



## **SERMON CHOL HA-MO'ED PESACH:<sup>i</sup> SMASHED WINDOWS**

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 8 April 2023  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

**1** This month marks two years since George Floyd's murderer was convicted.<sup>ii</sup> Ahead of the verdict, several American cities had declared states of emergency, or mobilised National Guard units, in anticipation of huge protests.<sup>iii</sup>

**2** The Black Lives Matters movement has, indeed, been widely decried as violent, riotous, lawless, and otherwise out-of-control and aggressive. And it cannot be denied that its demonstrations did result in some smashed windows.

**3** But interestingly, those whose windows were smashed – especially owners of small businesses, who could least afford to absorb the cost of repairs – were philosophical about it. Missy O'Reilly, who runs a bar in Manhattan, said that the damage to her building “sucked” but it was “easy to fix compared to what people of colour are dealing with”.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, Salih Mothana, whose

grocery store in Chicago was trashed by the protests, said: “I understand why it happened, and it’s OK. If it sends out the message, it doesn’t matter to me.”<sup>v</sup>

**4** The theme of unauthorised smashing runs through our Pesach Torah reading. Moses was forced to recreate the tablets of the law, to replace the initial set, which he had destroyed in what seemed like a fit of pique at seeing the Israelites reverting to idolatry the moment his back was turned.

**5** But there are other possibilities. The commentary *Oznayim la-Torah* suggests<sup>vi</sup> that when Moses descended Mount Sinai and found everyone dancing round the golden calf, he realised that he would need to do something momentous, something shocking and eye-catching and unbelievably, deeply dramatic, in order to recapture the Israelites’ attention and snap them out of their idolatrous trance.

**6** He could simply have sought to persuade them back to the path of monotheism. He could have given a sermon, or handed



out leaflets, or launched a petition, or slowly built up a coalition of suisable Israelites. But no. He realised that none of those softly-softly approaches would have been remotely effective. Just like Salih Mothana in Chicago observed about the BLM protests, Moses's intention was to be outrageous, in order to send a message. And in that regard, he was successful; the golden calf was destroyed in literally the next verse.<sup>vii</sup>

**7** Both Moses and the BLM protesters were operating in the same context. The legacy of slavery is a powerful one: a moral and practical stain incredibly difficult to shift. No liberation from slavery or its aftermath ever came about with a petition.

**8** Dr Kirsty Sedgman, an academic at Bristol University, has written extensively about how norms of so-called civilised behaviour ('Why can't BLM just enter into civil debate instead of taking over the streets?') are invented, and then selectively deployed, in order to subdue movements for social change.



**9** In her book *On Being Unreasonable*, she focusses on the example of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, which, after years of ‘civilised’ campaigning, and petitions, and electioneering, and planning committee hearings, was only finally removed from Bristol’s waterfront after being torn down by demonstrators. “The people of Bristol tried all the ‘polite’ things,” wrote Dr Sedgman, “then, suddenly, in June 2020, Colston was pulled down and thrown in the harbour. A few weeks later, the nearby Colston Hall announced that it was changing its name. Within the next year, an array of other institutions had followed suit: Colston’s Girls’ School, Colston Lodge, Colston House, Colston Street, Colston Weir, Colston Avenue, Colston Window, gone gone gone gone gone gone gone. With all that backstory in mind – knowing that words had so totally and completely failed, and witnessing the sudden leap into action following Colston’s dethroning – can we honestly say that toppling him was wrong?”<sup>viii</sup>

**10** Moses used precisely the same tactic. Of course, he didn’t learn that tactic from the BLM movement. But he learnt



from another source of great wisdom. The Ozneyim la-Torah commentary describes<sup>ix</sup> Moses's shock-and-awe approach to the Israelites' idolatry with two very important words: יד חזקה, a mighty hand. Where else have we heard that phrase this week? In the haggadah, of course: God freed us from Egypt בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.<sup>x</sup>

**11** The liberation from Egypt was, indeed, full of shock-and-awe tactics. There was no quiet campaigning, no building of coalitions. Instead, there were burning bushes and serpent staffs; pestilence of livestock and parting of seas. God used the tactic of a יד חזקה – which undoubtedly destroyed the small businesses of many Egyptians – as an effective way of freeing the Israelites.

**12** This is from whom Moses learned how to create lasting change. Extraordinary liberation requires extraordinary methods. Civilised debate has its place, but rules of civility are also used to oppress minorities, suppress radical ideas and maintain the status quo. Moses's decision to smash the tablets – tablets literally



crafted by the hand of God – seems, on its face, like the ultimate sin. But in fact he acted with the purest of motives and can easily justify his decision by observing that it successfully broke the Israelites' reliance on the golden calf, a goal of which God wholeheartedly approved.

**13** Sometimes, things need to smash in order for something new to grow from the dust left behind in the aftermath. Sometimes we need to tear down in order to build back better. There is an *עֵת לִפְרוֹץ* and an *עֵת לְבִנוּת*, a time to break and a time to assemble.<sup>xi</sup>

**14** The story of our own liberation, at Pesach, should be a constant reminder to us of the presence, in our world, of those who are as yet unliberated. As a people which has already passed over, from bondage to autonomy, it is our responsibility to promote the interests of groups who are yet to join us in the free world of milk and honey. At the very, very least, that responsibility means we should not tut or shake our heads when windows get broken in others' struggle for liberation.



**15** Moses received the technique of highly visible public protest from God in Egypt, and he transmitted it to the freed slaves. The freed slaves transmitted it to Elijah,<sup>xii</sup> and he to Harriet Tubman, and she to Martin Luther King Jr, and he to Angela Davis,<sup>xiii</sup> and she to the Black Lives Matter movement. And they taught three things: be impatient when seeking justice; make many people sit up and take notice of you; and tear down the fences that keep you out. כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

<sup>i</sup> Exodus 34:1-9

<sup>ii</sup> Eric Levenson and Aaron Cooper, "Derek Chauvin found guilty of all three charges for killing George Floyd", *CNN* (21 April 2021): <<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/20/us/derek-chauvin-trial-george-floyd-deliberations/index.html>>

<sup>iii</sup> Christal Hayes, "'Guilty!' Across the US, cheers fill city streets after Derek Chauvin is convicted in the death of George Floyd", *USA Today* (20 April 2021): <<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/04/20/derek-chauvin-nation-reacts-verdict/7308287002/>>

<sup>iv</sup> Serena Dai, Erika Adams and Tanay Warekar, "NYC restaurants rally to support protests, even with windows broken", *Eater NY* (1 June 2020): <<https://ny.eater.com/2020/6/1/21276913/nyc-george-floyd-protest-restaurant-damage-response>>

<sup>v</sup> Leticia Miranda, "First came a pandemic, then looting: small businesses pick up the pieces as their debt mounts", *NBC* (4 June 2020): <<https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/first-came-pandemic-then-looting-small-businesses-pick-pieces-their-n1224776>>

<sup>vi</sup> Oznayim la-Torah to Exodus 32:19

<sup>vii</sup> Exodus 32:20



<sup>viii</sup> Kirsty Sedgman, *On Being Unreasonable: breaking the rules and making things better* (London: Faber and Faber, 2023): ebook edition, ch 6.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> The haggadah passage in question is derived from Deuteronomy 26:8.

<sup>xi</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:3

<sup>xii</sup> 1 Kings 18:17-39

<sup>xiii</sup> See quotes and citations scattered throughout Sedgman, *On Being Unreasonable*, op cit.

