



## SERMON ROSH HASHANAH: JEWISH NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Thursday 3 October 2024  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

Rebel, o Jews  
Against the complacency  
Of racial pride!  
Think not that because  
We are descended from Hebraic people  
We automatically partake of Hebraic genius.  
That Jews produced a Moses,  
An Isaiah, a Jeremiah, an Einstein  
Does not give us personal leave  
To strut in the marble halls  
Of our new temples.  
Because we had such ancestors  
Or distinguished contemporaries  
Does that make each of us great  
Or our progeny prophets?

**[1]** The words, once again, of Rabbi Mitchell Salem Fisher.<sup>i</sup>

**[2]** Many years ago, I was at a Limmud session led by the late Rabbi David Goldberg z”l. He was making exactly the same point as that made by Rabbi Mitchell Salem Fisher in the text with which I began, criticising the publication of “*books with faintly embarrassing titles like The Jewish Contribution to Civilisation or Jewish Nobel Prize Winners*”.<sup>ii</sup>

**[3]** When it was time for questions, someone launched – as so often – into an impassioned speech that was in no sense a question and which suggested that they had been deaf to the entire point of the lecture. “*There have been so many Jews who’ve won Nobel prizes! Einstein, Hertz, Agnon...*” Rabbi Goldberg cut her list off after six or seven names,

<sup>i</sup> Mitchell Salem Fisher, *Rebel, O Jews! and other prayers* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1973): 1–2.

<sup>ii</sup> David J Goldberg, *This is Not the Way: Jews, Judaism and Israel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012): 88.

saying: “Yes, yes, we know all about that,” but she insisted: “It needs repeating!”

**[4]** But does it need repeating? I’m far from sure. To recite the roll of honour of Important Jews is easy. Yet ‘easy’ and ‘necessary’ are not synonyms. Why do some feel a compulsion to broadcast the achievements of the Jews of yesteryear?

**[5]** I think there are three possible reasons. Starting with the least creditable, there is a particularly obnoxious trend of comparing the number of Jewish and Muslim Nobel laureates, with the spurious intent of ‘proving’ that Jews contribute much valuable learning to humanity while Muslims, despite their greater numbers, contribute nothing.

**[6]** Secondly, some highlight Jewish achievement out of a sense of insecurity: no, really, we’re good people, we fit in, we use microscopes and test tubes just like you, we help you, you benefit from us! This is based on an idea – often a subconscious idea – that the Jewish people’s presence in the West needs to be justified, and can best be justified by reference to what we contribute.

**[7]** Thirdly, there is simple, honest pride. As Jews, we’re connected not just to our own families but to each other. We kvell, across time and space, at the accomplishments of people descended from the same shtetls as us. As the somewhat tasteless joke goes, when the priest remarked that Jesus was the saviour of mankind, the rabbi proudly replied: “*He was one of our boys, you know.*”

**[8]** While there is everything wrong with the first, racist, reason to trumpet Jewish attainment, and much to regret about the inferiority complex in which the second is marinated, we might say there’s nothing wrong with taking pride in the achievements of ‘our boys’ (not to mention our girls).

**[9]** Yet I wonder whether the difference between reason 1 and reason 3 is all that vast. Both seem to deny, or defy, the fundamental fact that we’re all individuals. If the relative lack of Muslim Nobel laureates doesn’t reflect badly on the Muslim community as a whole – which of course it doesn’t – why should the relative glut of Jewish Nobel laureates reflect well on us? We didn’t discover superfluidity in helium-3 or invent the multiwire proportional chamber. I don’t even know what those things are, so I certainly don’t qualify to bask in the glory.



**[10]** This morning, we read the story of the Binding of Isaac, which begins, crucially, in the singular: *God decided to test Abraham*.<sup>iii</sup> God was not testing us. We were not present. We were not involved. Abraham's supine willingness to sacrifice his own child is not something in which we had any part, nor is it something for which we should feel obliged to take any responsibility.

**[11]** Later in the story, plurals appear. After substituting the ram for the boy, God promises to bless Abraham using doubled-up language: בֵּרַךְ אֶתְּרִכָּה, בֵּרַךְ אֶתְּיִצְחָק.<sup>iv</sup> A midrash<sup>v</sup> understands the two appearances of the root בֵּרַךְ, meaning 'blessing', to mean two blessings were given: one to Abraham, one to Isaac. The two generations were being treated as distinct. They didn't share a blessing. Abraham was no reflection on Isaac; Isaac was no reflection on Abraham. United, as they were, by family bonds, they were also individuals, standing and judged as such.

**[12]** By no means dissimilarly, Dr Phyllis Tribble understands the entire story of the Binding of Isaac as a warning about over-attachment. She notes God's strong emphasis of just how close Abraham feels to his child – *Your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac*<sup>vi</sup> – and concludes:<sup>vii</sup>

Abraham binds himself and his son. To attach is to know the anxiety of separation. In clinging to Isaac, Abraham incurs the risk of losing him ... To attach is to practice idolatry. In adoring Isaac, Abraham turns from God.

**[13]** If fixation on the achievements of historical Jews – the Freuds, the Asimovs – becomes too reverent, it, too risks shading into a sort of idolatry. By taking vicarious pride in things other people have done, we devalue our own abilities and our own agency, and, indeed, our sense of individuality and self, which comes to us directly from God. Every moment we spend “*strut[ting] in the marble halls*”<sup>viii</sup> of strangers' past glories, even if those strangers happened to share a mythic bloodline

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 22:1

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 22:17

<sup>v</sup> Genesis Rabbah 56:11

<sup>vi</sup> Genesis 22:2

<sup>vii</sup> Phyllis Tribble, “Genesis 22: the sacrifice of Sarah” in Alice Bach (ed), *Women in the Hebrew Bible: a reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 271–292: 277–278. Emphasis added.

<sup>viii</sup> Fisher, *ibid*.



with us, every moment we do that is time we are not looking at ourselves and our immediate surroundings.

**[14]** Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity for us to turn away from the racial pride that strains the tethers anchoring us to the here and now. This process of detachment is far from easy. There is a mountain to climb before we can truly hear a story of someone with a Jewish name winning some prestigious award without mentally associating ourselves with their victory. But climb it we must, and, at the top of the mountain, we can sacrifice our tendency to look elsewhere, and, in the intense focus on our own selves which follows – our own capabilities, our own achievements, our own failings – we can move closer to God and closer to true atonement. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

