



tribe

The Yom Kippur Debate 5777

ARE WE ALWAYS STRONGER TOGETHER?



Supported by



US FUTURES



tribe

www.tribeuk.com

<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Introduction	2
Notes for Moderator	3
Introducing Jonah	4
Arguments from Jonah for the motion	5
Arguments from Jonah opposing the motion	6
Introducing Brexit	7
Arguments from Brexit for the motion	8
Arguments from Brexit opposing the motion	9
Introducing the Ben Azzai social action project	10
Arguments from Ben Azzai for the motion	11
Arguments from Ben Azzai opposing the motion	12
Concluding notes for the moderator	13

Motion:

This House believes that
we are stronger united
even if it threatens
our individuality.



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Yom Kippur Debate 5777. This is an immense opportunity to capture the imagination of the youth and students who fill our shuls on Yom Kippur so that we can discuss contemporary issues within the framework of our Jewish community.

The motion is: This House believes that we are stronger united even if it threatens our individuality.

This year, in synagogues across the UK, we will be debating whether we are *always* stronger through our commitment to international and interfaith partners or if this threatens our own country and our own community.

The debate follows a very straightforward format. It opens with a thought provoking discussion about the story of **Jonah** and whether he was a prophet who promoted unity or individuality. Phase two focuses on **Brexit**, a major global event of the past year which raises the question of whether our country is stronger or weaker as a result of the vote to leave the EU. Phase three relates the debate theme to issues within our own community in the context of Jewish **social action** initiatives. The Chief Rabbi recently claimed that “too many young live in a bubble” and has therefore launched the Ben Azzai programme through which Jewish university students will run social action projects in India and other locations in the developing world. Young people will be keen to discuss whether this approach strengthens or weakens our community and Israel.

To facilitate an informed debate, we have compiled some useful resources from general and Jewish sources. This resource pack has been designed for 4 debate presenters (2 for the motion and 2 against) as well as a debate moderator. Each contributor has a section of notes that relates to their part. Please use these notes as a guide and a gateway to sharing your own opinions. Hopefully the audience will get involved too with questions and comments.

Tremendous thanks to Rabbi Johnny Solomon, Director of the Jewish Education Consultancy, for his expertise in preparing the resource pack, to Rabbi Mordechai Ginsbury, Director of P'EIR for reviewing and contributing to the content, to Jeremy Wootliff of Prime Television for producing the trigger clip and to David Collins, Rabbi Yisroel Binstock and the whole Tribe team for their valuable input. I also want to acknowledge the leadership and young people of South Hampstead Synagogue for initiating the Yom Kippur debate project.

I hope you have a stimulating debate, an engaging communal experience and a meaningful Yom Kippur!

Shana Tova!

Rabbi Eli Levin



NOTES FOR MODERATOR

Yom Kippur is a day of introspection, prayer, forgiveness and positive resolutions. It is a day on which we reflect on the past in order to live better lives in the future. Part of the process towards meaningfully achieving change which is the essence of *Teshuvah* (repentance), is giving some consideration to the ‘big issues’ inherent in the backdrop against which our lives are played out. When we look back at the past year it is clear that one of the hottest topics has been **the relationship between the individual and the collective**, especially as expressed through the Brexit vote.

Over the following pages, we have provided material associated with a range of topics to stimulate a debate on the motion that **‘This House believes that we are stronger united even if it threatens our individuality’**.

The primary text for our discussion is the book of Jonah which is read on Yom Kippur. As you shall see, a key debate in this fascinating book concerns the spiritual responsibilities of the Jewish people towards other nations.

Additionally we will revisit the Brexit debate, and consider whether the outcome of the vote has strengthened or weakened the individuality of our country?

Finally, we will explore the fascinating question concerning our communal priorities, and which charitable projects we should be supporting.

As with all debates, while these three topics have been identified as key topics for discussion, we encourage other issues around the motion to be raised as well.

Let the debate begin!

INTRODUCING JONAH

Jonah is one of the shortest yet most profound books of Tanach, and it begins with God instructing Jonah to go to Nineveh - the capital of Assyria with a non-Jewish population - in order to encourage the people to repent and avoid destruction.¹



For many, it is the explicit theme of *Teshuvah* (repentance) in the book of Jonah which explains why this story is read as the Haftarah during the Mincha service on Yom Kippur². However, if one looks a little deeper, a second and perhaps equally important message emerges about the relationship between the Jewish people and the wider world.

Despite Jonah receiving explicit instructions from God concerning his mission to Nineveh, Jonah chose to ignore this instruction. Yet, as our Rabbis explain, this was not because Jonah thought that the people of Nineveh wouldn't repent. In fact, he fully expected them to heed God's call and to repent.

