



SERMON VA-EIRA:ⁱ HAMAS AND MUSK – DEALING WITH THE DEVIL

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 25 January 2025
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

[1] Well, I don't know about you, but I cried a little when I saw the photos of the first three returned hostages being reunited with their mums.ⁱⁱ While my head warned me that three slivers of good news can't begin to wash away the 16 months of pure undiluted nightmare that has had Israel-Palestine in its grip, my heart was able to look at the footage of these three young women being released as an unabashed moment of joy and human connection.

[2] Of course, the ethics of the deal that led to the release are a little murky. The reality is that doing 'deals' with Hamas – a terrorist organisation which has perpetrated unspeakable evils against our, and its own, people – feels icky. Granted, the ceasefire is fantastic news: it came far too late for far too many Palestinians, yet we can still give thanks that the present bout of bloodshed and destruction is drawing to a close. But the other concessions made to Hamas feel questionable: the very act of giving terrorists something that they ask for is intrinsically questionable.

[3] Yet while this was a deal with the devil, sometimes we have to deal with the devil.

[4] Earlier this morning, we readⁱⁱⁱ about God's instruction to Moses and Aaron that they liberate the Israelites from captivity (which sounds sadly familiar).

[5] There's a rabbinic tradition^{iv} that God doesn't speak to humankind in places of uncleanness or iniquity, yet the instruction we read today

ⁱ Exodus 6:20-30

ⁱⁱ See eg Peter Beaumont, "Three hostages released by Hamas reunited with mothers after ceasefire deal" *The Guardian* (19 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/B563-6KD5>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 6:26

^{iv} Yalkut Shimoni, Ezekiel 336

was given in Egypt, a nation of idolaters and slavedrivers. How do we explain God's decision to speak out from within Egypt's borders?

[6] The commentator Rav Zalman Sorotzkin explains^v that God only did so “*when צורת ישראל, the suffering of the Israelites, made it necessary*”.

[7] So it was necessary. There was no choice. The suffering of the Israelites made it essential for God to hold the Divine nose and transact holy business in an unholy environment.

[8] And the same, surely, applies to the hostages and their present-day captivity: nobody wants to deal with the wicked and depraved Hamas, but the suffering of the Israelites and the imperative of liberating them made it necessary to do a deal with the devil.

[9] On the subject of wickedness and depravity, though, we also need to talk about Elon Musk.

[10] Following Musk's decision to give a Nazi salute^{vi} in front of the world's press, and then to jeer and sneer^{vii} when confronted about it, Jake Wallis Simons, the editor of *The Jewish Chronicle*, mocked those who were concerned, saying that our discomfort with Nazi symbolism was merely “*weaponising the Holocaust*”.^{viii} (Which is odd, because he's always been the first to condemn Nazi salutes from other parts of the political spectrum.)^{ix}

[11] Similarly, yet worse, the Anti-Defamation League, the ADL – roughly America's equivalent of the CST, it exists to counter antisemitism in public life – issued an extraordinary statement indulging Musk for his “*awkward gesture in a moment of enthusiasm*”.^x

[12] These statements were blatant, shameful and un-Jewish acts of ‘sucking up’. Musk did a Nazi salute. As the German newspaper^{xi} *Die Zeit* put it (and I'm sure I don't need to translate this): “*Ein Hitlergruß*

^v Ozneyim la-Torah to Exodus 6:28

^{vi} See eg Madeline Sherratt, “Elon Musk furious after Wikipedia page calls his controversial gesture a ‘Nazi salute’”, *The Independent* (22 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/9LHD-YPT5>>

^{vii} George Wright, “Musk responds to backlash over gesture at Trump rally”, *BBC News* (21 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/P3EN-GU5W>>

^{viii} Jake Wallis Simons, *Twitter* (21 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/VGL9-73F7>>

^{ix} See eg Jake Wallis Simons, *Twitter* (29 July 2025): <<https://perma.cc/HBL2-HKNJ>>

