



SERMON CHOL HA-MO'ED SUKKOT: HEARTS AND SPADES WILL WIN THE DAY

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 19 October 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

[1] St George's Hill in Weybridge – not so far from here – is one of the most exclusive places to live in Britain. It features the most expensive street in the country outside London, with house prices averaging £9 million.ⁱ Famous residents have included John Lennon (you know, the bloke they named after that airport) and Elton John.ⁱⁱ

[2] There's an amazing irony in St George's Hill being a private enclave of the super-rich: back in 1649, it was the site occupied by the Diggers, a Civil War-era group of proto-Marxists who rejected the concept of land ownership. They set about cultivating vegetables on the hill in defiance of the landed gentry who laid claim to it.ⁱⁱⁱ

[3] The leader of the Diggers was one Gerrard Winstanley, now a rather obscure historical figure, although he is commemorated on a Soviet-era obelisk in Moscow alongside Marx and Engels.^{iv}

[4] Winstanley's ideology was simple and rather compelling:^v

[T]hey two persons that buys and sells, and leaves the land that is bought for an inheritance to their children, excluding others, they murder the third man, because they steal away his livelihood from him; for after a man hath bought the land, and paid money for it to another, he saith, 'this is my land, I have paid for it'. But the third man comes in and saith, 'the land is mine, equal with you by the law of creation'. And so he that is the buyer, he

ⁱ Kieran Graves, "UK's most expensive street outside London on Surrey estate so exclusive even Google maps can't visit", *Surrey Live* (10 January 2024): <<https://perma.cc/GCP9-CT58>>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an accessible introduction, see generally John Gurney, *Gerrard Winstanley: the Digger's life and legacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

^{iv} Ibid: 1.

^v Gerrard Winstanley, "An appeal to the House of Commons, desiring their answer: whether the common people shall have the quiet enjoyment of the commons and waste-land or whether they shall be under the will of lords of manors still" (1649), reprinted with better spelling in Christopher Hill (ed), *Winstanley: 'The law of freedom' and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 109–124: 120–121.

begins to draw his sword, and to fight; and if he conquer, he rejoices, and says, 'the land is now mine indeed, I have bought and I have conquered'. But thou covetous person, so long as there is another man in the world besides thee and him whom thou hast killed, the earth belongs to him as well as to thee.

In other words, for two reasons, land is something that belongs to everyone. Firstly, it is essential to human life, and nobody should be excluded from a resource essential to human life. Secondly, we were all created free and equal, and the fact that one person is descended from kings, and has thus inherited a vast fortune, while another is descended from paupers and has not, offers no justification for differential treatment.

[5] Of course, the Diggers did not meet with universal approval. Even though the Civil War had cast off the yoke of a royal family, lords of the manor still felt entitled to land they considered to be theirs, and they were not altogether keen to have a bunch of long-haired hippies planting sweetcorn on 'their' property. Some of their opponents sued them – at Kingston Crown Court,^{vi} just a few yards from where I grew up! – but others took more direct action.

[6] One nobleman, a cleric named Parson Platt, had the Diggers' houses pulled down. Winstanley records:^{vii}

Parson Platt (the lord of [his] manor) will not suffer the [D]iggers to have a house ([forgetting] his master Christ) ... yet the [D]iggers were mighty cheerful ... And they have built them[selves] some few little hutches like calf-cribs, and there they lie a-nights ... counting it a great happiness to be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

So, without physical, secure housing, the Diggers lived, happily and cheerily, in little agricultural huts. I think that probably reminds us of something.

[7] We all know that Sukkot is the festival where we remember the Israelites' days of tent-dwelling in the wilderness. The question arises, why did the Israelites spend so long in the wilderness? The two classic answers are, firstly, that it was necessary for the whole generation of Egyptian slaves to die off and a new generation to take its place, and/

^{vi} Hill, *ibid*: 28.

^{vii} Gerrard Winstanley, "A new-year's gift for the Parliament and army: shewing where kingly power is, and the cause of those they call Diggers is the life and marrow of that cause the Parliament hath declared for and the army fought for" (1650), reprinted in Hill, *ibid*, 159-210: 179.



or, secondly, that it was a punishment for the sin of the golden calf. But actually, those are answers to a subtly different question: why did the Israelites have to wait 40 years before entering the Promised Land?

[8] Our question is more specific, though: why did the Israelites have to spend so long in the wilderness? Why there?

[9] The rabbis answer this question too: the Torah had to be given in the wilderness, precisely because it was a common land owned by nobody: it was “*was given in the desert, publicly and openly, in a place belonging to no one*” in order that it would not be regarded as the property of any particular nation or tribe.^{viii} The other says that the whole experience was to give the Israelites a taste of what it was like to be poor, landless, stateless, homeless,^{ix} and thereby to engender in them compassion for others.

[10] Both of these are ideas we find in Winstanley’s writings too. Those who own land, he said, violate three of the Ten Commandments: *Thou shalt not steal*, by abstracting the shared inheritance of humanity and keeping it for themselves and their families;^x *Thou shalt not kill*, by enforcing their claims with violence^{xi} and excluding the poor and needy from much-needed natural resources;^{xii} and *Thou shalt honour thy father and thy mother*, because our father “*is the spirit of community*” and our mother “*is the earth*”, both of which are dishonoured when the world is divided up for the benefit of the wealthy.^{xiii}

[11] Our sukkah should remind us of all of these values. It is an open, welcoming space. It remind us of the fragility of our lives and our wealth. Rabbi Jill Jacobs explains: “*[I]t is not enough that the sukkah to be simply a place where you can survive for a week; rather, [it] must be a place in which you can live with relative dignity.*”^{xiv}

^{viii} Mechilta d’Rabbi Ishma’el, Ba-Chodesh 5 (Lauterbach translation)

^{ix} Ozneyim la-Torah to Deuteronomy 4:41-42 (based on the ArtScroll translation because I haven’t had a second to check the original)

^x Gerrard Winstanley, “The true levellers’ standard advanced: or, the state of community opened, and presented to the sons of men” (1649), reprinted in Hill, *ibid*, 75-95: 85-86.

^{xi} *Ibid*.

^{xii} Winstanley, “A new-year’s gift”, *ibid*: 174

^{xiii} Winstanley, “The true levellers’ standard advanced”, *ibid*: 93.

^{xiv} Rabbi Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: pursuing social justice through Jewish law and tradition* (Nashville, Tennessee: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009): 142.



[12] And, more than that, it must be a place we can be joyous.^{xv} Where, like Gerrard Winstanley and his friends, we can be mighty cheerful and happy to be inheritors of such an empathetic tradition.

[13] The Diggers had a song that they would sing as they dug. It ended: *“Then clubs and diamonds cast away / For hearts and spades will win the day.”*^{xvi}

[14] Our Sukkah should inspire us to pray for the same: that a time will soon come when neither clubs nor diamonds – that is, neither might nor wealth – will be the governing force behind our society, and instead hearts and spades, human connection and human achievement, will take precedence. בן יהי רצון, may this be God’s will.

^{xv} Leviticus 23:40

^{xvi} “The Diggers Christmas-carol” (undated), reprinted in George H Sabine (ed), *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley: with an appendix of documents relating to the Digger movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1941), 667–672: 672.

