

# Forgotten Grains not forgotten people: A Jewish textual base for the Right To Food

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The Torah lists four circumstances in which crops that a farmer grows for his own purposes, or for sale, nonetheless have to be given to the poor. These are: *pe'ah* (crops that grew in the corners of the field), *leket* (crops that the farmer accidentally drops while harvesting), *shich'chah* (crops that the farmer harvests but then forgets to take away for processing) and *olelot* (bunches of grapes which have an unusual shape).

The existence of these biblical laws, and the regulations that the rabbis provide in the Mishnaic tractate called *Pe'ah*, provide a very clear picture of how Judaism recognises a 'right to food'. There are three angles to this.

Firstly, the law is very clear that the importance of those in need having access to food trumps the farmer's property rights. He cannot simply insist that it is his food from his field; rather, as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch put it in his commentary, "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."

Secondly, the rabbis carefully created a system to ensure that food was distributed fairly and equitably and according to need. Farmers had to open up their land three times a day: the morning slot was ideal for nursing mothers who got up early; the lunchtime slot was ideal for orphans who slept in to keep their strength up; and the evening slot was for the elderly who took longer to walk around seeking sustenance. It would be no good to create a system where those in need could access food in theory but where large groups of them would be unable, in practice, to obtain any.

(Similarly, food banks need to cater to different religious and cultural diets.)

Thirdly, the entire system is built on recognising the dignity of the poor. The Mishnah is at pains to point out that the poor must be given extra food at Shabbat, more than is needed just to keep alive, because they deserve an enjoyable experience, not just a not-quite-starving experience. In assessing who was 'poor' and who was not, the Rabbis took no account of the value of people's houses or the tools of their trade, because nobody would be forced out of their home to afford food. Above all, there is a principle that "one who does not allow the poor to gather, behold, he is robbing the poor".

The four types of food, which the Torah gives to those in need are sometimes referred to as '*Matnot Aniyim*': gifts for the poor. But they are not a gift or a privilege. They are a right. And anyone who seeks to interfere with that is committing a serious act of wrongdoing.

The Hebrew word '*olelot*', the deformed grape-clusters left to the poor, also refers to young and sickly children. Tiny, helpless humans. An *olelet* is the tiny, sickly version of a fully-grown grape cluster. Maybe the fact that they must be preserved for the poor is the Mishnah's way of symbolising the general duty owed by society to the vulnerable. Just as we do not discard unhealthy bunches of grapes, even though they are not economically viable and can be an inconvenience, so too we certainly have a duty to care for and seek to include, facilitate, welcome and sustain those who are vulnerable, or excluded, or who cannot access the rest of society without assistance and accommodations.