



**SERMON KI TEITZEI:<sup>1</sup>  
BARRED**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 29 August 2020  
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 My wife spent most of May, June and July desperately counting down the days until swimming pools could reopen. I'm not much of a swimmer – in fact, there aren't many closed premises I've been desperate to access... except for synagogues. I've been itching to get back onto a bimah
- 2 Even though I'm now here, handling a Torah scroll for the first time in five months, and I really am loving it, the experience is by no means perfect. I miss all of you! I miss the chats. The handshakes. The flapjacks at kiddush. Our voices singing together.
- 3 Nonetheless, and these deficiencies aside, it is definitely still my natural habitat. And I've been barred from it since mid-March.
- 4 Parashat Ki Teitzei is full of examples of barring. A divorced woman is expelled from her ex-husband's home.<sup>2</sup> Parapets are put around rooves to stop people falling off.<sup>3</sup> Owners are prohibited from harvesting their excess crops.<sup>4</sup>
- 5 One particularly curious case is that of the loan-shark barred from entering a debtor's house to collect their security.<sup>5</sup>
- 6 On one reading, this seems unfair. It's his property; he lent money to someone who voluntarily put up, say, their saddle as security; they defaulted on the loan; he gets the saddle. Why should he be barred from going and collecting what is, in fact, rightfully his?



- 7 Similarly, we've been barred from this house of worship since mid-March. We've all been prevented from entering this place, to access the Jewish nourishment within, Jewish nourishment that's rightfully ours.
- 8 We all realise, though, that the restrictions on a loan-shark have very good reasons. Barring him from swanning into a debtor's house helps to protect the safety and dignity of a vulnerable person. It's a case of **כבוד הבריות**, the honour due to the innate dignity of all human beings.
- 9 **בריות** is spelt **בִּרְיִית**. If we spelt it with an א, we'd get a phrase that sounds identical – **כבוד הבריאות** – but refers not to human dignity but to human health. The rules barring us from re-entering our sanctuary here are just as sensible, and borne out of **כבוד הבריאות**.
- 10 Ki Teitzei is an incredibly miscellaneous parashah. It bounces from topic to topic within the space of just a few verses. But ultimately, this year, it comes to teach us that, sometimes, we have to be separated from what's ours – for the greater good.
- 11 The barriers the Torah erects between debtor and loan shark will never change; there cannot be a vaccine for the imbalance of power in that relationship. But we pray for the speedy coming of the day when we can all gather – safely – in this sanctuary once again.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GKW 29.08.20**

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 23:22-24:18



- <sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1
- <sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 22:8
- <sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 24:19
- <sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 24:10