



## SERMON VA-YISHLACH:<sup>i</sup> POSING AS A RABBI IN HOVE

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 14 December 2024  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

**[1]** I know it's very bad form to quote one's own reviews, but I would like to mention something that the *Jewish News Syndicate* said about me earlier this month, which I greatly treasured. They said: "*Gabriel Kanter-Webber [is] a leftist activist claiming to be a 'rabbi'.*"<sup>ii</sup> The phrase 'I'll be off to the framers in the morning'<sup>iii</sup> springs to mind.

**[2]** But I actually want to look at a different "*leftist activist claiming to be a rabbi*", one Rabbi Jacob Meir Zalkind. You've probably not heard of him, but in his day – he left the UK and retired to Haifa in 1933 – he was a renowned anarcho-communist, and editor of a Yiddish anarchist newspaper called *Arbayter Fraynd*.<sup>iv</sup> His *yahrzeit* falls in the coming days.

**[3]** Even early in life, his biographer Anna Elena Torres notes, Zalkind "*was known for his provocative personality*",<sup>v</sup> but as time went on he became more and more outspoken, until eventually he so angered the Jewish establishment that he was forced out of the congregational rabbinate. In 1918, the Orthodox chief rabbi issued a statement to *The Observer* denouncing him, and *The Jewish Chronicle* more bluntly declared that Zalkind was "*posing as a rabbi*". He fled London to lie low with a lady-friend, and they lived there together for some years: 28 Western Road, Hove<sup>vi</sup> – less than 300m from where we're sitting now.

<sup>i</sup> Genesis 32:25-33

<sup>ii</sup> Daniel Greenfield, "Thought police", *Jewish News Syndicate* (28 November 2024): <<https://archive.ph/s2BAF>>

<sup>iii</sup> Jacob Stolworthy, "Joe Lycett unveils framed front page after 'mocking' Liz Truss on BBC politics show", *The Independent* (18 October 2022): <<https://perma.cc/4TR6-EB8L>>

<sup>iv</sup> For an accessible online introduction to Rabbi Zalkind, see Anna Elena Torres, "The Anarchist Sage/ Der Goen Anarkhist: Rabbi Yankev-Meir Zalkind and religious genealogies of anarchism", *In Geveb* (27 February 2019): <<https://perma.cc/3FYD-GTLN>>

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> "The vagaries of a 'rabbi'", *The Jewish Chronicle* (22 November 1918): 23.

**[4]** So I'm rather touched to know that I'm not the first person in this very postcode area to have been accused by the Jewish press, in as many words, of being a "*leftist activist claiming to be a 'rabbi'*".

**[5]** One of Zalkind's essays pondered whether he and his readers should identify as Yiddish-speaking anarchists, Jewish anarchists, or 'just anarchists'.<sup>vii</sup> Unsurprisingly, he saw himself as standing completely within the four amot of the Jewish tradition, writing:<sup>viii</sup>

Judaism is a broad river, flowing with much that is flawed, but everyone draws out from it that which appeals to them. In Judaism, as in anarchism, we can focus on destroying and building at the same time, constantly searching and striving for something better and higher, breaking old gods and birthing new ones.

**[6]** And that's where our Torah portion comes in. There is a very, very strange word which appears in the biblical text: וַתִּקַּע. In context, it reads: וַתִּקַּע בֶּרֶךְ-יִצְחָק, *Jacob's hip was strained*,<sup>ix</sup> with וַתִּקַּע meaning 'was strained'.

**[7]** But almost exactly one chapter earlier, we had another verse using what is apparently the same word: וַיַּעֲקֹב תִּקְעָא אֶת-אָהֳלֹו בְּהָר, *And Jacob pitched his tent firmly on the mountainside*.<sup>x</sup> There, the word תִּקְעָא means 'attached firmly'.

**[8]** Words that have two meanings, one of which is the opposite of the other, are called contradictanymys.<sup>xi</sup> The classic example, which I think I've probably used before, is the verb 'to dust': dusting a shelf with a cloth means taking away tiny particles, whereas dusting a cake with cocoa powder means adding tiny particles. Only context can tell us which meaning is intended.

**[9]** The word וַתִּקַּע appears to be a contradictanym as well: sometimes it means 'to attach firmly', like the tent; sometimes it means 'to attempt to rip out', like the hip.

<sup>vii</sup> Hayyim Rothman, *No Masters but God: portraits of anarcho-Judaism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021): 52.

<sup>viii</sup> Jacob Zalkind, "Tesen far a konferens" [Yiddish], *Arbayter Fraynd* (15 December 1920), 1-2: 2.

<sup>ix</sup> Genesis 32:26

<sup>x</sup> Genesis 31:26

<sup>xi</sup> Ben Schott, *Schott's Original Miscellany* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002): 40.