Given this expected outcome, Jonah believed that by fulfilling God's instruction, it would implicitly reflect negatively on the Jewish people who themselves had not heeded previous calls from God to repent.³ Therefore, **while repentance by the people of Nineveh was good for humanity, Jonah felt that it was bad for the Jews.**



The question that Jonah asked himself was which choice is better? Should he do what was good for the Jews even if it showed less regard for the rest of humanity, or should he do what was best for humanity, even if it would be bad for the Jews?

It is clear that Jonah chose the former, but it is also clear that one of the major lessons taught in this book is that Jonah made the wrong choice. Nonetheless, the issues raised by this story continue to challenge us today in a variety of situations (for example, is it right if a Jew votes for a politician whose policies are good for the Jews but who may not provide effective leadership for the wider population?)

Overleaf are a list of pointers and arguments both FOR and AGAINST Jonah's decision, and more specifically, FOR and AGAINST the motion that 'This House believes that we are stronger united even if it threatens our individuality'.

¹ See Jonah 1:2

² *Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim 622*

³ *Mechilta, Bo* (Introduction)

ARGUMENTS FROM JONAH FOR THE MOTION

FIRST SPEAKER

While the first few verses of the book of Jonah describe how he ignored God's instruction and tried to flee from God, the rest of the book teaches us how Jonah made the wrong choice.

In fact, by miraculously keeping Jonah alive in the belly of a fish⁴, and then again instructing him to go to Nineveh⁵, it is clear that God was conveying to Jonah that notwithstanding the personal cost to the Jewish people, Jonah was duty-bound to fulfil his duties that were for the greater good of the wider world.

Though this perspective displeased Jonah,⁶ the final chapter and especially the final lines in the book when God rebukes Jonah clearly convey the message that **no attempt to protect one's individual welfare should come at the cost of a greater good.**

SECOND SPEAKER

A further reason to support the motion is suggested by the Alshich⁷ who observes that perhaps Jonah himself had misread the situation.

Jonah believed that the expected repentance of the people of Nineveh would have spiritually condemned the Jewish people. But, as Alshich suggests, perhaps it may have inspired the Jewish people to repent as well. Rather than the repentance of the people of Nineveh diminishing the honour of the Jewish people, it may have encouraged them to regain their honour.

What we see from here is **what may often be a decision for the benefit of other nations may actually be in everyone's interests.**

⁴ Jonah Ch. 2

⁵ Jonah 3:1

⁶ Jonah 4:1

⁷ Rabbi Moshe Alshich, (Turkey & Israel, 1508-1593)

ARGUMENTS FROM JONAH OPPOSING THE MOTION

FIRST SPEAKER

Jonah fled from God and ignored His instruction to encourage the people of Nineveh to repent. As the Midrash puts it, “*Jonah believed that he was protecting the honour of the son (ie. of the Jewish people) by ignoring the honour of the Father (ie. by failing to fulfil the instruction that God had given him)*”⁸.

Clearly this was a very risky strategy by Jonah given the fact that disobeying God is a sin punishable by death.⁹ So why did Jonah risk so much?

The answer as explained by Malbim¹⁰ is that Jonah ignored God’s instruction for the good of the Jewish nation because he believed that **any action that weakened or threatened the individual Jewish people could not be justified for a greater good**. Put differently, **if a greater good comes at a high personal cost, Jonah believed that it cannot be considered a greater good**.

SECOND SPEAKER

Malbim adds a further perspective on this point, arguing that not only would Nineveh’s expected repentance be bad for the Jews who themselves had not repented, but it would also lead to greater problems in the future since the Assyrians were destined to grow into a powerful empire that would later exile the Tribes of Israel. Consequently, Jonah thought that a way to forestall this outcome was to allow the people of Nineveh to perish.

According to this reasoning, there are times when decisions that may temporarily challenge us as an individual people may have even greater far reaching negative consequences.

Therefore, we learn from Jonah’s actions that **sometimes decisions need to be made to protect one’s individuality even if it comes at the costs of what appears to be a greater good**, and that these decisions can be justified especially when further negative consequences may emerge were other choices to be made.

⁸ *Mechilta, Bo* (Introduction)

⁹ *Sanhedrin* 89a

¹⁰ Rabbi Meir Levush Malbim (Russia, 1809-1879)

INTRODUCING BREXIT



In order to understand the reasons FOR and AGAINST Brexit (which is a term referring to the upcoming 'exit' of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU) as decided by referendum on 23rd June 2016), we need to learn a little history about what the EU is and how it started.

Following the Second World War, there was a general consensus that steps had to be taken to avoid further conflicts in Europe, and the proposed method for doing so was to unite Europe. However, while there were those like Winston Churchill who spoke about creating "a kind of United States of Europe", it wasn't immediately clear how this union would work.

