

WHO ARE THE WIDOW, ORPHAN AND STRANGER?

A commentary on *Parashat Ki Teitzei*
By Georgina Bye

Parashat Ki Teitzei at first seems like a pretty negative *Parasha* and I would wager that it is on the whole. It is one with lots of rules and regulations about what to do during war, when and how you should stone people, when to exile them from the community and who should be sentenced to death. To some extent it is basically an episode of *Game of Thrones*, but without the dragons.

However, we need to push past the brutality of this *Parasha* and take a closer look. The *Parasha* is not just talking about adultery, war and punishment, it goes on to talk about how you should plant your crops and build a fence around your roof so nobody falls off, how to allocate inheritance and the imperative to return lost property. How do these pieces sit side by side? Really this *Parasha* is about how you treat one another and despite this human to human element it's not an easy *Parasha* to read, many of the rulings are challenging to our modern worldviews, the treatment of *agunot* (chained women who have been refused a divorce by their husbands), the general oppression of women as captives through marriage, and the social exclusion of wayward children and much more.

Yet, there is a glimmer of hope in this *Parasha*, although you have to wait until almost the end of the portion to find it. In Chapter 24 we turn our sights towards the poor workers, the strangers who are in our land, widows and orphans. After so much talk of how we can mistreat people we get to a point which says hang on a minute, you don't take advantage of those that have nothing.

This section is talking about how we must treat the most vulnerable, we must pay their wages on time. We must not take a widow's cloak for payment. Essentially

we could derive that we are talking about those in extreme poverty, those outside of our own community, that have nobody to care for them. Perhaps a modern reading, is the refugee, the person struck by natural disaster or living in the shadow of an oppressive regime. The reasoning we are given here is that we should "remember that you were slaves in Egypt." This phrase is repeated at least six times in the Torah through various iterations and again throughout the Passover *Haggadah* so it must be fairly important and worth reminding us of.

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The other part of this obligation to the vulnerable is that of leaving some of the produce of the fields for the poor. This *Parasha* says you should not pick all of the olives off the tree and if you drop some sheafs of harvest in your field you must leave them there and not pick them up.

In truth I feel this is one of the most important messages that we occasionally need reminding of, maybe that is why it is repeated. Yes, this *Parasha* is a challenging one to read but it also contains one of our strongest imperatives to treat those less fortunate than ourselves with kindness and to not make their situation worse. Where we can lift them up so as not to be sinful ourselves.

I am very privileged to work for organisations that dedicate their time and resources to helping those in extreme poverty, those affected by natural disasters and revitalising Jewish communities around the world. They do so with this Jewish imperative in mind, driving their organisations and their personal work to support those that most need it.

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