



SERMON SH'LACH L'CHA:ⁱ THE REAL WORLD

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 29 June 2024

bar mitzvah of Adam

Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

[1] There's a word in Yiddish: קעסט. It's one of those fantastic words that needs quite a lot of English words in order to translate it fully. Dr Marina Zilbergerts defines it as:ⁱⁱ

[A] practice ... by which the parents of [a] bride committed to supporting the young couple financially for a number of years after their marriage so that a scholarly groom could devote himself to full-time study.

So it seems my wife's parents have quite a lot of catching-up to do!

[2] In all seriousness, the life of the groom in this arrangement doesn't exactly sound unattractive. To a nerd like me, it might actually be quite pleasant to have several years for uninterrupted Jewish learning without the burden of money worries.

[3] Even now, when I have a million things to do as your rabbi, I try to set time aside for personal study, and it's easy to think: if only this were the only thing I needed to do!

[4] But... there's always a but. Such a life would be a very lonely, hollowed-out version of Judaism.

[5] Adam, today you read us the story of the twelve spies. They went to scout out the land of Israel, and, on their return, ten of them gave a false account of having seen invincible giants there. Traditionally, Judaism views these ten as villainous: they lied, fearmongering among the Israelites,ⁱⁱⁱ and worse than that, by suggesting that the land could not be conquered, they doubted God's power.^{iv}

ⁱ Numbers 13:21-33

ⁱⁱ Marina Zilbergerts, *The Yeshiva and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2022): 46-47.

ⁱⁱⁱ See eg Ramban to Numbers 13:2

^{iv} b.Sotah 35a

[6] But then a different strand emerged in how the rabbis thought of the ten spies. In around the 19th century, commentators^v began to argue that the spies lied not in order to traduce God, but out of love for God. They were deeply attached to the spiritual existence of living in the wilderness – no need to work for food, no need to knit clothes, no material worries of any sort – where they had a direct relationship with the Eternal. Entering Israel, though, would be a step down for them. They would come back to reality with a bump. Crops would have to be planted. Irrigation trenches would have to be dug. They would have to queue up in markets instead of just gathering heavenly manna. It would be a very different, and much less spiritually-centred, life. So they wanted, instead, to continue living in *טוטק*,^{vi} as if God was their father-in-law, subsidising them to live a holy lifestyle.

[7] This approach certainly allows us to have more sympathy for the spies.

[8] But they were still wrong.

[9] What they failed to understand is that Judaism isn't Judaism if it's taking place in some sort of idyllic, ecstatic, ideal plane where there are no problems, no shortages, no struggles. Judaism is the commandments about caring for the poor, and the commandments about defending the stranger from prejudice. Judaism is the fair distribution of property and wealth, and tending to the sick.

[10] Whatever Jewish life the spies were living in their perfect little wilderness utopia, it wasn't the one that we lead. Judaism that doesn't encounter the challenges of real life is not Judaism. Judaism which involves sitting around and praying all day, completely uninterrupted by good deeds or any sort of challenge or dilemma or difficulty, is not Judaism.

[11] In the 1970s, Rabbi Mitchell Salem Fisher wrote what he called “a *haftarah to be recited on any Shabbat*”.^{vii} In part, it reads:

^v See eg Chiddushei ha-Rim (1965 Nachaliel edition) p 221 sv ‘Ha-M’raglim hitcavnu l’tovatum’

^{vi} Likkutei ha-Rim (2010 Beit Shemesh edition) p 346 sv ‘Va-yotzi’u dibat ha-aretz asher taru otah’ and n 21

^{vii} Mitchell Salem Fisher, *Rebel, O Jews! and other prayers* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1973): 12-13.



Woe unto you if you make [Shabbat] a day of mere pause, a time to mouth prayers! Behold the true Sabbath, a day of inspiration, and stirring. Its quiet is to rouse you to moral action and to awaken your mind.

Jews need to exist in the real world.

[12] Adam, you certainly exist in the real world. You've had to juggle learning biblical Hebrew with your normal life as a young person living in the 21st century. When you wrote to me, you told me that you build computer parts and sell them online, and how much it means to you to have a hobby that also lets you make money. Well, you're going to have no need for קעסט. You have a skill that is worthwhile and enjoyable – everybody's dream! – and you also, now, have a skill that is holy and, hopefully, fulfilling, which is the Jewish life you've built for yourself here. You've managed to strike a balance that the spies never managed to. You've done a fantastic job, and we wish you מזל טוב!

