



## SERMON R'EH:<sup>i</sup> OUTREACH OR HERESY?

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 23 August 2025  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

**[1]** וַיַּעַשׂה עֹמְרִי הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה: *And Omri did evil in the eyes of God.*<sup>ii</sup> Great name and role-model for a rabbi's son, right?

**[2]** But let's look in a little more detail about what the biblical Omri, who appears in the First Book of Kings, did wrong. We're told that he “*walked in the ways of [King] Jeroboam*”,<sup>iii</sup> who was considered wicked for setting up two shrines in Bethel and Dan, two rivals to the Temple in Jerusalem. He encouraged his people to bring sacrifices there and to worship there.<sup>iv</sup>

**[3]** In doing so, Jeroboam, the first ever large bottle of champagne to become a monarch, violated one of the commandments from this morning's parashah: וְאַשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה בְּכָל-מָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה, *Take care, lest you [be tempted to] offer up a sacrifice in any place that takes your fancy.*<sup>v</sup> There is only one legitimate place for ritual and that's the Temple; anywhere else is prohibited.

**[4]** The 11th-century commentator Chizkuni<sup>vi</sup> gives us a plausible reason for this restriction: at the time, the bringing of sacrifices was the whole of what Judaism was. And if people were allowed to bring their sacrifices anywhere they felt like it, they'd stop making the often arduous journey to the Temple in Jerusalem. The problem with that, Chizkuni suggests, is that, without proper supervision, without the official guidance of the priesthood, the Jews of ancient Israel, carrying

<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 12:7-19

<sup>ii</sup> 1 Kings 16:25

<sup>iii</sup> 1 Kings 16:26

<sup>iv</sup> 1 Kings 12:27-29

<sup>v</sup> Deuteronomy 12:13

<sup>vi</sup> *Ad loc*

out the Torah's ritual on their own, would gradually lapse into idolatry.

**[5]** It's a plausible reason, but perhaps a little patronising. The implication is that those Jews who lived outside Jerusalem – the ones not dissimilar to us, down here in Sussex – were simple-minded, unsophisticated, provincial folk, who could easily get Judaism wrong without being shown how to do it properly by clever men in beautiful robes who'd grown up immersed in their religion.

**[6]** Chizkuni's argument would have been better, I think, if he focussed instead on the impact on the Temple of there being rival places of worship in the country's various regions. The Temple would, perhaps, have lost some status: it would no longer be Judaism's single and undisputed Mecca – to mix a metaphor – but instead just a big place of worship existing alongside countless smaller ones. It would become more like West London Synagogue: flippin' massive, bloomin' wealthy, staggeringly ornate, but of no particular importance to us.

**[7]** And would that transformation really be a bad thing? I think probably not. Judaism should be something we can achieve wherever we live, not something that takes us several days' journey by wagon – or a train to Victoria followed by a number 6 bus – to reach. The existence of foci of Jewish life outside the metropolis is hugely democratising.

**[8]** There's another benefit to Judaism being spread around rather than centred in one single place, and that benefit is strength.

**[9]** One of Liberal Judaism's own founders, Claude Montefiore, made a promising start in setting out such an argument:<sup>vii</sup>

It is not ... Maimonides ... who fulfilled the Jewish mission most truly, or rendered the greatest service to the Jewish cause. No. It was the many little obscure Jewish communities through the ages, persecuted and despised, who kept alive the flame of purest [m]onothelism and the supremacy and divineness of the [m]oral [l]aw.

Unfortunately, he then took a leaf out of Chizkuni's book and continued on a patronising note about how unsophisticated we all are:

[This] synagogue was perhaps squalid; the services within it were often crude and undignified; there were certainly several untenable beliefs and also much superstition. But ... at the root there was something ... very pure

<sup>vii</sup> C G Montefiore, "Epilogue", in E R Bevan and Charles Singer (eds), *The Legacy of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 507-523: 515-516.



... something that is the seed of a future, preserved, it may be, in an uncouth and unattractive husk.

Oh dear.

**[10]** The philosopher Dr Rebecca Goldstein did much better, pointing out that the Romans actually did us a favour, albeit an unintentional favour, by exiling us from our land:<sup>viii</sup>

The fact that Jews, after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, had no country of their own, made it more likely, rather than less likely, that they would survive as a people. If they had been concentrated in one country, they would surely have been conquered by one of history's great empires, as happened to other vanished tribes. But a people dispersed across a vast diaspora is more resilient, which is why other stateless peoples, like the ... Roma ... have also survived for millennia, often against harrowing odds.

**[11]** So, Omri. The supposed sin of the biblical King Omri was that he continued to operate little shrines outside Jerusalem. The Deuteronomist calls it heresy. I call it outreach.

**[12]** Here's to the dispersion of Judaism, the small, 'provincial', communities, the squalid, crude, undignified, uncouth and unattractive husks, that enable as many people as possible to build and live strong Jewish identities – and long may they continue. כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

<sup>viii</sup> Rebecca Goldstein, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010): 383.

