



SERMON B'HAR:ⁱ FACING THE FUTURE

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 25 May 2024

Daniel's baby-blessing

Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

1 Professor Parmesan, aside from sounding like a Cluedo character, is a leading climate scientist in France, and she doesn't have any children. In a recent interview with *The Guardian*, she explained that she thought:ⁱⁱ

'Do I really want to bring a child into this world that we're creating?' Even 30 years ago, it was very clear the world was going to hell in a handbasket. I'm 62 now and I'm actually really glad I did not have children.

The Guardian found many, many other female climatologists who had made the same decision.

2 And it's entirely understandable, both specifically – global warming really does, or should, give us pause, to think about what sort of world our children will inherit from us – and generally, in that we're humans, and it's natural and reasonable for humans to worry about the future.

3 This theme is prominent in today's parashah. God commands the Israelites that, every seventh year, they will not grow anything.ⁱⁱⁱ Giving the land a rest sounds like a lovely idea, and yet we can well sympathise with the Israelites for wondering... where would their food come from then?^{iv} God allows for this contingency, telling

ⁱ Leviticus 25:14-24

ⁱⁱ Damian Carrington, "I am starting to panic about my child's future': climate scientists wary of starting families", *The Guardian* (13 May 2024): <<https://archive.ph/qv7xN>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 25:4

^{iv} That worry may have arisen in relation to the first year of each cycle (because nothing would have been grown and stored away in the last year of the previous cycle): Ramban to Leviticus 25:20. Alternatively, it may have arisen in relation to the seventh year itself, because the Israelites would be afraid to eat anything lest there be nothing for the following year: Hirsch *ad loc*.

the people: “*And if you should ask, ‘What are we to eat?’...*”^v – but what comes next is rather curious. “*Then I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years.*”^{vi}

4 Some understand these verses as a Divine reassurance that faith will see us through. For example, Me’am Lo’ez, a 19th-century Spanish commentator, explains: “[t]he Torah is ... telling us that we should not worry”.^{vii}

5 But that isn’t what the text actually says. The text says ‘if’. If the Israelites asked about how they would survive a year without crops, then God would ensure a miraculously bounteous harvest to fill the gap. We have to infer, then, that without the Israelites worrying out loud, God would not ordain the miraculously bounteous harvest.^{viii}

6 We can infer two important principles from this. Firstly, there is nothing blasphemous in fearing for the future. A puritan might be inclined to say that querying a biblical commandment is, in and of itself, heretical. One might argue that even to speculate that a Divine scheme like the seven-year cycle could have a gaping hole in it, like unintended starvation, indicates an unacceptable lack of trust in God.

7 There is certainly a lively debate in rabbinic literature about life insurance. As one writer puts it:^{ix}

In all aspects of life, we should depend on God for assistance, and should not rely on any other source of support, neither on others nor on our own strength. Does not, then, the endeavour of insurance indicate a lack of faith in God, an exaggerated fear of calamity or an attempt to circumvent God’s will?

^v Leviticus 25:20 (NJPS translation)

^{vi} Leviticus 25:21 (slightly adapted from NJPS translation)

^{vii} Me’am Lo’ez to Leviticus 25:18-24

^{viii} The actual word in the biblical text, כִּי, might instead be interpreted as ‘when’: see eg Malbim *ad loc*. Either way, though, it is clear that the blessing in verse 21 is triggered by the Israelites’ question in verse 20, and that in the absence of the question (whether or not the question is inevitable), the blessing would not follow. This interpretation is supported by Shem mi-Shmu’el, B’har, although it is used to support a rather different conclusion.

^{ix} Rabbi Menachem Slae. *Insurance in the Halachah: a legal-historical study based on the responsa literature and other Jewish legal sources*, trans Bracha and Menachem Slae (Jerusalem: Israel Insurance Association, 1982): 201-202.



Well, no. Obviously not. It's a prudent response to the vicissitudes of real life. It is a fact that people sometimes die prematurely without leaving a sufficient fortune for their dependents to live off of. And it is a fact that, if a society goes a whole year without growing any crops, that society will suffer food shortages. There is no evidence that God is in any way unhappy at the Israelites asking their question about the seven-year cycle. Quite the reverse.

8 Which brings us onto the second principle: questioning the viability of the future, and planning ahead to ensure our livelihoods are sustainable, is vital. If the Israelites hadn't asked their question, the blessedly massive sixth-year harvest would not have taken place. Blind faith – 'Oh well, we're sure it will all be fine' – would have led to disaster. Intelligent thought, however, was rewarded.

9 Rupert and Deborah: I'm sure that, on the journey towards parenthood, you will have had, to put it lightly, many conversations about how best to provide for lovely Daniel. And that's quite right. Faith is important – there is a huge dose of faith involved in bringing a new life into the world – but it isn't magic. Concerning ourselves with the future doesn't mean we lack faith, and even in those moments when we do lack faith, we can call on God – and the community – to plug the gap and support us. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

