



## SERMON NASO:<sup>i</sup> DON'T BE A PRAT

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 7 June 2025  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

**[1]** Earlier this week, a man called Hamit Coskun was found guilty of a religiously-aggravated public order offence, for burning a copy of the Qur'an outside the Turkish embassy while yelling: "[F-word] Islam," and: "*Islam is the religion of terrorism.*"<sup>ii</sup>

**[2]** I had hoped that people would be classy enough, if not prepared to condemn Coskun's act of hatred, at least to stay quiet. Religiously-aggravated book-burning is something which Jews with an understanding of 20th-century history know all too well to treat as, at best, suspect.

**[3]** But, of course, Hamit Coskun has his supporters. Broadly speaking, they fit into two categories.

**[4]** The first group are on his side because they share his views about Muslims. For example, Robert Jenrick, the Shadow Lord Chancellor, celebrated Coskun for his "*vigorous criticism of Islam*",<sup>iii</sup> while Tom Slater, who self-identifies as a journalist, published a column announcing: "*Welcome to the Islamic theocracy of Great Britain.*"<sup>iv</sup> These critics made a perfunctory attempt to frame their comments as a defence of free speech, but we know that if the tables were turned – if, say, a Muslim asylum-seeker had burned a copy of the New Testament outside Westminster Abbey while shouting: "[F-word] Christianity!", they would be calling for harsh criminal sanctions against such an egregious attack on British values.

<sup>i</sup> Numbers 6:22–7:6

<sup>ii</sup> Sammy Gecsoyler, "Man fined after burning Qur'an outside Turkish consulate in London", *The Guardian* (2 June 2025): <<https://perma.cc/QG3H-A3MU>>

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Jenrick, "Free speech must not be sacrificed to appease Islamists", *The Telegraph* (2 June 2025): <<https://archive.ph/xXREx>>

<sup>iv</sup> Tom Slater, "Welcome to the Islamic theocracy of Great Britain", *Spiked* (2 June 2025): <<https://perma.cc/GR5C-DVKT>>

**[5]** Such hatemongers, targeting Muslims today, would happily turn round and target Jews tomorrow if it suited them. They don't deserve our attention.

**[6]** The second group of Coskun's supporters have no problem with Islam *per se*. The National Secular Society – which paid Coskun's legal fees – has a problem with all religions. Its chief executive, Stephen Evans, warned us that this case involved the “*stifling [of] contentious expression*”, a downward spiral which will eventually lead to “*a return to blasphemy laws*”.<sup>v</sup>

**[7]** Now, the National Secular Society, the NSS, is an institution which, in principle, I could admire. I'm broadly in support of their campaign to abolish the practice of each day in Parliament beginning with Christian prayers, and I'm no fan of faith schools. Topics for another time.

**[8]** But the NSS drifts beyond a laudable mission of promoting pluralism, and goes out of its way to spite religious people.

**[9]** At the start of the coronavirus lockdown, when the government included faith leaders on its list of key workers allowed to continue sending our kids to nursery and school, the NSS was outraged and wrote to the Education Secretary demanding our removal.<sup>vi</sup> But that wasn't secularism; it was just rancour. Priests, imams and rabbis didn't spend lockdown singing hymns and preaching about the end-times. We were busy delivering food to the housebound, making deathbed visits and officiating funerals. That is work just as essential as that carried out by other key workers such as postmen and journalists, but the NSS tried to put a stop to it simply because we are people of faith.

**[10]** In 2018, the London Borough of Brent put up a series of posters celebrating local landmarks and cultural centres. A poster of a Hindu temple ended up being posted on the outside of a toilet. The Hindu community politely asked if it could be moved; the council said, yes, of course; and it swapped places with a board promoting a concert hall or a theatre or something. Everyone behaved very sensibly and that

<sup>v</sup> Stephen Evans, “Coskun's conviction is a surrender to Islamic blasphemy codes”, National Secular Society (2 June 2025): <<https://perma.cc/7QZT-YNUT>>

<sup>vi</sup> “‘Religious staff’ on list of key workers during coronavirus outbreak”, National Secular Society (23 March 2020): <<https://perma.cc/QT7J-C2MP>>



would have been the end of the matter, until the NSS went on the rampage. They condemned Brent Council for their “*pathetic surrender to demands for a blasphemy code*”.<sup>vii</sup> Now, hang on: that intervention means that the NSS was insisting that posters of Hindu temples must be displayed on a place that their worshippers find unclean and disrespectful. But why? Who was harmed by the simple change of location? The only possible motivation for the NSS’s involvement was to make Hindus sad.