**[10]** Those meanings aren't just contradictory: they're the most complete opposites possible. As the commentator Chizkuni<sup>xii</sup> points out, this is a word "*with two meanings: creation and destruction*".

**[11]** Yet are they truly opposites? Often they come hand-in-hand. Many much-valued facets of human life require both: our beautiful shul could not have been constructed until what was here before had been torn down, and the builders worked from plans which an architect could not have prepared without the felling of a tree to make the paper. Even birth, the most basic of creative processes, can only take place thanks to the simultaneous existence of death.

**[12]** This is especially true in the case of Jacob's battle with the angel. The wrenching of Jacob's hip led to the foundation of the Jewish people and the consecration of the name ישראל,<sup>xiii</sup> Israel, *God-Fighter*.<sup>xiv</sup> We are the people who "*wrestle[] with beings both Divine and human and prevail[]*":<sup>xv</sup> that core aspect of our identity only emerged when tested in the crucible of real life.

**[13]** What does it mean to be a God-Fighter? It means nothing is off-limits. So often, prospective converts have told me that what attracts them to Judaism is that we find it acceptable to question anything and everything.

**[14]** Being a God-Fighter means saying 'no' when appropriate: think of Abraham rebuking God for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>xvi</sup> Ultimately, said Zalkind, God created humankind, knowing full-well that we would be rebellious, subversive troublemakers, "*because the company of angels had become לאַנגווייליג צו, far too tedious*".<sup>xvii</sup>

**[15]** Our being God-Fighters is what makes us good company. It is also what makes us good subjects: our prayers are that much more

<sup>xii</sup> Chizkuni to Genesis 32:26. Ilan Chayyim-Pur's *Hofchim b'Mikra u-v'Lashon Chachamim* at p 88 agrees that we're dealing with a contradictanym. The dictionaries dispute this, however, asserting that the words have different roots: the tent-meaning's root ת-ק-ע, the hip-meaning's root י-ק-ע. This seems more grammatically plausible, and also goes some way towards excusing the unusual passive of 'was strained'. However, for the purposes of this sermon, who needs dictionaries?

<sup>xiii</sup> Genesis 32:29

<sup>xiv</sup> Fox translation

<sup>xv</sup> Genesis 32:29

<sup>xvi</sup> Genesis 18:25

<sup>xvii</sup> Jacob Zalkind, "A shtiekel shepfungs-mitologia" [Yiddish], *Arbayter Fraynd* (May 1920): 3.



meaningful, more powerful, when we understand that they're given voluntarily.<sup>xviii</sup> If praise is given automatically, unquestioningly, without hesitation or contemplation, it is valueless. Only when it is recognised that we have the option to find fault with God, to query, answer back, even be angry, even physically fight, only then does the decision to offer praise become consequential.

**[16]** And if God is susceptible to fault-finding, how much more so is the Jewish establishment! Rabbi Zalkind was treated as a pariah by the press for his iconoclasm, for his outspokenness and his willingness to depart from the 'party line' agreed by the rest of the community. But what could be more Jewish than to depart from a party line? What could be more Jewish than to shatter idols wrongfully revered by our community's national leaders?

**[17]** It would be tempting to view Jews' willingness to be argumentative even with the Divine as heretical. Yet the tension between criticism and praise is, on close examination, as false as the tension between destroying and building. Criticising God and praising God are two sides of the same coin.

**[18]** We started with Rabbi Zalkind mentioning<sup>xix</sup> that Judaism is about "*destroying and building at the same time ... breaking old gods and birthing new ones*". So how appropriate that the moment which defined us – Jacob's battle with the angel – should be recounted by means of one of those special ambiguous verbs!

**[19]** I think that Rabbi Jacob Zalkind, the leftist activist who was accused of posing as a rabbi in Hove, was rather like the biblical Jacob. He struggled against beings both human and Divine for his whole life, עד עלות השחר, *until the break of dawn*.<sup>xx</sup> And he prevailed, at least in the sense that he spent his life doing what fulfilled him, leaving a legacy, obscure as it may be, that continues to inspire a century later.

**[20]** Surrounded by ambiguity – Jewish or anarchist, rabbi or activist – he rationalised and resolved these contradictions.

<sup>xviii</sup> In fact, Zalkind understood the whole body of Jewish law to be voluntary following God's decision to break the covenant by dispersing the Israelites: see Va-Yomer Ya'akov to Isaiah 40, and Rothman, *ibid*, 51.

<sup>xix</sup> Zalkind, "Tesen far a konferens", *ibid*.

<sup>xx</sup> Genesis 32:25



**[21]** May we, too, take up the Jewish duty to straddle tension and live with paradox, to wrestle with gods, to smash the false ones and build a new and better future, with our hopes and aspirations being fully manifested. (And may we also learn the century-old lesson that there's nothing whatsoever wrong with leftist activists claiming to be rabbis in Hove.) בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

