



SERMON MATTOT–MASS'EI:ⁱ MOSES AND THE LOVE TEST

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 4 August 2024
anniversary blessing for Kirsty and Andy
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

[1] When Ethel, older sister of William Brown – *Just William*, of Richmal Crompton fame – was finding it hard to decide which of two local boys should be allowed to escort her to the annual tennis club dance, William had one of his trademark genius ideas to help her choose. He told both young men that Ethel had fallen into a lake and urgently needed rescuing.ⁱⁱ

That would be a test all right[,reflected William]. He'd see which dived in to save her. Even if they both dived in, he'd see which dived in first. [But a]s one man they flung off their coats and dived in from the parapet of the bridge. Side by side they dived, without an inch to choose between them. Bother them! thought William.

[2] Now, if only Moses had been as creative as William, he might have solved the problem of who the daughters of Tz'lof'chad should marry, without having to resort to a trite *deus ex machina* like consulting God.

[3] But consult God he did, and the answer he got is one that might seem instinctively uncomfortable to us: *Every daughter among the Israelite tribes who inherits a share must become the wife of someone from ... her father's tribe.*ⁱⁱⁱ

[4] 'Don't marry outside the tribe because then you and your wealth would be lost to us' is not exactly a sentiment in keeping with the ethos of this congregation! So Andy, by choosing this passage – to celebrate your and Kirsty's presumably free choice to join together in marriage – you set me a bit of a challenge.

ⁱ Numbers 36:1-13

ⁱⁱ Richmal Crompton, *William the Showman* (1937; repr London: Pan Macmillan Children's Books, 1992): 229-230.

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 36:8

[5] And I hope I've risen to the challenge by unearthing a dusty manuscript from 12th-century Aleppo, called Midrash Aggadah. In fact, it was unearthed in 1897 by Rabbi Solomon Buber, but even today it remains very incomplete, with lots of dot-dot-dots where the parchment was torn or worn or unreadable.

[6] Yet one of the fragments we do have is a snippet of commentary on this very Torah reading, and it says:^{iv}

Advice was given to [the daughters of Tz'lof'chad] that if they found worthy young men in their own tribe, men who they wanted to marry, then they should not marry anybody else.

That is a fantastically radical interpretation.

[7] Firstly, it recasts what we might have thought of as a Divine decree – *וְזֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה*, *Thus God commanded*^v – as mere “advice”.

[8] Secondly, and more importantly, it understands the advice as being incredibly empowering. It almost completely neuters the idea that these five strong women were restricted in their choice of life partner: they should marry within their own tribe... if they want to, if that is where they find the worthy man. The obvious implication is that, if they instead find a worthy man outside the tribe, and wish to marry him, go ahead. (OK, it's still heteronormative, but we're in 12th-century Aleppo here; throw them a bone.)

[9] The question then is, how does one identify a worthy fiancé(e)? And that's where we come back to William Brown's idea of a 'love test'. The saving-from-drowning scenario he dreamt up was, obviously, ludicrous. But the fundamental idea is sound. It's about their personal qualities and characteristics, not about their bloodline.

[10] And there is no need, no reason, to be tribal about those characteristics, any more than there is a need or reason to be tribal about wealth. 'Marrying out' isn't a phrase we like to use because of the completely inaccurate connotations of loss: loss of money, loss of human capital, loss of Jewishness. We know that that isn't true. Modern life isn't binary, and almost certainly, life amongst the Israelite tribes wasn't binary either. A marriage enriches, or at least

^{iv} Midrash Aggadah to Numbers 36:6

^v Numbers 36:6



has the potential to enrich, everybody even vaguely connected to the happy couple.

[11] Above all, these days, we can't be tribal because we have no clear idea of who is in which tribe. Leaving aside the ten lost tribes, some of us might be Judahites, some Benjaminites, some Levites, some converts or descendants of converts, and save for a small number of cases, we have very little idea who is what.

[12] A beautiful passage in the Tosefta, a 2nd-century compendium of Jewish law, illustrates this. Rabbi Akiva reassures a young man of Egyptian origin – a friend of one of Akiva's students – that:^{vi}

All the nations [are] mixed up! An Ammonite marries an Egyptian, and an Egyptian marries an Ammonite, and anyone marries anyone from all the families of the earth, and anyone from all the families of the earth marries anyone.

[13] Kirsty and Andy, whether you be Judahite, Benjaminite, Levite, convert or designer cross-breed, your marriage has brought so much not only to your own lives and the lives of your family, but also to us here at BHPS.

[14] We wish you many, many more years of joy; many, many more years of your amazingly varied natural pursuits; and, above all, many, many more years in which you are so sure of each other's love that there will be no need to replicate William Brown's drowning test. מזל טוב!

^{vi} t.Kiddushin 5:4

