



## **ADDRESS TO ARDINGLY COLLEGE**

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Tuesday 23 May 2023**

**1**      Who can think of a protest which has happened recently? Anywhere in the world?

Extinction Rebellion

Just Stop Oil

Insulate Britain

Teachers' and nurses' strikes

Reclaim the Streets

Iran

Israel

India

France

Quite a long list!

**2**      Most recently, we saw the arrests of dozens of people for protesting during the coronation – although, later, the police

had to apologise to a fair few of them because it turned out they hadn't actually done anything illegal.<sup>i</sup> All they had done was stand around holding placards reading 'Not My King'. And there's nothing wrong with that: their beliefs, whether or not we agree with them, are heartfelt. When someone has heartfelt beliefs, they're allowed to talk about them. In fact, they have to talk about them. A republican who kept shtum at a once-in-a-generation moment for the royal family would not be being true to themselves.

**3** We just heard a biblical reading<sup>ii</sup> which told the story of Elijah's protest against an ancient king of Israel. The story began with King Ahab calling Elijah עֵזְרָאֵל, 'troubler of Israel'. But, without a police force to arrest Elijah for his anti-monarchy protest, he had no choice but to stand by as Elijah's demonstration went ahead. Elijah stood and mocked and highlighted everything that he saw wrong with Ahab's kingdom.

**4** And as we know from the wider story, Elijah was a goodie! He was right and the king was wrong. Ahab may have



been the one in a position of power and authority, while Elijah was just an ordinary citizen, but that ordinary citizen had an important point to make. He could have just made a quiet speech, or written a letter to a newspaper. But instead, he chose to make his point using the amazing, dramatic theatre of a public stand-off – and that disruption paid off. He convinced people.

**5** If I was Elijah, I'd have been very proud to be called a troublemaker by a wicked king. It's a great compliment! That story inspired my teacher, Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah, to write a book in which she argues: "At its heart, Judaism is about – is supposed to be about – trouble-making. Elijah certainly was 'a troubler, עֹכֵר, of Israel'. This Hebrew word comes from a root meaning 'stir up' or 'disturb'. That was the role of the prophets. They were hecklers. Their only responsibility was to speak out. That is what a prophetic message is always meant to do: trouble, disturb, stir up the way things are."<sup>iii</sup>

**6** That doesn't mean that we should be disruptive for the sake of it, of course. But what it does mean is that we shouldn't sit



at home in silence for the sake of it either. “Stay quiet!” is something that the powerful will always say to those who argue against them. And, “Protest in a way that isn’t disruptive!” is just another way of saying, “Stay quiet!” Protesting in a way that doesn’t get noticed is useless. There’s no point protesting against the monarchy the week after a massive royal event that is being broadcast around the world. The republicans used the coronation to get noticed. Elijah used a huge bolt of fire from heaven. Same difference.

**7**      The fact is, you don’t need someone’s permission to disagree with them. Sometimes – maybe very often – your counter-arguments will be valuable and important. And even right!

**8**      So if we shouldn’t sit at home in silence, never expressing an opinion about anything, what should we do? Engage with the world around us! Leaving our homes and go outside to grapple with intolerance, inequality and oppression. This is not just a moral duty but it is actually doing something religious. It is



just as much ‘doing religion’ as reciting prayers is ‘doing religion’.

And it may well be more practically useful!

**9** Some people try to separate between religion and politics. I don’t think that’s a realistic difference. Certainly in the case of Judaism, our religion is, and is supposed to be, all-encompassing. We have blessings not just for overtly ‘religious’ occasions such as services and funerals, but for all the other, varied experiences that life throws at us. There are blessings for seeing a tall person; blessings for eating sweets; blessings for smelling flowers... even blessings for going to the toilet. The underlying idea is that all of those moments represent connection with God: God who gave the tall person life, God who gave us senses with which we enjoy tastes and fragrances, God who created our bodies and their physical needs. And engagement with the political world is, surely, a moment that is just as much an emanation of the Divine as doing a wee!

**10** The one thing for which Judaism doesn’t have a blessing is sitting at home and doing nothing.



**11** Voting is a religious act. Writing to an MP or councillor is a religious act. Going to a protest or demonstration is a religious act. Even – and I know your teachers might not thank me for coming in, saying this, and then leaving – arguing with anyone in authority is a religious act. All so long as, at the heart of the matter, there is something you really firmly believe in for some sort of moral reason.

**12** Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of the Bible, was a troublemaker – and that’s precisely what made him great. You can all be troublemakers too.

**13** Thank you for having me!

<sup>i</sup> Sean Seddon, “Coronation: Met expresses ‘regret’ over arresting six anti-monarchy protesters”, *BBC News* (9 May 2023): <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-65527007>>

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

<sup>iii</sup> Elli Tikvah Sarah, *Trouble-making Judaism* (London: David Paul, 2012): 31-32.