In real terms, the first serious step to achieving this union occurred in 1951 with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), However, even though the ECSC began with six members (France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg), it was primarily conceived with France and Germany in mind to remove "the age-old opposition" between these two countries. Though the UK was invited to join the ECSC, it declined.

However, as the UK economy remained stagnant while both France and Germany were establishing powerful economies, the UK changed its mind and it applied to join what was now called the EEC in 1961. However, this request was vetoed (twice!) by French President Charles de Gaulle who claimed that the UK was more interested in links with the US than in establishing bonds with its European neighbours. It was only in 1973 after de Gaulle left office when Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath finally led Britain into the EEC. When membership was put to a referendum in 1975, it had the support of Britain's three main parties and 67% of the country voted in favour.

But, the expected economic turnaround in the UK did not take place. Strikes and power cuts continued, and rising oil prices caused a significant increase in inflation. In 1992 the Maastricht Treaty was signed by John Major which involved huge transfers of power to the new European Union. Some believed that Britain's position was clear, especially having secured opt-outs from the single currency and the social chapter. Others, however, felt that the concept of the EU undermined the British tradition of the inviolable sovereignty of parliament.

By the late 1990's, the UK economy was much stronger and efforts were made to build bridges with Europe. However, in recent years the Euro has undergone a crisis, and few if any people in the UK wish to adopt the single currency. In fact, the very fact that the single currency has all but failed is seen by many as a reason why so many in the UK supported Brexit. In 2011 EU leaders tried to tackle their problems through a treaty setting new budget rules. David Cameron demanded exemptions and then vetoed the pact. For some, this was more of the same, with Britain lacking a real interest to get involved with Europe. But Euro sceptics saw this as one further piece of evidence that the UK should opt-out of the UK. David Cameron promised a referendum on British membership and on 23rd June 2016, 52% of the UK voted to opt-out of the EU.

ARGUMENTS FROM BREXIT FOR THE MOTION

FIRST SPEAKER

The concept of the EU was established on the premise **that Europe is stronger when it is united**, and therefore, individual nations who are not part of this union may be more economically vulnerable. In fact, despite initially rejecting membership, this was why the UK chose to join the EU.

Though the ensuing period has had its ups and downs, many believe that the UK's membership of the EU has enabled the UK to be in a sufficiently strong economic position to consider leaving the EU.

Moreover, approximately half of Britain's exports go to EU countries and such trading is considerably easier because of our membership. Therefore, **membership of the EU makes the UK stronger, even if it threatens our individuality.**

SECOND SPEAKER

Around three million jobs in the UK are linked to the EU.

This means that, at least for the past 50 years, **being part of Europe is part of the British identity.**

By leaving Europe the UK may be plunged into uncertainty as businesses would be less likely to invest and this will weaken the UK in every way.

Thus, not only does membership of the EU makes the UK stronger even if it threatens our individuality, **membership of the EU actually makes the UK stronger because it is a part of who we are.**

ARGUMENTS FROM BREXIT OPPOSING THE MOTION

FIRST SPEAKER

While a number of reasons have been offered to support Brexit, one of the central claims is that supporting Brexit is all about **reclaiming our identity**.

Though the original concept of the EU was meant to avoid further conflicts in Europe, it is clear that the EU has evolved and though some changes have been positive, many claim that membership of the EU comes at the cost of the individual identity of its members.

This argument has been expressed with respect to a number of different issues. For example:

- Membership of the EU binds the UK to a range of regulations that many believe do not reflect the national interest or identity of the UK.
- Membership of the EU restricts the UK from preventing anyone from another member state from coming to live in the country

This means that those who support Brexit oppose the motion and claim that **we are not stronger united if it threatens our individuality**.

SECOND SPEAKER

Others argue that the reason to support Brexit is less about the national identity of the UK, and more about the financial interests of the UK.

For example, it is claimed that leaving the EU will result in an immediate cost saving since the country would no longer contribute to the EU budget (which amounts to around £8.5bn per year - about 7 per cent of what the Government spends on the NHS each year).

Additionally, leaving the EU will enable the UK to conduct free trade without the restrictions placed on them by the UK.

Therefore, **supporting Brexit prioritises the British economy over investments in the EU which may not be to the benefit of the UK.**

INTRODUCING THE BEN AZZAI SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT



Mirvis: too many young people live in a 'bubble'

● Chief Rabbi urges youth not to be selfish and look beyond Anglo-Jewry and Israel

In Denial

Kirk Ken

'Too many young people live in a 'bubble' read the headline (Jewish Chronicle Sep 8th, 2016), and as the article explained, Chief Rabbi Mirvis recently launched the Ben Azzai Programme to take groups of university students to India and other developing countries to inspire a stronger sense of social responsibility.

