



SERMON YOM KIPPUR AFTERNOON: BACK ON DECK

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 12 October 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

Rebel, o Jews,
Against injustice!
We must not permit the mighty river
Of righteousness of Amos
To remain a verbal trickle,
An archaic mumble.
We shall not escape nor progress
By clothing problems
In self-glorifying aphorisms.
We must not allow sweet clatter
To keep us from disturbing
The nastiness of man toward man.
'Amelioristic inevitability'
Was burned in Auschwitz
And asphyxiated in Belsen.
We may no longer shunt
To a mystical conglomeration
Our duties and our hopes.
The blinding light of faith
Must never prevent us
From glimpsing the grimness
Of ignorance, poverty, hatred and war.

[1] As you'll have noticed, each of my sermons over these High Holy Days has opened with a poem by Rabbi Mitchell Salem Fisher beginning: "*Rebel, o Jews!*"ⁱ But who was Rabbi Fisher?

[2] Although he was alive until as recently as 1990, his legacy is almost entirely lost to obscurity. His one book – in which I found the poetry we've been enjoying – is so out of print that I had to obtain a photocopy from the National Library of Israel.

ⁱ In this case, Mitchell Salem Fisher, *Rebel, O Jews! and other prayers* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1973): 4.

[3] And I only discovered him thanks to my colleague Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steenⁱⁱ doggedly following footnotes until she discovered his fascinating life-story. He was ordained in the 1920s, but quickly withdrew from the congregational rabbinate: his 1930 resignation letter lamented how rabbis had degenerated into being nothing more than “*lecturer[s], entertainer[s] and institution promotion agent[s]*”.ⁱⁱⁱ He spent the rest of his career working as a lawyer for the Anti-Nazi League.^{iv}

[4] Rabbi Robyn felt a connection with Rabbi Fisher’s life as it was the opposite of her own: she abandoned human rights law to re-train as a rabbi.^v

[5] For my part, though, I feel a connection with him that speaks particularly loudly on Yom Kippur afternoon. Because it is on Yom Kippur afternoon that we encounter somebody else who was summoned to a prophetic role, but ran away from it, considering that their efforts would be wasted, futile, pointless.

[6] That somebody else, of course, is Jonah.

[7] Jonah was somebody who ran away multiple times and on multiple levels. Not only did he board the ship to Tarshish in order to get as far away from Nineveh as possible, he then burrowed down into the hold of the ship (see what I mean about multiple levels?) to shy away from a storm. He did everything he could to distance himself from the harsh realities of the world – “*retreating from life*”, as Rabbi Steven Bob puts it.^{vi}

[8] But then, abruptly, in a really quite sudden moment of transformation, Jonah turns it all around. He takes up his mission. He prophesies. Whatever inhibitions he had the first time round, evaporated. There was no hiding in the hold of the ship, no buying tickets to far-flung destinations, no evasion. He faced up to what he now recognised as his responsibility, and he fulfilled it.

ⁱⁱ Robyn Ashworth-Steen, “A disturbed and disturbing rabbi”, *Tattoo-worthy texts* (14 June 2024): <<https://perma.cc/KL9X-L5UP>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Steven Bob, *Jonah and the Meaning of Our Lives: a verse-by-verse contemporary commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2016): 38.



[9] Rabbi Mitchell Salem Fisher had an abrupt moment of change as well: there's something I didn't mention earlier. He quit the rabbinate in 1930 and spent the rest of his career practising law. But... his book, the book from which all of the "*Rebel, o Jews!*" poems came, was published in 1973. Over 40 years after he abandoned the pulpit, something brought him back. Decades after spurning the rabbinate as a talking-shop shorn of passion, sincerity, genuine moves towards social change, he must have had some sort of change of heart which prompted him to write (and disseminate) the words we've been hearing.

[10] And although a Big Thing that must have affected him took place in those intervening years – the Holocaust – that was still a long time before 1973. Rabbi Fisher, I think, must have had a moment when he was rabbi-in-the-fisher, when, just like Jonah, he experienced something that changed his outlook entirely.

[11] True, his warning in this afternoon's poem shared the same sentiment as his original letter of resignation: "*We must not permit the mighty river of righteousness of Amos to remain a verbal trickle.*"^{vii} That is quite right. Synagogues must not be spaces where we simply mouth platitudes before going home again.

[12] But then again, isn't that exactly the message of Yom Kippur? We've sat here for nearly 24 hours, reading words written by others, listening to songs beyond our vocal range, pushing the boundaries of our endurance. And we do all this fully aware that it will all be for naught if we walk out of the front door the same people – albeit somewhat hungrier – as we were when we came in.

[13] So we have to undergo the same journey that Jonah went, the same journey that Rabbi Fisher went: after running away, we need to come back, to return.

[14] In many ways, Yom Kippur is escapism. It might not feel like an enjoyable form of escapism, but then again, it's time we take out of our ordinary, humdrum working lives; we eschew the kitchen, avoid the café, stay away from the pub. I think we're actually hiding in the hold of the ship. And it's time for us to find the courage to surface, to face up to the real world once more, to climb the ladder.

^{vii} Fisher, *ibid.*



[15] “We may no longer shunt to a mystical conglomeration our duties and our hopes.”^{viii} We’ve had a day of pinning our hopes on God; now it’s time to pin our hopes on ourselves. God wasn’t going to rescue the Ninevites: it took Jonah. God wasn’t going to salve Rabbi Fisher’s conscience which smarted for all those decades: Rabbi Fisher, himself, had to make a clean breast of it and distribute his prophetic word.

[16] And God isn’t going to perfect our lives here in Brighton and Hove. God, or faith in God, can inspire, encourage, urge – but a time comes when the urging has to stop and the doing has to begin. As Yom Kippur draws to a close, it is time for us to ascend from the hold and face the storm; climb through the hatch and onto the deck; thence we can take the helm of our own destiny, steer hard-a-starboard, and sail humanity to a better future.

[17] בן יהי רצינו, may this be our will.

^{viii} Ibid.

