



SERMON TZAV:ⁱ THE KINDNESS OF THE STORK

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 6 April 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

1 John Chapman, Jacob Flickinger, Zomi Frankcom, James Henderson, Saif Issam Abu Taha, James Kirby and Damian Sobol: the seven aid workers from World Central Kitchen killed by an Israeli air strike this week.ⁱⁱ There can be no question that these were seven good people, people who exemplified the value of רַחֲמִים, lovingkindness towards one's fellow human beings.

2 A word with the same root as רַחֲמִים appeared in our Torah reading this morning: טַרְטוּף, the stork, listed as a non-kosher bird.ⁱⁱⁱ The Talmud asks: “*Why is it called that?*” – and somewhat predictably, answers: “*Because it performs acts of lovingkindness for its fellows.*”^{iv}

3 But this only leads to a different question: why isn't it kosher? The commentator Ramban explains^v that birds are sorted into kosher and non-kosher based on their attributes. Those which behave nobly and laudably are kosher; those which are cruel and spiteful are treif. That being so, how come the stork – kind by name and kind by nature – ended up on the blacklist?

4 We find three different answers to this in the literature. Firstly, the Gerer Rebbe says that it's because the stork is kind only to its fellows. A stork will look after storks, but will quite cheerfully withhold life-sustaining care from other creatures.^{vi}

ⁱ Leviticus 11:13-23

ⁱⁱ Emine Sinmaz, “‘Very best of humanity’: the seven aid workers killed in Israeli airstrike”, *The Guardian* (3 April 2024): <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/03/very-best-of-humanity-the-seven-aid-workers-killed-in-israeli-airstrike>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 11:19

^{iv} b.Chullin 63a

^v Ramban to Leviticus 11:13

^{vi} Chiddushei ha-Rim to Leviticus 11:19

5 A modern commentary called Shemen ha-Tov comes up with an alternative theory: it's because the stork thinks it's the bees knees. It has a very high opinion of itself and its charitable work caring for other storks. So much so, that it labels as טוֹב that which is, in fact, not benevolence at all, but just the basic, minimal level of decency expected of any living being.^{vii}

6 The third answer circles back to the stork being named טוֹב: why is an animal which is, we have no established, rather unpleasant, named after the value of lovingkindness? Another modern commentary, Netivei Chayyim, explains that the name is a reminder that everyone has a good side, no matter how subtle.^{viii} Yes, storks are nasty and malevolent animals, but they do share food with each other, and that is to their credit. We shouldn't be too moralistic to recognise that they have that as a redeeming quality.

7 Those three approaches to the question of the stork contain so many lessons for our approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Firstly, there is the basic fact that we should not only be cheering on 'our own side': we should not, stork-like, care only for our own, but should instead extend compassion to all the war's victims. The bombs have been dropping for six months, now, with Palestinians dying on a daily basis, but it's only now that British citizens have been killed that much of the British establishment is waking up to the fact that this is a horrible war causing much unnecessary loss of life. What's changed in the last week? There was just as much suffering seven days ago. But now, it's our own kind – white British ex-servicemen – and suddenly the wheels of Whitehall are turning.^{ix}

8 Following the second approach, we cannot get carried away with our own sense of virtue. No matter how many vigils we attend, how many marches we go on, how many sermons we give, the fact is that our sense of unease at what is going on does not make us uniquely ethical or empathic people. It just means that we're people. Caring about atrocities is the basic standard for membership of the human

^{vii} Shemen ha-Tov vol 3 to Leviticus 11:19

^{viii} Netivei Chayyim to Leviticus 11:19

^{ix} Nadine Batchelor-Hunt, "Pressure grows to halt arms to Israel after British aid workers killed in Gaza", *Politics Home* (2 April 2024): <<https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/pressure-grows-for-uk-halt-arms-israel-british-aid-worker-deaths-gaza>>



race. Those like the World Central Kitchen workers, who give up their comfortable western lives (and sometimes their lives altogether) to make the situation better, their heroic efforts represent the best that our species can be. As for the rest of us, the columnist Elizabeth Spiers got it right when, back in October, she warned against “*mistaking tweet-length expressions of outrage for brave action in the face of atrocity*”.^x

9 Finally, we must be willing to acknowledge the good amongst those who we may otherwise be inclined to consider worthy of contempt. Those who are staunchly pro-Israel must recognise the love and devotion of Palestinian parents unable to feed their children, of Gazan families’ yearning for peace, desperation to see a State of Israel secure enough to call off the bombers. And those who are staunchly pro-Palestine must recognise the pain of Israelis missing – or mourning – hostages, the torment of those who were sexually assaulted, the terror of those who live in fear and trauma.

10 If anything, the classification of the stork, the *הַסִּיף*, as non-kosher, is in the Torah to teach us a lesson about the futility of binaries. The stork is neither entirely good nor entirely evil. The distinction between kosher and non-kosher birds is not a clear, bright-line division between the moral and the immoral.

11 And the same goes for the horrendous, tragic conflict taking place in Israel-Palestine. It is not a football match and we should not have ‘sides’. The Palestinians are entitled, in the short term, to safety, aid and the basic necessities of life, and in the long term to a viable state. And the Israelis are entitled, in the short term, to the return of the hostages and an end to terrorist rockets, and in the long term, to a secure state.

12 There are causes in both nations sorely deserving of *חֶסֶד*, and we pray that the world will soon wake up to the grievous wrongs being perpetrated, and broker a lasting peace. *בן יהי רצון*, may this be God’s will.

^x Elizabeth Spiers, “I don’t have to post about my outrage; neither do you”, *The New York Times* (17 October 2023): <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/17/opinion/social-media-israel-palestine.html>>