According to the Chief Rabbi, "we need to be more conscious about what is happening in our world and more committed to providing help, in addition to the wonderful things we are doing for our community and for Israel. We shouldn't be selfishly inclined and only think, 'how is this good for us'? The key element of our Jewish approach to life should be, what benefit we can be to our world?"

Clearly, it is a laudable endeavour and this is especially true since the Ben Azzai Programme will be a far more attractive option for orthodox students who are Shabbat and kosher observant. However, despite its attractiveness there are both pro's and con's to a project like this.

Similar to our discussion concerning the book of Jonah, should the Jewish community be prioritising its charitable efforts inwards to the Jewish community, or - as the Chief Rabbi indicates - should we actively concern ourselves with the challenges facing developing countries whose populations are largely not Jewish?

Put differently, are we stronger as a people when we concern ourselves with the struggles of countries such as India, or do these programmes threaten the individuality of our Judaism and Israel?

It is towards this important discussion that we now turn.

ARGUMENTS FROM BEN AZZAI FOR THE MOTION

FIRST SPEAKER

As explained in our discussion about the Book of Jonah, we are duty bound to concern ourselves with the welfare of all humanity, and this means that projects like the Ben Azzai programme strengthen our values and our community.

Moreover, when we engage in social action programmes such as Ben Azzai which particularly support non-Jewish communities, we perform a public *Kiddush Hashem* - an act which sanctifies the Name of God, which thereby enhances our image in the eyes of non-Jews and strengthens our connections beyond the boundaries of the community.

SECOND SPEAKER

Though there may have been a time when Jews lived amongst themselves in villages or ghettos where they had to strengthen the resources available for the Jewish community, today most Jews live in the wider society.

By involving ourselves in projects that support other communities, we are supporting infrastructures which are likely to benefit our descendants.

Like the Talmudic story of Honi the circle drawer¹¹ who, upon enquiring why a man would plant a tree that would take 70 years to grow was told 'just as my grandparents and parents planted for me, I am planting this tree for the generations to come', any social action project ultimately strengthens the world and provides further resources for those that come after us.

¹¹ Ta'anit 23a

ARGUMENTS FROM BEN AZZAI **OPPOSING THE MOTION**

FIRST SPEAKER

It may be strange to argue against the establishment of a positive programme such as this. However, like Jonah argued, maybe our greater priority is to support the needs of our local community.

In fact, this approach actually has a biblical precedent. We are told '*if you shall lend money to My people to the impoverished who dwell with you*' (Shemot 22:24) which is interpreted by our Rabbis to teach us that there are rules of precedence in charitable giving:

- Jews over non-Jews;
- impoverished over the non-impoverished, and
- those who are close to you ahead of those who are further from you.

Though it should be clearly stated that these are rules of precedence and that Jews are also required to help non-Jews in need, our Rabbis interpreted the above verse to convey the idea that 'charity begins at home' and that by doing so, we strengthen the unique services of our community. Therefore as we have finite financial and human resources at our disposal we should leave the Indian Government and world relief organisations to look after poverty in India and spend our resources on our own community needs. It may be the case that not enough Hindus around the world support development projects in India so why does this become a Jewish responsibility?

SECOND SPEAKER

In addition to the above-mentioned point, there is also a second issue to consider which is the decentralisation of Jewish institutions and the Jewish State in the consciousness of young Jewish people.

When the Rabbis spoke about a hierarchy of charitable giving, they spoke both about the act of giving and the awareness for giving. However, by prioritising charitable concerns outside of the community it may well weaken the community.

So while projects like the Ben Azzai programme may be praiseworthy, it can be argued that social responsibility projects in countries like India are not our top priority, and that involvement in such programmes may weaken, rather than strengthen, our community.



CONCLUDING NOTES FOR THE MODERATOR

Over the previous pages we have explored different approaches to the complex relationship between the individual and the community.

From Jonah we learnt about the relationship between the individual Jewish people and the other nations.

From Brexit we learnt about the relationship between the UK and the EU.

And from the Community we learnt about the relationship between the individual and their Jewish community.

In each instance we have explored arguments either in support or against the motion that **‘This House believes that we are stronger united even if it threatens our individuality’**.

However, while different conclusions can be drawn from this debate, it is essential that a distinction is made between individuality and individualism. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains:

“Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group... Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”¹²

What we learn from here is that **while there may be instances where individuality takes priority over belonging to a collective, there are no instances when individualism does, because no country, nation or person can live a good life if they are only interested in themselves.**

¹² <http://www.rabbisacks.org/bamidbar-5774-leading-nation-individuals/>