



SERMON CHUKKAT:ⁱ ATTENTION-SEEKING

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 13 July 2024
bar mitzvah of Simeon
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

[1] Nicole Krauss's novel *The History of Love* begins with a lonely old man pitifully describing his life:ⁱⁱ

Sometimes when I'm out, I'll [...drop] my change all over the floor, the nickels and dimes skidding in every direction. I never actually buy. All I want is not to die on a day when I went unseen.

Leo Gursky (of course he's a Jewish old man) lacked meaningful human interaction and would do anything, no matter how debasing, to attract attention.

[2] Attention-seeking is not always a bad thing. It's certainly hard to fault Mr Gursky for the extreme lengths to which he goes to be noticed.

[3] Rabbis, certainly, are prone to attention-seeking personality types – or, perhaps, people with attention-seeking personality types have a particular propensity to enter the rabbinate. In his doctoral thesis, Rabbi James Bleiberg explores the psychology and psychopathology of rabbis. (It's 271 pages long.) He quotes one pulpit colleague who noted that one characteristic of the job is how:ⁱⁱⁱ

You get a lot of people around you always telling you how much they like you and how much you mean to them ... You are always in the centre and an important person in the group.

Like all professionals, rabbis need to keep an eye on how our psychological profiles affect our behaviour and our interactions. But, again, there's nothing wrong in principle. Congregations need a rabbi who's willing to be at the centre of attention.

ⁱ Numbers 20:27-21:9

ⁱⁱ Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love* (London: Penguin, 2005): 3-4.

ⁱⁱⁱ James R Bleiberg, "The unconscious motivations of the pulpit rabbi", PhD thesis (Widener University, 1998): 201.

[4] But attention-seeking can, quite easily, cross a line and become unacceptable, weird, creepy or dangerous.

[5] We get an excellent example in a midrash about the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea. One might wonder why God waited until the escaping slaves were actually trapped at the Red Sea before parting the waves: wouldn't it have been more prudent to open up a safe passage before they arrived?

[6] The midrash's answer is in equal parts insightful and disturbing. God wanted there to be a moment when the Israelites were stuck, quite literally between the devil and the deep blue sea, because מתאוה לתפלתן, God "*desired their prayers*".^{iv} מתאוה is an interesting choice of word. It doesn't just mean 'desire' in the sense of 'want'. It means 'desire' in the sense of 'with the reckless desperation of the addict'.^v God was addicted to the Israelites' prayers, so addicted as to engineer a hazardous situation just so as to be able to rescue the Israelites from it and receive praise.

[7] And in case you're wondering if I'm exaggerating the midrash based on one particular Hebrew word, hold onto your hats, because it gives us an analogy:^{vi}

To what can this be compared? To a king who ... wanted to marry [a certain princess]. He was desperate, but she refused even to talk to him. What did the king do? He arranged for some bandits [to accost her] so that she screamed out [to the king, who then] said to her: "*This is what I craved, to hear your voice.*"

Wow. God as abusive husband. God who would do anything – even endangering the chosen people – just to hear a few prayers. It's a powerful and astonishing image, and I think it was probably repeated in the passage from Numbers which you read for us this morning, Simeon. The whole God-sending-snakes-to-attack-the-Israelites scene^{vii} seems exactly the same.

^{iv} Exodus Rabbah 21:5

^v Jastrow sv 'אוֹי', referring to Numbers Rabbah 10:8

^{vi} This was basically the plot of a 2007 episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, but that may be a coincidence.

^{vii} Number 21:6



[8] Or is it? We could also understand God as being more like Leo Gursky – a lonely old man desperate for attention, dropping coins all over the floor (or snakes all over the encampment) just to be noticed. Worrying about slipping away from real interaction. Being forgotten. Being sidelined. Missing out on the reality of life on earth.

[9] Simeon, on Thursday, we had a bar mitzvah rehearsal. You stood up here, with me, and did your entire service: all the bits of liturgy, your Torah reading, everything. And at the end, I told you what I always say after a bar mitzvah rehearsal, which was: “You’re done. That’s it. You’re bar mitzvah. You’ve passed. You’re going to come back on Saturday and do it all again, but that’s a repeat performance, just a chance to show off. Really, though, you’ve completed your bar mitzvah already.”

[10] And the showing-off you’re doing – that you did so splendidly – isn’t the dangerous, pathological sort at all. It’s your genuine and legitimate desire to receive credit for an extraordinarily hard job brilliantly well-done. Instead of snakes among the congregation, there are sweets, and how well-deserved. We wish you מזל טוב.

