



SERMON R'EH:ⁱ IF A THING'S WORTH DOING

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 12 August 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue – *bar mitzvah of Buckley*

1 Nine days ago, my car had an encounter with a white van, and that was the end of its useful life. All the humans involved were safe, but a little sad. Omri, when he got home from nursery, rather forlornly gazed out of the window and declared: “*Car broken! Want fix it car. I like daddy car!*” And I was a bit sad too. It was my first car. I know that it was a terrible, low-tech old banger worth less than the shul paid for my parking permit. But still, I had a great degree of affection for it. I didn’t go so far as to say Kaddish when the scrap-merchant came to take it away, but I did pay £80 to the DVLA to keep its registration and re-assign it to the new car. That facility is mainly designed for people with fancy personalised plates, but it served my purposes as well.

2 Spending £80 on sentimentality might look like an extravagance. Especially in a week where we anyway had to splash out on a new car. But keeping the number plate is something that was meaningful to me. And that was my prerogative.

3 Now, today, Buckley here is celebrating his bar mitzvah. The journey towards bar mitzvah isn’t easy, and, normally, it isn’t exactly cheap. At the minimum, it requires an enormous commitment of time from the family. So, like my old-new number plates, it could be thought of as a needless extravagance.

4 But of course, that isn’t how we approach it at all. And the passage of Torah which Buckley read so confidently for us this morning, explains why. It commands us, when encountering somebody

ⁱ Deuteronomy 15:1-11

in need, to open our hands and lend them יָדֵי מְחֹסֵרִים: *sufficient for their needs*.ⁱⁱ

5 *Sufficient for their needs*. What does that phrase mean? We see countless examples of moral outrage when those in need are given what is perceived to be more than enough for their needs, when those who are financially secure are furious that ‘their’ money is being used to provide unnecessary treats to the undeserving. A classic example of the genre is an article by Stephen Pollard, editor-at-large of *The Jewish Chronicle*,ⁱⁱⁱ with the headline: “*Benefit claimants are still living in the lap of luxury*.” Somewhat predictably, this screed argues that benefit claimants have “*won a jackpot*” thanks to:

[H]ardworking taxpayers, who [despite] finding it daily more difficult to make ends meet [are] nonetheless forced to fork out vast fortunes to keep [the unemployed] in housing the like of which they could barely dream of for themselves.

Gosh! Lucky, lucky benefit claimants. One wonders why Stephen Pollard continues to work at his job, if he could so easily upgrade his lifestyle by the simple expedient of resigning and joining the dole queue.

6 Dr Ruth Patrick, an academic at York University, calls attitudes such as this “*scroungerphobia*”, and condemns the offensive “*‘othering’ of those judged less deserving of state support*”.^{iv}

7 I get the sense that Dr Patrick has read our Torah portion this morning. I can only guess – or hope – that Stephen Pollard hasn’t. Because not only does it explicitly command against the Scrooge-like condescension displayed by his article – “*Do not harden your heart ...*

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 15:8

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen Pollard, “Benefit claimants are still living in the lap of luxury”, *The Daily Express* (16 August 2011): <<https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/265223/Benefit-claimants-are-still-living-in-the-lap-of-luxury>> Pollard continued this theme in subsequent articles, eg “The young should be made to work for their benefits”, *The Daily Express* (18 February 2015), <<https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/558735/Stephen-Pollard-on-young-work-benefits-dole-welfare-NEETs>>, and “54% of UK households now on ‘benefits’ – the dam is going to burst”, *The Daily Express* (24 January 2023): <<https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/1725253/rishi-sunak-taxes-benefits-healthcare-universal-credit>>

^{iv} Ruth Patrick, *For Whose Benefit? The everyday realities of welfare reform* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), ebook edition: ch 6.



give readily and have no regrets when you do so^v – it contains that phrase: *sufficient for their needs*.

8 The Talmud understands the verse as meaning that those who have fallen upon hard times must be supported not with merely the squalid minimum necessary to stay alive (the notion over which Pollard appears to salivate), but with enough to allow them to live in dignity. Hillel the Elder, we are told, once organised a charitable collection for a nobleman who had fallen on hard times – and the support package he put together included a horse and a servant.^{vi} I suppose we could argue that the recipient had indeed “*won a jackpot*”, but his luck did not lie in getting a free horse at the expense of “*hardworking taxpayers*”. No. His luck lay in the fact that he encountered Hillel, a sensitive and compassionate leader.

9 Buckley, in your journey towards becoming bar mitzvah, you have also proven yourself to be a sensitive and compassionate leader. You’ve worked hard, and you’ve come up with a deep and fascinating interpretation of your portion. But above all, you understand that your bar mitzvah is important. You could have used the time you’ve spent on it for anything. But you chose to use it in pursuing your family heritage – I very much enjoyed your childhood memory of choosing which grandparent to sit with in Holland Road shul based on which grandparent had the best snacks – and you have done yourself proud. מזל טוב!

^v Deuteronomy 15:7, 10

^{vi} b.Ketubot 67b

