



SERMON EIKEV:ⁱ WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 24 August 2024
bat mitzvah of Pearl
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

[1] A couple of months ago, I went to a cousin's bar mitzvah at Catford and Bromley Synagogue. And my little Omri, being a rabbi's son, naturally assumes that he owns any synagogue in which he happens to find himself, so during the service he went sashaying round the room, and climbing on the bimah, much like he does here.

[2] Except there was something rather special about that shul's bimah. It was covered by a cloth embroidered with the words: "*In loving memory of Abraham and Esther Wagman.*" Abraham and Esther Wagman were my great-grandparents, Omri's great-great grandparents. How extraordinary it felt to see Omri frolicking on the same bimah where his great-great grandfather had once stood.

[3] Pearl, you so beautifully expressed in your d'var Torah that Jews are all connected to each other, not only in this generation but between generations. As the writer Ze'ev Maghen has put it:ⁱⁱ

[Y]ou personally were born quite recently. You haven't existed, built, climbed, fallen, lost, won, wept, rejoiced, created, learned, argued, loved and struggled for thousands of years. Nevertheless: you, my dear friend, happen to have lucked out. You are a distinguished member of a nation which has done all these things, and then some [...Y]ou can extend your arms and touch the eons and the millennia, you can ... bask in the glory and writhe in the pain and draw on the power emanating from every era and every episode and every experience of your indomitable, indestructible, obstinately everlasting people [...Y]ou were there. You participated in what they did, in all those places at all those times, you fought their battles, felt their feelings and learned their lessons. You tended flocks with Rachel, and slaved in Potiphar's house with Joseph; you sang in the wilderness with Miriam, and toppled the walls of Jericho with Joshua; you

ⁱ Deuteronomy 8:1-10

ⁱⁱ Ze'ev Maghen, *Imagine: John Lennon and the Jews, a philosophical rampage* (self-published, 2010): 75-76.

carried first fruits to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem ... you went into exile with the prophet Jeremiah, and hung your harp and wept by the rivers of Babylon; you were with ... Akiva in the Roman torture chamber ... you were crucified for refusing the cross in the Crusades ... you were exiled from the shores of Spain by Isabella, and ... parachuted into Hungary with Hanna Senesh, and fought back at Warsaw with Mordechai Anilewitz; you were shot with your family in the forests of Poland ... Throughout all this and so much more, you were there with them – and they are here with you.

[4] This idea goes some way towards answering a question raised by the words of ברכת המזון, the prayer which the final verse in your Torah portion commands us to recite after meals.ⁱⁱⁱ ברכת המזון traditionally includes a prayer for the bounty of the land of Israel, and the sustenance its fertile plains and valleys provides us.

[5] But... we don't live in the land of Israel. For a couple of thousand years, no Jews, or virtually no Jews, lived in the land of Israel. Why did that part of the prayer continue to be included?

[6] A Spanish Torah commentary from the eighteenth century, Me'am Lo'ez,^{iv} explains:

The answer lies in knowing the purpose of our having been given the land of Israel, which was: *So that they should keep God's statutes.*^v Since this is still possible, with thank God for the land whose original settlement gave us the opportunity to become a Torah-observing nation.

In other words, the reason is history. The land of Israel is important to the Jews because of the memories it evokes: it's the place where we became a people, where we learned Torah, where the words you read, Pearl, began to bind together your ancestors.

[7] Since then, though, your ancestors have gone on all sorts of journeys to all sorts of places. I don't know where. Eventually, in my family's case, they ended up in Catford; in yours, I understand, it was Weybridge. But in every one of those places, over hundreds and thousands of years, your ancestors will have done things – achieved things – which are amazing and remarkable. Some you may know about through family lore and storytelling, some may have been lost to the

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 8:10

^{iv} Ad loc, trans M and S Sprecher

^v Psalm 105:45



mists of time. But every place your ancestors settled, that place is special and sacred.

[8] And that goes for all of your ancestors, the Jewish ones, the non-Jewish ones, everyone who helped to create you the way that you are. Professor Christine Hayes tells us that, even in ancient times, Judaism valued the “*moral-religious component*” of Jewish identity far more than the “*genealogical component*”.^{vi} Yet genes are important too: without them, all of them, you wouldn’t be here, or at least you wouldn’t be you.

[9] We give thanks for the land of Israel not because of present-day ideas of ownership or sovereignty or settlement – but because of the inspiring spiritual and historical events that took place there in the earliest days of the Jewish people. And today, Athol and Aisling, we give thanks that your families came together to give the world the wonderful gift of Pearl.

[10] Pearl, you’re at the end of a very long chain of tradition, and most importantly, you’re conscious of it. You’ve done a fantastic job, not just today, but over the whole bat mitzvah process, and we wish you מזל טוב.

^{vi} Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: intermarriage and conversion from the Bible to Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 11.