^x Anti-Defamation League, *Twitter* (20 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/QV8C-3G45>>

^{xi} Lenz Jacobsen, “Ein Hitlergruß ist ein Hitlergruß ist ein Hitlergruß”, *Die Zeit* (21 January 2025): <<https://archive.ph/cCWEQ>>



ist ein Hitlergruß ist ein Hitlergruß.” We all know perfectly well that what Musk did was a Nazi salute. The ADL knows perfectly well that what Musk did was a Nazi salute. Jake Wallis Simons knows perfectly well that what Musk did was a Nazi salute. Why are they pretending otherwise? To ingratiate themselves with him, to curry favour, to touch the hem of his garment.

[13] But unlike the Gaza situation – both Gaza situations, the ancient one and the contemporary one – there is no need or justification, in this case, to kiss a neo-Nazi’s ring. He doesn’t have any hostages. He doesn’t have any Hebrew slaves. He is deserving of nothing but contempt and no countervailing considerations require us to hold our nose and cosy up to him.

[14] Musk was on that platform in Washington DC representing a quasi-fascist regime which used its first seconds in office to undo^{xii} years of work on trans rights and to release^{xiii} a coup-plotting militia – including a man with an I’m-a-fan-of-Auschwitz T-shirt^{xiv} – from prison. The ideology this regime stands for is repugnant to Jewish values and, indeed, to human values, and there can be no excuse for the Jewish establishment toadying to such a monstrosity.

[15] It was necessary for Israel to negotiate with the malignant Hamas because of *“the suffering of the Israelites”*. Families reunited was a concrete end goal that made it all worthwhile.

[16] However, so long as America continues to be a democracy, which I appreciate is far from a given, there is no risk in Jewish leaders resisting the present administration – and every reason for them to do so. Moses stood up to Pharaoh; the Jewish world must stand up to Trump. And as our cousins in the United States begin to reckon with what the next four years will mean for them – some of my rabbinic colleagues are already helping families of trans congregants to make sure that their passports are up-to-date – it is our duty to stand with them and support them.

^{xii} Megan Molteni, “Trump executive order declaring only ‘two sexes’ gets the biology wrong, scientists say”, *Stat* (23 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/TUY9-MUCK>>

^{xiii} Joan Walsh, “Trump liberates his own paramilitary force”, *The Nation* (21 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/M6ZJ-PZTN>>

^{xiv} “‘Hitler admirer’ released in Trump riot pardons”, *The Jewish News* (22 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/PW4Q-MESC>>



[17] The smiles on the faces of Romi Gonen, Doron Steinbrecher and Emily Damari as they hugged their mums provided a moving illustration of just what human connection can mean. The power of that connection must be harnessed for the benefit of the weak, the vulnerable and the marginal, not squandered on smug and self-serving political relationships. True Jewish leadership doesn't mean seizing photo-ops with politicians: it means challenging and confronting them.^{xv}

[18] As the fantastic Bishop Mariann Budde said^{xvi} in her inauguration sermon, shortly before a Republican congressman called for her to be deported:^{xvii} *"Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers."* For no people is that more true than for Jews. And let us say, amen.

^{xv} An example of proper Jewish leadership comes from the Central Conference of American Rabbis – of which I am proud to be a member – which put out a statement robustly denouncing Trump's decision to "erase[] the identities [and] restrict[] the rights and freedoms of nonbinary and transgender Americans": Rabbis Erica Asch and Hara E Person, "Central Conference of American Rabbis condemns federal government's attacks on nonbinary and transgender Americans", CCAR (22 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/6BQ3-S7XE>>

^{xvi} "Donald Trump rebuked by bishop as she tells him to 'have mercy' on LGBT+ community and immigrants", Sky News (21 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/C7EZ-PJWA>>

^{xvii} Mike Collins, Twitter (21 January 2025): <<https://perma.cc/FMC4-DDGX>>

