



## **SERMON VA-YAKHEIL:<sup>i</sup> WHEN IS INTERNATIONAL MEN'S DAY?**

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 22 March 2025**

**~ non-bat mitzvah of Janet ~**

**Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

**[1]** In 2015, Philip Davies MP stood up in the House of Commons and demanded parliamentary time to discuss men's rights:<sup>ii</sup>

I ... decided it was only right, given that we have a debate each year on International Women's Day, to appeal for time to be given for a debate to commemorate [men], in the interests of gender parity ... The problem is that virtually everything ... seems to start from the premise that everything is biased against women and that something must be done about it. There is never an appreciation that men's issues can be just as important and that men can be just as badly treated as women ... I do not believe there is actually an issue ... Often, problems are stirred up by those who might be described as militant feminists and the politically correct males who sometimes pander to them.

He went on to complain about how unfair it is that more men are in prison than women,<sup>iii</sup> and how "*the moment anybody raises any [issue] that affects men, [they] are accused of being [a] misogynist[]*".<sup>iv</sup> (On the subject of misogyny, when Mr Davies's colleague Madeleine Moon MP stood up to speak, he said he would only let her do so "*if she wants to make a sensible point*".)<sup>v</sup>

**[2]** I wonder what Philip Davies would make of today's parashah.

**[3]** Janet, you beautifully read us six fantastically important verses, including: כַּל-אַלְמָנָה וַיְתוֹם לֹא תַעֲנוּן, *You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan.*<sup>vi</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Exodus 22:20-26

<sup>ii</sup> HC Deb, 19 November 2015 c 241WH

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, c 253WH

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, c 249WH

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, c 245WH

<sup>vi</sup> Exodus 22:21

**[4]** I have a horrible feeling that Philip Davies might think to himself: how sexist! Why do widows get special legal protection that widowers don't? We're all meant to be equal! Is God saying that life's easy-peasy for men who lose their wives? Tsk! Tsk!

**[5]** Well, the 11th-century French commentator Rashi had the perfect response long before Philip Davies and the men's rights movement ever came along. Explaining why the Torah singles out widows, he says: "*Scripture only speaks about what actually happens ... and it is common for [people] to oppress [widows]*."<sup>vii</sup>

**[6]** In other words, the answer to the question, Why is there no 'you shall not mistreat any widower' verse? is the same as the answer to the oft-asked cavillous question, When is International Men's Day?<sup>viii</sup> And that answer is: it is either foolish or mendacious to pretend that the two concepts are equivalent.

**[7]** As Professor Kate Manne pithily puts it: "*[W]omen face hostile social forces that function to police and enforce patriarchal norms and expectations.*"<sup>ix</sup> That's a fact. That's an inequality. That, in a nutshell, is why an International Women's Day is necessary. That's why even the authors of the Torah – not exactly known for being militant feminists – insisted on widows being given special legal protection in recognition of their intrinsic vulnerability.

**[8]** Now, Janet, you didn't have a bat mitzvah when you turned 13. There might have been all sorts of reasons for that, and we won't go into them now. But what we can say is: what a phenomenal job you've done today. It takes an enormous amount of courage to do what you've done. Anyone standing on the bimah reading in a new language for the first time needs an enormous amount of courage.

**[9]** It isn't the case that my experience of turning up here and leading a service after four hours' sleep is equivalent to anyone else willing to take part in our worship.

**[10]** But what helps make it easier – what I hope helps make it easier – is the community itself. This lot. BHPS congregants do not just tolerate

<sup>vii</sup> Rashi *ad loc*

<sup>viii</sup> Strictly speaking, International Men's Day is on 19 November (the same date as World Toilet Day), but I'm trying to make a more ideological point here.

<sup>ix</sup> Kate Manne, "Against transphobic 'moral flounce' behaviour", *More to Hate* (4 July 2022): <<https://perma.cc/R4HL-LMND>>



a 'newbie' reading from the bimah; they actively celebrate it, rejoice in it. Ron and Claudia and especially Harry in his final weeks, z"l, supported you on your journey to this moment.

**[11]** You may not be counting this as an official bat mitzvah, but it's certainly marking the 50th anniversary of your non-bat mitzvah, and there is no doubt that today is a great success for you.

**[12]** To misquote the song, *"Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-three?"* – and the answer is, yes. As you turn 63, we express our gratitude for everything you and your family bring to our congregation, and we wish you מזל טוב.

