



**SERMON PESACH:<sup>1</sup>  
LET THEIR PEOPLE IN**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 16 April 2022  
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue

- 1 “They had not prepared any provisions for themselves.”<sup>2</sup>
- 2 Why didn’t the Israelites have provisions? According to the Mechilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, a 3rd-century commentary on the Book of Exodus, the reason is that the Israelites were sweetly trusting:<sup>3</sup> they were so content to rely on Divine providence that they didn’t pack any food for themselves.
- 3 No food! What sort of Jews were they?!
- 4 But more seriously, it seems faintly careless. They had enough time to ransack Egypt for precious metals;<sup>4</sup> how come they didn’t have enough time to wrap up some bread, fruit and vegetables for their journey?
- 5 ‘Sweetly trusting’ is not a mature, realistic approach to modern life. Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised that fleeing slaves, who had never had any sort of agency or control, lacked the initiative to take any steps to look after themselves. But ‘sweetly trusting’ – or its somewhat less



charming cousin, ‘hoping someone else does it’ – also defines the British government’s approach to those fleeing oppression today: Ukrainian refugees.

- 6 Simply assuming that private citizens would open up their spare rooms – an assumption that, for some reason, didn’t apply when the refugees were Muslim: I don’t recall the government initiating a ‘Homes for Syrians’ in 2011 – is the very definition of ‘sweetly trusting’. Or, rather, of ‘hoping someone else does it’.
- 7 And to be fair, private citizens did open up their spare rooms. Tens and hundreds of thousands of private citizens came forward. Just like Captain Tom did to raise money for the National Health Service. Just like Marcus Rashford and countless cafés, restaurants and pubs did to feed schoolkids whose families couldn’t afford lunch.
- 8 But that isn’t the point; they shouldn’t have to, and it isn’t their job.
- 9 In 2020, the columnist Nesrine Malik wrote: “By reaching into its own pockets to feed hungry children, the British public has now become an informal branch of the state. Central government has abdicated its responsibilities so that local communities have no choice but to pick up the pieces themselves. A new danger is on the horizon – that we become



a GoFundMe nation. And the state will look on and hand out honours to those who have galvanised the public to do the government's work.”<sup>5</sup>

- 10 People are good, and people are exceptionally good at filling gaps. This very shul is a perfect illustration: the effort that NLS members go to in providing for those in need, in filling the gaps left by the state – from your family of Syrian refugees to the Salaam Shalom Soup Kitchen – is exemplary.
- 11 But that's the micro level of gap-filling. On the macro level, one thing that we have done to fill the gap left by the absence of a state was... creating a state. It is a basic principle of political philosophy that the state exists because all of us made a social contract to delegate a little bit of our own freedom to create a higher authority that would fulfil people's basic needs more efficiently and more justly than we could achieve without it.
- 12 The Jewish version of the social contract is covenant. We pooled our sovereignty and made God, through the prophets and the rabbinic system, our leader. That explains, then, the escaping Israelites' trust that God would provide humanitarian support when they were at their lowest ebb.



- 13 Times haven't changed. That must be the role of the state now as well. Passively allowing random homeowners to host Ukrainian refugees is not sufficient – even though homeowners have stepped up to the plate and expressed a willingness, in these dire and extreme circumstances, to do so. The duty to care for refugees falls on society as a collective, not on motivated citizens as individuals.
- 14 In the Exodus, the great prophetic voice of Judaism said to Pharaoh: שלח את-עמי, let My people go. Now we must raise our own voices in prophetic chorus and say to our own rulers: הכניסו את-עמם, let their people in.

## GKW 16.04.22

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 12:37-49

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12:39

<sup>3</sup> Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Pischa 14

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 12:35-36

<sup>5</sup> Nesrine Malik. "Britain is becoming a GoFundMe nation, with the public doing the government's job", *The Guardian* (2 November 2020): <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/02/britain-gofundme-nation-public-government-children-nhs-tories-state>>