



SERMON B'HA'ALOT'CHA:ⁱ IMAGINING THE FUTURE

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

[1] One of the fun things about being a parent is that I can enforce my nostalgia on the next generation. I'm sure there's good children's TV still being made, but I'm still revelling in sitting with Omri and Flora and re-watching gems from the 1990s, including *Arthur*, *Chucklevision* and *Sooty*.

[2] At least, I was revelling in it. Then I started to notice some of the people involved. Rolf Harris made an appearance. Gary Glitter made an appearance. Cyril Smith made an appearance. Neil Gaiman made an appearance. This past for which I was nostalgic contained, in fact, a series of deeply unpleasant predators whose faces were broadcast to infants without a care in the world.

[3] A similar moment of what we might call fabricated nostalgia enveloped the Israelites in today's Torah portion. "*We recall the fish that we used to eat in Egypt for free,*"ⁱⁱ they mused, along with cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Except of course, they didn't enjoy complimentary haute cuisine during their stay in Egypt. They were slaves. They were subjected to the most appalling mistreatment and oppression.

[4] But, how quickly we forget; and, just weeks later, as children of liberty, the Israelites were quick to romanticise the recent past and express nostalgia for choice foodstuffs to which they had never, actually, had ready access.

[5] As Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue celebrates its 90th anniversary, contemplating our past is a natural and healthy thing to do. There is so much of which we can be proud: this was the first Jewish congregation in the history of Sussex where women and men

ⁱ Numbers 11:1-14

ⁱⁱ Numbers 11:5

could pray together without segregation; we spent 21 years being led by the joint first openly lesbian rabbi in the country; we have a groundbreakingly modern and accessible building; we are the first synagogue to have been awarded a gold certificate by EcoJudaism; and we are now the hosts of an exciting new initiative in Anglo-Jewry, Voices for Prophetic Judaism.

[6] Our list of achievements is long and prestigious, and I've recited it enough during this 90th anniversary year that I won't repeat every single entry.

[7] But we must also be careful not to fall into the trap of our ancestors in the wilderness: taking pride in past accomplishments is good; viewing a complicated past through rose-tinted glasses is bad. None of our successes came without a struggle or even, occasionally, a bitter argument. (Who among our membership can have heard this morning's verse about the Israelites clamouring for fish without remembering our deeply controversial 'salmongate' AGM of 2023?) There is no harm, and every benefit, in reflecting on the difficulties of the journey as well as the beauty of its destination.

[8] Aside from the falsity of the Israelites' reminiscences about the meaty, culinary delights of their time in Egypt, there is something else odd about their demand, מִי יַאֲכִלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר, *Who will give us meat to eat?*ⁱⁱⁱ Manna, we are told, the miraculous foodstuff God provided during the wilderness years, was, erm, miraculous. It could taste like anything.^{iv} The freed slaves just had to want it to taste like meat, and, lo! it would taste like meat. So why all the whinging?

[9] The commentator Rav Zalman Sorotzkin explains^v that the kvetching Israelite קִטְצָא, the riffraff, simply lacked imagination. It never even occurred to them that they could dream of a more gastronomically-satisfying existence and have it come true. They had clearly never heard the Sainsbury's slogan, "*Making life taste better.*"

[10] Their lack of imagination is why they sat around whining instead of taking matters into their own hands and building an improved future for themselves and their children.

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 11:4

^{iv} b.Yoma 75a

^v Ozneyim la-Torah to Numbers 11:5



[11] Our synagogue, BHPS, could never have been the product of an *הבזבז*, a whimpering riffraff. Its founders – and every generation of communal leaders since then – had the imagination to visualise a progressive and forward-thinking congregation, and the determination to make it a reality.

[12] John Fulton, the first Vice-Chancellor of Sussex University (an institution which, sorry Professor Roseneil, is so much younger and more junior than BHPS!) once wrote:^{vi}

[E]ducation is ‘making the future’ [so we] must ask the question whether the ‘future’ is to be a tailor-made society whose features are clearly imprinted and pre-determined by men’s decisions in the past ... Alternatively, is the teacher’s responsibility for the future discharged when [they have] done all that can be done to raise the powers of the individuals committed to [their] charge to their highest capacity, in the confidence that, if they have been so prepared, the future which they shape will be the best attainable?

Of course, he concluded that the answer was the latter.

[13] The Israelites who were caught up in memories of the past – especially false memories – were never going to be competent to make a new future. Only those able to dream and willing to focus their minds on years to come could do that.

[14] BHPS was radical from its very first service in 1935, but as we discovered when we reënacted it a few weeks ago, that 1930s radicalism got old quickly. To our modern selves, it felt antiquated, gendered and probably quite unspiritual. It is only thanks to the imagination of successive generations of our community’s leaders and clergy that we have been able to maintain our radical credentials, continue to develop, continue to be a Jewish home for everybody no matter where they are in their Jewish journey.

[15] To close, I am going to quote from Rabbi Elli’s sermon at our 75th anniversary service, 15 years ago:^{vii}

As we look back and reminisce, and also savour events of the more recent past, I hope we feel proud of who we are, what we are and what we have achieved, and that we feel a sense of gratitude for the leadership of

^{vi} Sir John Fulton (as he then was), “New universities in perspective” in Daiches (ed), *The Idea of a New University: an experiment in Sussex* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1964), 9–21: 17.

^{vii} Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah, “BHPS 75th anniversary sermon” (22 May 2010): <<https://perma.cc/Z8LM-XLX4>>



successive Councils over the years, and for the contribution made by all the rabbis and lay ministers, who shaped the life of the congregation.

And may our next 90 years be as thrillingly exciting as the 90 just gone. (And, if you're lucky, at the lunch after the service, there will be melons and cucumbers, onions and garlic.) כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

