



SERMON KI TEITZEI:¹
WE KNOW WE BELONG TO THE LAND

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 21 August 2021
Southgate Progressive Synagogue

- 1 I was booked to lead your service on Boxing Day. But I had to cancel at the last minute because my wife was having an emergency caesarean. Luckily it all turned out OK, and our baby, five weeks premature, is now happy, healthy and smiley at nearly eight months old.
- 2 His name is Omri, which literally means ‘my sheaf’, so it feels appropriate that this morning we read that passage from Parashat Ki Teitzei which deals with the laws of the forgotten sheaf:² “When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the orphan and the widow.”
- 3 The rules of leket and shich’chah – those grains which the farmer accidentally drops, and those which he neglects – are based wholly on chance. The farmer might not forget any sheaves; they might not drop any. It’s certainly not a reliable way of ensuring that the poor have a steady flow of food. So what is the point of these commandments?
- 4 Let’s ask the question another way, perhaps in a more cynical way. Why should the poor be given the produce of my field? I planted it, I watered it, I harvested it. It’s mine, right?



- 5 Well, not according to the commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, it's not. He said: "The idea of ownership is writ large here: your harvest, your field. You have worked and cultivated, here now is the result, which you are about to gather with your own strength or that of those in your service. It is just this proud feeling of ownership which these mitzvot come to admonish. They warn you not to consider the whole of your field as being solely for you. They warn you not to lust over the power of your own labour."³

- 6 Rabbi Hirsch is referring to a human trait that needs correcting. The tendency to point to something and say, "That's mine." But how did this trait begin? How did people begin to develop these proprietorial feelings over 'their' things?

- 7 Professor Robert Nichols thinks that the concept of property was invented at the same time as the concept of theft: "Dispossession combines two processes: it transforms non-proprietary relations into proprietary ones, while, at the same time, systematically transferring control of this (newly-formed) property. In this way, dispossession merges commodification and theft into one moment. In a standard formulation one would assume that property is logically and chronologically prior to theft. However, in this context, theft is the mechanism and means by which property is generated."⁴

- 8 We can generate the idea of property, but we can't control that property. We can't control whether or not we forget a sheaf. We can't control whether or not we drop a sheaf. We can't even control whether or not our crops flourish; soil conditions, atmospheric conditions, many



considerations outside the boundaries of ‘our’ property, the field, have a huge impact. To paraphrase the psalm,⁵ unless God grows the grain, the farmer toils in vain.

- 9 I can’t control my own little sheaf, Omri, either. It would be easy for me to be lulled into believing that, because I created him, I own him: that he’s mine. But that’s not the case. In the words of the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran:⁶

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you
cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

- 10 This parashah comes to teach us that the propertisation of land and of produce, and the fetishisation of the fruits of our labour, or of the fruits of our loins – assuming proprietorship over something which we really don’t deserve – is virtually idolatry. God grows the grain, God created the people (including the poor people). Our role in the great process of life is purely technical. We are servants, not masters.⁷ We tend the crops that only exist thanks to Divine intervention. We bring life into the world through the miraculous processes God has created. These are



commodities to be shared generously, not guarded jealously. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

GKW 21.08.21

¹ Deuteronomy 24:10-22

² Deuteronomy 24:19

³ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch to Deuteronomy 24:19ff

⁴ Robert Nichols. *Theft is Property!: dispossession and critical theory* (London: Duke University Press, 2020): 8-9.

⁵ Psalm 127

⁶ Kahlil Gibran. *The Prophet* (Waterville, Maine: Walker Large Print, 1923): 21.

⁷ b.Horayot 10a-b

Deuteronomy 24:10-22

כִּי־תִשֶׂה בְרֵעֶךָ מִשְׁאֵת מְאוּמָה לֹא־תִבֹּא אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ
לְעֵבֶט עֵבְטוֹ: בַּזְּחוּק תִּעְמֹד וְהָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֶתָּה נִשֶּׂה
בּוֹ יוֹצִיא אֵלֶיךָ אֶת־הָעֵבוֹט הַזְּחוּצָה:

When your fellow has asked you to make them a
loan,

You have no right to grab it from inside their
home.

To uphold their dignity, you are ordered to wait
Until they can bring it to you at the gate.

If they are poor, says our God, the Almighty,

You have to return their pyjamas or nightie.

You mustn't oppress your hired staff, and their
wages

Should be paid very promptly: don't make them
wait ages.

וְאִם-אִישׁ עָנִי הוּא לֹא תִשְׁכַּח בְּעֵבְרוֹ: הָשִׁב תְּשִׁיב
לוֹ אֶת-הָעֲבוֹט כְּכֹחַ הַשְּׂמֶשׁ וְשָׁכַח בְּשַׁלְּמָתוֹ
וַיְבָרְכֶךָ וְלֹא תִהְיֶה צָדִיקָה לְפָנָי יְהוָה אֶל-הִיא: לֹא-
תַעֲשֶׂה שְׂכִיר עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן מֵאֲזִיָּה אוֹ מִגֵּרָה אֲשֶׁר
בְּאֶרֶץ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיהָ: טו בְּיוֹמוֹ תִּתֵּן שְׂכָרוֹ וְלֹא-תָבוֹא
עָלָיו הַשְּׂמֶשׁ כִּי עָנִי הוּא וְאֶלְיוֹ הוּא נִשָּׂא אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ
וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עָלֶיהָ אֶל-יְהוָה וְהָיָה בָּהּ זָזָטָ:

Don't execute parents for their offspring's crime:

For the one who has sinned, they alone should do
time.

Uphold the rights of vulnerable folk,

And don't force a widow to give up her cloak.

For recall: you were brought out of Egypt by God,

Your slavery was ended with Moses's rod.

לֹא-יוֹמְתוּ אָבוֹתַי עַל-בְּנֵים וּבְנֵים לֹא-יוֹמְתוּ עַל-
אָבוֹת אִישׁ בְּזוּטָאוֹ יוֹמְתוּ: לֹא תִטֶּה מִשִּׁפְּטֵי גֵר יְתוֹם
וְלֹא תִזְזַבֵּל בְּגָד בְּנֵה: וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ
בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּפְדֶּךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם עַל-כֵּן אֲנֹכִי
מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה:

When you harvest your field, don't take every

sheaf:

When you gather your olives, don't take every

leaf.

From your vineyard, leave widows and orphans

some vines,

So you will remember My wonders and signs.

כִּי תִקְצֹר קִצִּירְךָ בְשָׂדֶךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ עֹמֶר בְּשָׂדֶה לֹא
תָּשׁוּב לְקִזְזוֹתוֹ לִגְר לִיתוֹם וְלֹא לְמִנָּה יִהְיֶה לְמַעַן
יִבְרַכְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ: כִּי תִזְכַּט
זֵיתְךָ לֹא תִפְאֵר אֲזַרְיָה לִגְר לִיתוֹם וְלֹא לְמִנָּה
יִהְיֶה: כִּי תִבְצֹר פְּרִמָּה לֹא תַעֲזוֹלֵל אֲזַרְיָה לִגְר
לִיתוֹם וְלֹא לְמִנָּה יִהְיֶה: וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי־עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַל־כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־
הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה: