



**SERMON SHAVUOT:  
THE KING'S DAY OFF (OR: A FAIRY-TALE FOR TODAY)**

Gabriel Webber, Wednesday 31 May 2017  
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Once upon a time, there was a kingdom whose king was not like the kings of other lands. In other lands, the king is in charge: if the king wants breakfast in bed, he gets breakfast in bed; if the king wants to go hunting for the day, he goes hunting for the day; and if the king wants to make a law forbidding his subjects from eating cheesecake, he can do that too.

But this king was different. This king didn't tell the people what to do – rather, the people told him what to do. Sometimes they would tell him to pose for a portrait, so they would have something to put on their stamps. Sometimes they would tell him to put on his best robes and attend the opening ceremony of a new school or hospital. And, if they felt they needed another law, they would decide what it would say, and give it to the king to sign.

For most of his life, the king was content with this. He got teased a bit by some of the sultans and a few cheeky dukes at the annual get-together of all the world's royal families, but he was fond of his people and liked them to be happy. He worked hard and did as he was told.

But one day, the people decided on a law that the king really didn't like. There had been times before when they passed laws that he slightly didn't like, or that he didn't like very much; and he would always sign them, because the people ruled in this particular kingdom and he didn't want to be the sort of king to say no to things. But this law, he absolutely did not like.

So, he summoned his ministers to the palace, and said to them: “This is not easy for me. You are my closest advisers, and the chosen representatives of my people. I have a great respect for what you think, and I always do what you ask of me. But, just this once, it’s different. This is a bad law, and I cannot sign it.”

The ministers were astounded. “But sire!” they exclaimed. “We are not asking you to agree with the law – we never ask you to agree with anything. We only ask you to do as the people want.”

“I know,” replied the king. “And I almost always do. I’m not like other kings, spending my days hunting or eating breakfast in bed or banning cheesecake just because I can. I do what the people demand of me. I work hard for them from dawn ’til dusk. I think I’ve shaken more hands and kissed more babies in the past year than anyone has ever before. But, for once in my life, I’m going to do something that I want. And I want to have nothing to do with this law. You can have it as your law by all means: but please, don’t ask me to be involved.”

The news of the rebellious king spread throughout the land, and in markets and taverns and Twitter hashtags everywhere, nobody talked of anything else. The ministers, meanwhile, summoned the greatest philosopher from each city to come to the king’s palace and help them find a way to make him sign the law.

Eventually, one of them came up with the perfect idea.

“Your majesty,” announced the chief minister when she finally found the king (he was doing the washing up after a state banquet the previous evening, just as she had asked him to), “we have a proposal for you.”

“What is your proposal?” asked the king. “Whatever it is, I’m sure I will accede to it, because I always do what you ask of me.”

“We want you,” began the chief minister, “we want you... to take a day off.”

This time, the king was astounded. “Take a day off?” he exclaimed. “How can I take a day off? Am I not your king always?”

“You said it yourself, sire,” replied the ministers. “You work your fingers to the bone for the people of our land every day. You never get any time to relax or enjoy yourself. We keep your every minute busy. And we are so grateful for all that you do for us – but you deserve a break. So take a day off. Eat breakfast in bed, go hunting, do whatever you want: you give the orders for a change.”

(“But please don’t forbid cheesecake,” the chief minister’s small son added.)

Suddenly, understanding dawned in the king’s mind. “And who would run the country while I am taking this holiday?” he asked.

“Why, the same people who always run it, your majesty,” said the chief minister.

“Us. Your ministers. We’ll just struggle by for a day without you to help us.”

“And would you be planning to pass any laws on this day when you are in sole charge?” asked the king, his kingly eyes twinkling royally.

“We have one in mind,” answered the chief minister.

And so it came to pass that this very unusual king did a very unusual thing. He took a holiday. The people got the law that they wanted; the king got the break that he deserved; they each came to understand what the other needed; and they all lived happily ever after.

1 That fairy-tale<sup>1</sup> was, like so many, based on a true story from Belgium in 1990. The Belgian Parliament passed a law introducing abortion, and King Badouin just could not bring himself to sign it.<sup>2</sup> As happened in the fairy-tale, the Belgian cabinet calmly and simply suggested that they would declare the king, with his agreement,<sup>3</sup> “unfit to rule” for a single day, during which they

would give royal assent on his behalf; and, 24 hours later, he would be restored to the throne.<sup>4</sup> The first monarch in recorded history to take annual leave. And everyone did live happily ever after.

- 2 I think there was something rather magical about that moment. It was almost like a fairy-tale. Those of us who watched *Charles III*<sup>5</sup> on BBC1 earlier this month will realise how easily it could have degenerated into a crisis; into bitterness; into family splits, demonstrations, even violence. Those of us who learnt about Charles I<sup>6</sup> will realise what can happen when a king takes on a parliament. But, instead, everyone was orderly and civilised and sensible, and the end result was a quite beautiful moment of understanding. The Belgian people realised that their king was a real human being with a conscience too often suppressed; and the king accepted that his subjects were actually his rulers, and that he had no divine right to overrule them, whatever his title.
- 3 For me, Shavuot marks a similarly beautiful moment. It was a moment of covenant, of mutuality. Up until this point in the Israelites' story, God gave the commandments directly and individually. When God wanted Noah to go forth and multiply, God said "go forth and multiply"; when God wanted Moses to take off his shoes, God said "take off your shoes". But at Shavuot, things changed. God offered the Torah to the Israelites, and our ancestors said yes; had they said no, the rabbis tell us,<sup>7</sup> God would have accepted that and placidly offered the Torah elsewhere. Power to the people.
- 4 And by giving us our laws in writing, for all time, God took a day off. No more constant surveillance of the entire human race so as to be ready to say "take your shoes off" or "don't commit adultery" at just the right moment. Since Sinai, the ball has been in our court. We are trusted to manage our own

affairs. The Torah is ours: for us to wrestle with, question, adapt, shape to our needs. Power to the people.

- 5 That power is often burdensome. But those burdens are for the rest of the year. Right now, on Shavuot, we can take a lead from God – and give ourselves a relaxing day off, bake a nice cheesecake, and sit back and enjoy a good old fairy-tale.

*Check against delivery.*

### **GW 31.05.17**

<sup>1</sup> Wot I wrote, (very) loosely inspired by Frank Stockton's 'The Banished King' (*The Bee-Man of Orn and Other Fanciful Tales*, 1887)

<sup>2</sup> He wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister: "To those who are amazed at my decision I would put the following question: is it normal for me to be the only Belgian citizen with a duty to act in conflict with his conscience in such matters? Does the freedom of conscience apply to everyone except the King?"

<sup>3</sup> King Badouin was all in favour of this plan. He also wrote: "I am asking the Government and the Parliament to find a legal solution that guarantees both the monarch's right not to have to act in conflict with his conscience and the proper functioning of our parliamentary democracy."

<sup>4</sup> Lukas Prakke: 'Swamping the Lords, Packing the Court, Sacking the King: Three Constitutional Crises', *European Constitutional Law Review*, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Mike Bartlett: *King Charles III*, NHB Modern Plays, 2014

<sup>6</sup> 1600-1649

<sup>7</sup> Sifre Deuteronomy 343