**[11]** The toilet-poster debacle and the burning-Qur’an debacle both have the same flawed logic at their centre. The fact is that asking people not to associate Hindu temples with places of defilement, and not to destroy Muslim holy books, isn’t about expecting the general public not to commit blasphemy. It’s about expecting the general public not to behave like prats. It’s a question of respect and tolerance, not control and theocracy.

**[12]** There is a general, albeit unwritten, rule in society that we don’t do things that serve no purpose other than to upset other people. In the words of Aharon Barak, former Chief Justice of Israel:<sup>viii</sup>

The principle of good faith means that protection of one’s own interest must be done fairly and with consideration for the justified expectations ... of the other party. Person-to-person, one cannot behave like a wolf, but one is not required to be an angel. Person-to-person, one must act like a person.

Qur’an-burners, and those who defend them, have no regard at all for the feelings and expectations of other people. They are acting like wolves, and they have, somehow, fooled respectable people into defending them.

**[13]** In today’s parashah, we read the words of the Priestly Blessing, which ends with the familiar words: *יְשֹׁא יְהוָה פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשֹּׁם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם*, *May God reach out to you in tenderness and give you peace*.<sup>ix</sup>

<sup>vii</sup> “Council withdraws advert from toilet after Hindu complaints”, National Secular Society (13 September 2018): <<https://perma.cc/6YGM-ZQK6>>

<sup>viii</sup> *Roker v Salomon* CA 6339/97 at [7]; translation from Aharon Barak, *The Judge in a Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 66.

<sup>ix</sup> Numbers 6:26



**[14]** The Ba'al ha-Turim, a 14th-century commentator, notes that in gematria – Hebrew numerology – the word שלום, *peace*, has a value equal to that of the name עשו, Esau.<sup>x</sup>

**[15]** Now, Esau is the rabbis' classic example of an enemy of the Israelites. Dr Gwynne Kessler describes him as the “embod[iment]” of “non-Jewishness”.<sup>xi</sup>

**[16]** So what, then, should we make of the link between Esau's name and the concept of שלום, *peace*? According to the Ba'al ha-Turim, Jews should stand ready to extend friendly greetings to everybody – even non-Jews, even those who we might regard as having suspect agendas.

**[17]** By all means let us question the doctrines of other religions. By all means let us criticise the motives of those individuals who seek to harm others. But we can do so while still maintaining a basic level of interpersonal respect. Yelling ‘[F-word] [insert name of religion here]’ isn't questioning and it isn't criticism: it's just playground abuse. Setting the Qur'an alight isn't questioning or criticism: it's just inflammatory (do you see what I did there?). Whinging and whining that photographs of Hindu temples aren't being desecrated in the way that the NSS for some reason wishes they were desecrated, isn't questioning or criticism: it's just exacerbatescent petulance.

**[18]** The numerology of the Priestly Blessing reminds us that, whatever we think of other people, their belief systems and their backgrounds, we still owe them a duty to treat them with respect – and that duty derives from our status as Jews. Our books have been burned often enough. We owe it to our own tragic history to convince the world that burning others' books is unacceptable. כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

<sup>x</sup> Ba'al ha-Turim *ad loc.* I'm aware that gematria is kind of nonsense but sometimes needs must.

<sup>xi</sup> Gwynne Kessler, “‘Famous’ fetuses in rabbinic narratives” in Vanessa R Sasson and Jane Marie Law (eds), *Imagining the Fetus: the unborn in myth, religion and culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 185–202: 188.

