfort.” By 1925, the US government was convinced that liquor licences corruptly signed by rabbis were “the chief source of the illicit liquor supply”.ⁱⁱⁱ

3 Now, I may have missed my opportunity to be able to sell my signature to the Mafia by about 100 years, but nonetheless, in my own way, I’m still a gangster. All rabbis are gangsters. All rabbis – all faith leaders – are in possession of considerable authority. I sign (or, theoretically, refuse to sign) conversion certificates and aliyah certificates. I determine the Jewish status of prospective members. I write references. I award bursaries. I authorise passport forms.

4 I would never take instructions from the Mafia in exercising any of these functions, but it would be foolish to deny that I’m in a position of power. My power may not be as closely linked to machine guns as would have been the case for the Prohibition-busting rabbis in 1920s America; it nonetheless has a very real, and very significant, impact on people’s lives.



5 The legal scholar Robert Cover explains that all power, ultimately, is a form of violence. That violence may be more or less justified, but nonetheless, when one person exercises power over another, they do so “in a field of pain and death”.^{iv} Ultimately, all power is backed up by a threat of violence. Cover also explains that we try to mask this, for the sake of our own conscience, by separating the exercise of power from the delivery of the consequences. A judge signs a death warrant, but they don’t pull the lever; an executioner pulls the lever, but they didn’t sign the death warrant. Responsibility is dispersed and everybody is able to maintain their self-image as a good person and a faithful servant of a higher cause.^v

6 Perhaps the best illustration of this principle appears in today’s Torah portion. The Israelite priesthood was an extremely dominant institution. Not only did this family – for it was a family business – hold absolute power over the community’s spiritual lives, they also administered the tithing (or tax) system, and had a significant role in the justice system.



7 Yet at the same time, they lived charmed lives. We started reading from Parashat T'tzavveh towards the end this morning; if we'd started earlier, we'd have gone through chapter after chapter of detailed descriptions of just how much luxury surrounded the priesthood. They dressed in ornate ceremonial bling, expensive fabrics finished off with golden thread, on which reposed a breastplate full of jewels.

8 How easy it would have been for the priests, surrounded by all this extravagance (all expenses covered by the taxpayer), to forget that they operated in a field of pain and violence, that their decisions and their indecision could make or break the lives of those around them.

9 And so of course the portion ends by describing, in equal detail, how the priests had to work from an altar that was splashed with blood. Of course they needed to mix their fancy, tailored clothes with gore and entrails that so closely represent death. If it weren't for the certainty that their beautiful robes would, at some point, get stained with literal blood, the priests



would easily overlook the fact that their hands were metaphorically soaked in blood.

10 Modern faith leaders do not run the tax system. We have no role in the justice system. Our power, although considerable, is nothing like that of the Israelite priesthood; we no longer live in a theocracy. We no longer even have the opportunity to garnish our paycheques with Mafia dollars.

11 But nonetheless, this parashah is a reminder that beneath all the splendour and joy of any religious institution is an undercurrent of trust and responsibility. We must beautify our Judaism; we must, at the same time, strive to remember that they are not immune to the suffering and misery of the world beyond. Maintaining this balance is what allows us to make our spaces holy. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

ⁱ Exodus 29:4-14

ⁱⁱ Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze: becoming American in the age of Prohibition* (New York: New York University Press, 2012): 155.



iii Ibid: 156.

iv Robert M Cover, *Violence and the word* 95 Yale LJ 1601 (1986): 1601.

v Ibid: 1627.

