



## SERMON HA'AZINU:<sup>i</sup> INVENTING GOD

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 5 October 2024  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

**[1]** A short reading from Yip Harburg's book *Rhymes for the Irreverent*:<sup>ii</sup>

Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree;  
And only God who makes the tree  
Also makes the fools like me.  
But only fools like me, you see,  
Can make a God, who makes a tree.

**[2]** Despite the title, that little ditty is far from irreverent. Once we accept, as Liberal Jews do, that the Torah is a human-created document, it must follow that the God depicted therein is a human-created God.

**[3]** This doesn't mean that God doesn't exist. The Torah also speaks of donkeys, rainbows and credit agreements, and they definitely exist. But the way they're presented and characterised, the way the text impels us to relate to them, that is human.

**[4]** This Shabbat's parashah cautions us against turning to other, new, gods: gods with a small G. לֹא אֱלֹהִים אֲלֹהִים לֹא יָדְעוּם חַדָּשִׁים מִקֶּרֶב בָּאוּ, it says: a warning against *Non-gods, gods who were hitherto unknown, new ones who your ancestors did not fear*.<sup>iii</sup>

**[5]** The 12th-century commentator Joseph B'chor Shor explains<sup>iv</sup> that this verse refers to gods that "*were never called gods until ... you built them and appointed them to be gods*".

<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 32:16-27

<sup>ii</sup> Yip Harburg, *Rhymes for the Irreverent* (Madison, Wisconsin: Freedom From Religion Foundation, 2006): 17.

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 32:17

<sup>iv</sup> *Ad loc*

**[6]** If we unpack that a little, a fascinating point emerges. Things that are not gods, become gods (still with a small G), when we designate them as gods.

**[7]** Firstly, that means that humans have the power to create, a power that is Divine in form and in scope. God said, “*Let there be light*,” and, behold, there was light;<sup>v</sup> idolaters say, “*Let this statue be a god*,” and, behold, it is a god.

**[8]** Secondly, of course, as with any creative power, this power can be used for good or for evil. When we use it to enthrone Torah values – justice, love of neighbour and stranger, charity – as being of Divine importance, that is a good thing. When we live these values, we enthrone God (with a capital G) in our world.

**[9]** But when we elevate un-Jewish values – *kal v’chomer* physical things – and begin worshipping them, or building our lives around them – centring them as if worshipping them – we are creating idols.

**[10]** As the somewhat facetious Anglo-Jewish poet Izak Goller put it: “*Shut down God’s book: it’s out of date. Hail passbook, chequebook, banker’s rate!*”.<sup>vi</sup>

**[11]** Even Judaism itself can become idolatrous if it becomes divorced from its ethical foundations. A fixated focus on ritual, at the expense of moral clarity, means we’re worshipping texts rather than our God of practical righteousness.

**[12]** It was this very concern which led directly to Liberal Judaism being founded. It an 1899 article by Lily Montagu which sparked the whole thing, and that article opened with the bold words: “*[T]he majority of [Jews] are either devoted to ceremonialism at the expense of religion, or indifferent both to ceremonialism and religion.*”<sup>vii</sup> She went on to worry about those who:<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 1:3

<sup>vi</sup> Izak Goller, *A Jew Speaks!: a new book of verse and prose* (Liverpool: T Lyon and Co, 1926): 36. Rev Dr Goller followed this comment with a prophets-profits pun, but that works better in writing.

<sup>vii</sup> Lily H Montagu, “The spiritual possibilities of Judaism to-day”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 11 (1899), 216-231: 216.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*: 218.



[W]hen [they] repeat[] the prayers ordered by [their ancestors, are] less stirred by the effort of the soul to hold communion with the Infinite than by a sense of ... unquestioning obedience.

**[13]** This High Holy Day season, as always, is a fantastic opportunity to reflect on what we elevate to Divine status in our lives. If the answer is, the values of the Jewish ethical tradition – treating others as we’d wish to be treated ourselves – then we’re not crossing the line identified by Joseph B’chor Shor, we’re not creating and worshipping new gods, because these values are not “*new*”, they’re in the Torah in black and white, they’ve been with us since Sinai.

**[14]** As we celebrate the anniversary of the world’s creation, let us also celebrate our own creative powers, and resolve, in the coming year, to use them Jewishly, for good. בן יהי רצון, may this be God’s will.

