



SERMON LECH L'CHA:^a GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 5 November 2022
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֶיךָ וְנָתַתִּי לָךְ וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֶיךָ – *I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your descendants who will come after you.*^b

- 2 And, just like that, Abram arrogated to himself the right to reside in the land of Canaan. He didn't seek permission from the area's rulers. He didn't buy a plot of land. He didn't apply for entry clearance. He simply waltzed in, set up his tent, and made it his home, and the home for his descendants.

- 3 Was Abram, then, part of the "invasion" of which Suella Braverman warned us on Monday? "Let us stop pretending that they are all refugees in distress," she urged. "The whole country knows that that is not true."^c



- 4 The last politician to use the language of “invasion” around refugees was Nick Griffin of the British National Party.^d But a more interesting use of language to describe refugees is found in Hebrew.
- 5 Abraham is described as a **גַּר**, a sojourner or stranger, in the land of Canaan. The 12th-century commentator Abraham ibn-Ezra explains:^e “In Hebrew, someone who has a family is like a branch connected to the root. A **גַּר**, a sojourner, though, is like a grain,^f **גֶּרְגִּיר**, cut off from its roots.” With his characteristic charm, ibn-Ezra adds: “There are some feeble-minded people out there who are too ignorant to understand this.”^g
- 6 And, actually, he’s right. Language that derides, degrades and dehumanises refugees is indeed the preserve of the ignorant. Those of us imbued with humanity can instinctively realise that a single grain of wheat is a powerful and perfect metaphor for the asylum seeker. Weak and vulnerable. Alone and detached from its origins. Brimming with potential that can only be fulfilled in a safe and



nurturing environment. A grain can, will and must take root wherever it finds the correct conditions to grow and flourish.

- 7 There is a pernicious myth – a myth promoted, regretfully, by our own government – that it is somehow improper for asylum seekers to come here; if they made it to France first, goes the narrative, let France take them in.

- 8 Appearing before a Parliamentary committee last year, Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor from the UN’s refugee programme made short work of destroying this myth.^h “It is based on a non-existent principle that refugees should seek asylum in the first safe country they encounter,” she said. “If this argument was valid for the UK, it would also be valid for France. It would be valid for France to send people back to the next country, to Germany. You keep going back until everybody is essentially back to their own borders. The fallacy is that we think that all a refugee should legitimately want is to save their life, and if their life has been saved and they are not being shot at, they are okay. The reality is that simply surviving is not



enough. You will want to find a place where you can re-establish your life. This is often not possible in many of the countries that are safe but do not offer, for example, the opportunity to send your kids to school. We have to understand why people sometimes take the risks, the very major risks, to move further afield, in order to re-establish lives for themselves and their families. I suggest that any of us would make the same choice if we found ourselves in that kind of situation. That does not make you any less of a refugee.”

9 It is not enough for the grain not to be crushed. If it cannot grow into a fine sheaf of wheat, it is being cruelly denied autonomy. When asylum seekers are dehumanised merely for trying to do more than just stay alive, that is frightening, fascist and unacceptable.

10 Yet it is not just refugees who are dehumanised. The other frightening, fascist and unacceptable development of this week was the success of the far-right in Israel’s general election.¹ Bezael Smotrich and Itamar ben-G’vir, two openly extremist politicians,



now have seats in the Knesset and a real chance at being part of the next Israeli government. Between them, these men favour a ban on non-Orthodox conversions to Judaism. They support the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin, may his memory be a blessing, 27 years ago yesterday. They idolise the perpetrator of the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre, in which 29 Palestinians were killed at prayer.^j One described himself as “a proud homophobe”,^k the other ran on a policy platform of forcing “enemies” (which means Arabs, of course) to leave the country.^l

11 These politicians, and their parties, and the people that voted for them, have seemingly forgotten how they came to be running for election in the first place. Their ancestors arrived there as **גרים**, as sojourners, as individual, rootless grains of wheat. That happened in the distant past under Abram, as we read in this morning’s parashah; and it happened in the recent past with the establishment of the modern State of Israel.



12 The ‘it’s our country’ argument rings spectacularly hollow in light of the fact that Jews, ourselves, are an immigrant people – even in ‘our own land’ – according to the Torah. By all means have a Jewish state, but let it be ethically Jewish, not just ethnically Jewish.

Homophobia, racism, sectarian hatred and support for assassins and murderers are not ethically Jewish.

13 The same is true here in Britain. ‘Enhanced border security’, of the sort being peddled by the Home Office, is surely a greater risk to our safety than the so-called ‘threats’ it is meant to protect against. Nothing can be less threatening than a grain of wheat, especially a grain of wheat in which we see echoes of our own history, our own desperation, our own yearnings for freedom and fulfilment.

14 The phrase אֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵינוּ, the land of our sojourning, has no tense in Hebrew. Anywhere we find ourselves at any given moment is the land of our sojourning. Britain, Israel, Peru, wherever. Like grains of wheat, we may be weak. But like grains of wheat, we are also strong: we have the seed of life within us, the Divine spark which



enables us to grow and bloom even after a traumatic separation from our roots. Those of us fortunate enough to have flourished already – those of us who have laid down roots in a new land, and grown tall into a bountiful plant – have a duty to remember where we came from, and to use our power and privilege to support others who have not yet bloomed.

^a Genesis 17:3-16

^b Genesis 17:8

^c HC Deb, 31 October 2022: c 641

^d Emma Thelwell. “BNP launches its ‘serious’ manifesto”, *Channel 4* (23 April 2010): <https://www.channel4.com/news/articles/vote_2010/bnp%2Blaunches%2Bits%2Bmanifesto/3623487.html>

^e Ibn-Ezra to Genesis 15:13

^f גרגיר – other possible translations include ‘rocket-plant’ or ‘berry’ (Jastrow).

^g Ibn-Ezra, *ibid.*

^h HC 885 (2021-22): oral evidence of 20 October 2021

ⁱ “Kahanism won. Israel is now closing in on a right-wing, religious, authoritarian revolution”, *Ha’aretz* (2 November 2022): <<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2022-11-02/ty-article-opinion/kahanism-won/00000184-3591-d636-a9ed-fdb1292d0000>>

^j “Is this the Israel UK Jews want?”, *Jewish News* (20 October 2022): <<https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/voice-of-the-jewish-news-is-this-the-israel-uk-jews-want/>>

^k Tamar Pileggi. “Jewish Home hopeful boasts of being ‘proud homophobe’”, *Times of Israel* (23 February 2015): <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-home-hopeful-boasts-of-being-proud-homophobe/>>

^l Jeremy Sharon. “Ben Gvir’s policy goals: going to extremes even Europe’s far right won’t touch”, *Times of Israel* (28 October 2022): <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/ben-gvir-policy-goals-going-to-extremes-even-europe-s-far-right-wont-touch/>>



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