



## Ordination Address – 2013

Dr Laliv Clenman

Ordinands: Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz, Rabbi Leah Jordan, Rabbi Benji Stanley

The Talmud has an uncanny way of making us cry (well it makes some cry people more than others, but I won't name any names for the moment - Esther). But the Talmud also has a way of making us laugh. As much as the rabbis took their learning, traditions, and laws most seriously, surely as seriously as you, our three ordinands today Esther, Leah and Benji undertake your Judaism, your learning and your transition to your new role as rabbis, the sages also had the courage to laugh at themselves. By mocking themselves, they created a space for self-reflection, for imperfection and

fallibility, for going to extremes and then returning to the middle, making mistakes, having high hopes and dashed expectations, taking risks towards living their own unique, personal vision. In short by mocking themselves, they allowed for their own humanity.

Indeed, we are truly fortunate to have before us today three remarkable, dedicated and very serious new rabbis, serious in the best possible way.

For example, The first time Esther lead services on the most solemn of days, Yom Kippur, she sat down for her sermon at a long table covered in a white tablecloth, looking perhaps just a little too much like a church altar. She then proceeded to give a sermon on '*mitzvot bein adam lamaqom*' and '*mitzvot bein adam lechavero*', gesticulating with hand gestures for each – commandments between humankind and G-d [up and down hand movement] and commandments between a person and their fellow [side to side hand movement] and I don't need to tell you, erudite audience, what that sign looked like! As her congregants saw what was happening they started laughing aloud to which Esther responded with her classic self-deprecating dry humour, 'Oops, wrong religion!'

Leah, who managed to silence and alienate an entire and very English congregation with her boldly honest and very American introduction of one of the most honoured members of the community, as follows, "She was awarded an MBE and if anyone can explain to me, an ignorant American, what that entails, I'd love to have it outlined to me!" As I am Canadian, I am much better off than you Leah, as I know all too well that an MBE has something to do with the British Empire.

And Benji, who found himself increasingly satisfied as he was giving his sermon because he saw that amongst the congregation of dozing and neutral faces, one woman was properly fighting off tears, behold she was weeping, so moved was she by his words. As it turned out he was informed afterwards that she was actually recovering from an operation on her cataracts.

These stories may lead us to another amusing tale, this one about a talmudic rabbi, a certain Rabbi Zeira, which appears in Tractate Bava Metsia (daf 85a for those of you who still need to take notes). This story has woven itself in with your experiences for me in a manner I had not expected and I hope is a testament to the power that text holds for each of us.

R. Zeira was Babylonian but moved to Israel, despite the fact that the great Rav Yehudah openly discouraged and disapproved of Babylonian Rabbis settling in Israel. R. Zeira's life was marked by the cultural, intellectual and physical journeys between these two lands.

Esther, your rabbinic journey has taken you from your first date with Dave, when you asked him if he had any problems with your dream of being a rabbi and he answered "no" in blissful ignorance. This was a fateful answer which started a journey to the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, study in Israel, finally joining us at Leo Baeck College as you went back and forth to spend all too rare time with your husband in the Netherlands, and now finally settling down with your imminently growing family at Sinai Synagogue in Leeds.

Leah you have travelled from the deepest depths of the United States of America to study in Israel, to HUC in Los Angeles to Mechon Hadar in New York City and finally joining us at Leo Baeck College, and now joining Liberal Judaism as a Young Adult and Student Chaplain.

Benji, you may have started out here, where texts first came alive and spoke with you at St. Paul's, but then through your time at Leo Baeck College your hunger for learning has brought you to Israel, Mechon Hadar in New York, and back yet again to Leo Baeck College in sunny London and now to being part of the rabbinic team at West London Synagogue.

All of your travels have meant so much more than carbon footprints traced across the sky. There have been moves upon moves, relationships begun and cemented, torturous long-distance from a partner, or from close family and friends. You have struggled through culture shock and weather shock, negotiating the varying cultures of each new community and each institution.

The Talmud tells us that R. Zeira dealt with this same problem as follows: "When R. Zeira went up to Israel, he sat one hundred fasts, that the Babylonian *gemara*

(learning) might be forgotten (by him), so that it would not trouble him” (or: confuse, preoccupy him, cause him to make an error). Perhaps then, each time you move, and now as you start your new rabbinic roles, you too should fast for one third of the year? Surely it would be preferable for you to take up your exciting new posts in a state of perfection, with your learning complete and clear? This would allow each of you to exist free of a sense of trouble, never haunted by the diverse memories of your past experience or of yearnings for all that which you have yet to learn.

Bava Metsia continues to relate that R. Zeira managed to avoid holding a position of community leadership so that he could focus on his studies. Each of you has been drawn deeply to the waters of Torah, struggling not to drown in the sea of Talmud, and yet forever determined to swim in it. Each of you has attempted to negotiate a balance between your Torah learning and your communal work, during your studies, as well as for the future. The temptation of the *beit midrash* as an all-encompassing universe of a sea of learning lies at one end, and the lure of the varied demands and deep needs of congregations and communities at the other.

