



SERMON SHOFTIM:ⁱ WARNING

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 19 August 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue – *baby blessing of Akiva*

1 I'm a member of a fantastic Facebook group called *Warnings and disclaimers that were clearly the result of a lawsuit*. It's a space for people to share photos of oddly specific warning notices that they encounter. Some of the very best examples come from baby products. For example, on a bottle of infant formula milk: "*Not for intravenous use.*" On a babygro: "*This garment is not flame resistant.*" And on a cot mattress: "*This item does not soak up vomit.*"

2 Of course, very few of us would try to inject a baby with milk. But presumably, at some point, somebody tried all of these things, and then tried to blame the manufacturer for their misfortune.

3 Most of the posts in the Facebook group come, surprisingly enough, from America. But our Torah portion this morning contains a similar example – strikingly similar, in fact, to the non-flame-retardant babygro. We read:ⁱⁱ לֹא יִמָּצָא בָּךְ מַעֲבִיר בְּנוֹ-וּבִתּוֹ בָּאֵשׁ – *There shall not be found among you anybody who passes their son or daughter through fire*. Again, it might seem obvious to us that forcing a child to run through a fire is a bad idea, but apparently it was the done thing in some of the Israelites' neighbouring tribes, who considered it a way of worshipping their idol Molech.ⁱⁱⁱ

4 The curious thing is that the Torah already told us not to do this, though. Back in Leviticus,^{iv} 16 weeks ago, we read: "*Anyone ... who*

ⁱ Deuteronomy 18:10-22

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 18:10

ⁱⁱⁱ Rashi *ad loc*

^{iv} Leviticus 20:2

gives their offspring to Molech shall be put to death.” That seems to cover it. Why was the commandment repeated?

5 Midrash Tannaim, a particularly ancient rabbinical commentary, suggests the following answer:^v from the commandment in Leviticus, it says, “*we learned a punishment but we did not hear a warning*”. On the face of it, this is quite a strange argument. Surely the warning is implied in the punishment. If we’re told that anyone caught speeding will get three penalty points and a £100 fine, that seems like a pretty clear warning against speeding. We don’t also need a separate sentence telling us: by the way, it’s best not to speed.

6 But context is everything, and this particular law relates not to road safety but to parenthood. Parents – especially parents of a newborn baby – are often sleep-deprived, stressed, anxious, and fundamentally vulnerable. They are entitled to support, guidance, help and friendly pointers. Lists of punishments do not constitute parenting advice.

7 Raising a child is an enormous responsibility, but it’s not a responsibility that falls on parents alone. The well-known phrase, “*It takes a village to raise a child*,” which comes from an African proverb,^{vi} is widely understood as being essential to the wellbeing of young people. Professor Andrea Reupert, who researches educational development, sees the ‘village’ as encompassing parents and siblings; extended family; neighbours; friends; school; healthcare workers; sport groups; faith communities; and more.^{vii}

8 What is more important than who is in the village, though, is what they’re doing. It is not sufficient for community leaders to threaten parents with punishment (still less the death penalty) and then consider that they’ve fully discharged their duty towards the child. Obviously punishment for neglectful or abusive parenting is appropriate in some, rare, cases. But in the far more common case of those who are struggling, what is necessary is support and facilitation.

^v Midrash Tannaim 18:9

^{vi} Andrea Reupert, Shulamith Lala Straussner, Bente Weimand and Darryl Maybery, “It takes a village to raise a child: understanding and expanding the concept of the ‘village’”, *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022), 1-7: 2.

^{vii} Ibid: 4.



9 Midrash Tannaim cannily recognised the difference between threat of punishment and warning against doing the wrong thing. First the Torah swooped in with a strict sense of justice. But then it followed up, in today's parashah, with the guiding hand of advice.

10 Cristina and Jake: the two of you, together with Akiva, are embarking on a long and exciting and terrifying and joyful and frustrating and doubt-ridden and love-filled journey. Thanks to this sermon, you now know not to try to pass Akiva through fire or inject him with infant formula, but even so, you will still face moments of uncertainty and insecurity. But as well as the fear and anxiety that can come with parenting dilemmas, know that you are surrounded by a loving family and a supportive community, who are there to offer you not threats and punishment but encouragement and guidance. כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

