



SERMON B'SHALLACH:ⁱ REJOINING THE FAMILY

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 8 February 2025

~ *bat mitzvah of Mabel* ~

Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

[1] I'm afraid I'm going to start this sermon with what might seem like an obscure and nerdy point of Hebrew grammar. In one of the verses you read, Mabel, we heard:ⁱⁱ וְאָמַר פֶּרַעַה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִבְכִּים הֵם בְּאֶרֶץ, which the bookⁱⁱⁱ translates as: *Pharaoh will say of the Israelites: 'They are astray in the land.'*

[2] Except that isn't quite right. If Pharaoh was talking about the Israelites, we would expect it to say וְאָמַר פֶּרַעַה עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. What it actually says, though, לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, literally means that Pharaoh was talking to the Israelites. Of course, that makes no sense at all – the whole point was that the Israelites had already left – so most of the commentators^{iv} come up with a rather strained interpretation and, basically, pretend that the text says 'about' instead of 'to'.

[3] But there's an exception. One commentator, a 19th-century Lithuanian called Maharil Diskin, wonders:^v what if not all of the Israelites had left? He suggests that two stayed behind: Datan and Aviram, a pair of figures who feature prominently later on^{vi} in the Torah rebelling against Moses's leadership.

[4] To understand their story fully, we need to look at Moses and his campaign from the Hebrew slaves' point of view. Basically the first thing we learn about his adult life is that he killed an Egyptian slavedriver.^{vii} Did that really help the plight of the Israelites? Surely

ⁱ Exodus 13:18–14:5

ⁱⁱ Exodus 14:3

ⁱⁱⁱ NJPS translation

^{iv} See eg Rashi *ad loc*

^v Maharil Diskin *ad loc*

^{vi} Numbers 16

^{vii} Exodus 2:12

not. There were plenty of other slavedrivers to continue the regime of terror, and it was inevitable that the slaves would be collectively punished for the death of one of their masters. So, Datan – who witnessed the scene – made sure that Pharaoh found out it was Moses who was to blame.^{viii} Datan thereby saved the Israelites from punishment for Moses’s not-entirely-well-thought-through act of violence.

[5] A little later, after Moses first asked Pharaoh to free the slaves, Pharaoh not only said ‘no’ but made the conditions of the slavery even more cruel and even more oppressive.^{ix} Datan and Aviram, the leaders of the slaves – sort of early trade union representatives – were furious with Moses.^x This man, who grew up as a prince, swooped in, white-knighting all over the place, and all he was doing was making things worse for the Israelites!

[6] Summing all of this up, Maharil Diskin concluded that Datan and Aviram simply didn’t trust Moses. They found him hot-headed, impulsive and indifferent to how many Hebrew slaves suffered as a result of his entitled and sabre-rattling approach.

[7] So of course, they thought that the entire exodus thing was just a hare-brained scheme bound to end in disaster, and decided to stay in Egypt rather than take their chances in the wilderness.

[8] That, then, would explain who Pharaoh was talking to in the verse you read, Mabel: he was talking to the Israelites who remained in Egypt, Datan and Aviram, telling them, ‘You made the right decision, Moses has led the rest of your people to ruin.’

[9] This sounds entirely plausible, and it certainly explains the oddity of **עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** and **לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**. But now we have a different problem: if Datan and Aviram stayed in Egypt, how can they possibly be rebelling against Moses in the wilderness dozens of chapters later?

[10] And here’s how Maharil Diskin explained it: Datan and Aviram went with Pharaoh and the rest of the Egyptian army, to see what had become of their brethren, trapped at the shore of the Red Sea. And when they saw the waves part, and the Israelites escape thanks to such

^{viii} Yalkut Shimoni 167; Exodus Rabbah 1:30

^{ix} Exodus 5:6–9

^x Exodus 5:19–21; Exodus Rabbah 5:20



an extraordinary miracle, they decided they wanted to go with their people after all.^{xi}

[11] Now, Mabel, when you wrote to me, you had a lot to say about the importance of family. You told me how much you enjoy being at shul with your family – and how time spent at shul is like time spent with an extended family.

[12] And I think, ultimately, that's the same feeling that Datan and Aviram had. The Israelites were just one big family. And while families and family members are sometimes really annoying – there's no shame in admitting it; as the poet Elizabeth Hands put it, family groups are always "*a strange parcel of creatures*"^{xii} – they're still ours, and we still want to be with them, to spend our lives with them, to share their destiny.

[13] Datan and Aviram regretted their decision to turn their back on the Israelites – on the proto-Jewish people – and decided that, in fact, they wanted to go with them. Their journey was by no means smooth: they continued to oppose Moses's leadership, and perhaps their criticisms were actually a useful check on his otherwise untrammelled authority. He made a lot of people very angry; Datan and Aviram stuck with him and did their best to look after the rest of the family.

[14] Mabel, BHPS is incredibly lucky to have had your family – your "*strange parcel of creatures*", if I may – in our midst for decades. We've celebrated so many happy occasions with you all, but this one is yours. You've worked so hard, led today's service so beautifully, and you've been a credit to your family. We wish you מזל טוב.

^{xi} This also helps to explain an oddity later in Exodus 14, namely the existence of two separate verses (22 and 29) describing the parting of the waves in subtly different terms. Maharil Diskin to Exodus 5:14-20 explains: the sea actually split twice, once for the fleeing slaves, and once to enable Datan and Aviram to catch up.

^{xii} Elizabeth Hands, "On an unsociable family" in *The Death of Amnon* (Coventry: N Rollason, 1789): 113.