The Talmud tells us that R. Zeira dealt with this same issue with yet another set of fasts: He “sat one hundred other fasts so that R. Eleazar would not die during his years [i.e. his lifetime] [for if he R. Eleazar had died] matters of the community would have fallen upon him [R. Zeira].” Zeira, no doubt saw the toll taken by the burdens that such a communal leadership position placed upon the sages R. Yochanan (who incidentally we are told died of grief and madness) and then R. Eleazar, and knowing that his learning and experience placed him in good stead to take over from R. Eleazar as communal leader should he pass away, sought to keep R. Eleazar alive as long as possible through his fasting – anything to avoid a congregational job!

Perhaps you too might fast in order to attempt to control the communal world around you and thereby free yourself from its obligations, or on the other hand you might try to allow for complete immersion in the day to day realities of the communal sphere, setting your learning, your self, your practice, your spirituality, aside?

It must be said that each of you has undergone a litany of tests in the last number of years – from the written tests of essays and exams, upon essays and upon exams, to the tests of a *dvar torah* or Torah reading, the regular and sometimes relentless testing of the public life, to the tests of starting again and again in a new place, and the trial of continuing in the face of the seemingly endless process of rabbinical training in a world that values 140 character tweets. As you transition into your new roles as leaders, surely you must be ever more successful, ever more independent, all the more invulnerable? How can you be ever feel ready enough, perfect enough, and free of internal or external critiques?

Bava Metsia tells us of one last set of fasts that R. Zeira undertook, and once again not a 5-2 diet but his favourite and much more impressive 100 day diet: R. Zeira “sat one hundred other fasts, so that the fire of Gehinnom would not have power over him. Every thirty days he would check himself. He heated the oven, went up into it and the fire did not have any power over him. One day the rabbis gave him the eye, and his legs were burned, and [thereafter] they called him Skinny-Burnt-Legs.” This man was testing his inner self and his physical body against the worldly everyday flames of a hot oven and the otherworldly flames of Gei Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom, which may still be seen today in Jerusalem, a place where the Israelites were said to have sacrificed their own children in the fire, a place that came to be known as a kind of hell. These then are the flames of the very deepest human failure, the flames of terrible suffering, grief and betrayal, the flames of punishment.

No human being can survive the flames unscathed, and none of us is immune to the failures that may land us in Gehinnom, whether we make our own hell in this world, or believe in some fate beyond it. Yet R. Zeira through his continual fasting, denying his body its most basic and natural needs, rendered himself invulnerable to the flames, able to sit in the oven and rise from it untouched. His rabbi colleagues were less than pleased, watching him conduct his monthly test and always passing with perfect marks, like some sort of saint, carrying his perfection with him until the next new moon. A saint perhaps, but no, *not a rabbi*.

And so the critical, envious eye of his colleagues brought R. Zeira back to his humanity. By all accounts a notable sage of great learning, he came to be known not as Rav and not as Rabbi but as *qatin charikh shaqeih* – skinny burnt legs. His name became a mockery the urge for complete control and perfect learning, a mockery of the attainment of invulnerability, of the separation from communal and administrative work, the mastery of culture shock and confusion - his moniker a symbol of how ideal success is in fact failure. You will and should be confused, troubled and mixed up. You will fail, you will make mistakes, you will pass through flames and you will be injured. And therein shall lie your rabbinate.

Despite being a Babylonian, Zeira was offered the rare honour of *semikhah* in Israel but the Yerushalmi tells us that he refused it, and the Bavli tells us that Rav Zeira used to hide himself to escape ordination until he learned that ordination might help erase his sins. What Zeira avoided, you each have sought out.

We are told that this *semikhah* from which Rav Zeira fled ended with the collapse of the Patriarchate in Roman Judea early in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, and subsequent attempts to reestablish *semikhah* and the Sanhedrin have been met with failure and controversy. But, perhaps this *semikhah* that you have just now undertaken, does go back to Moses after all, as he ordained Joshua, the 70 elders and the judges. This term *semikhah* signifies a sharing of the burden, a passing on of responsibility and authority, honour and spirit, learning and experience to you, Leah, Benji and Esther, to support and be

supported in turn, to lean and be leant upon, to be close, to lead, not alone but joined together in all directions through time and space, that we may not be as communities without shepherds and that you may not be forced to carry a burden too heavy for you.

Each of you is a leader who has within you a vision, a hope, even a dream, of the future of our communities, one of inclusivity, plurality and diversity, one of learning and wisdom, one of dedication and passion, one of engagement and change. To paraphrase the Bavli's record of what was spoken at the ordinations of Ammi and Assi: "Ordain for us people such as these."