



## SERMON KI TEITZEI:<sup>i</sup> SUPPORT

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 6 September 2025  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue  
~ *bat mitzvah of Hannah* ~

**[1]** In 2019, Josh Thompson, an advertising executive in New Zealand, received a letter summoning him to a redundancy meeting with his boss. The letter advised him that he had a right to be accompanied, by a trade union representative, friend, or other supporter.

**[2]** *“I thought it’s best to bring in a professional,”* Mr Thompson said, *“so I paid \$200 and hired a clown.”*<sup>ii</sup> His clown – in full costume – sat with him throughout the meeting, making balloon animals. When the redundancy paperwork was handed over, the clown mimed tears.<sup>iii</sup>

**[3]** Now, two things about that. Firstly, what a joker. I have so much respect for Josh Thompson’s flippancy and sense of humour. Hopefully I never get summoned to a redundancy meeting, but if I do, apologies in advance to our synagogue council members but I am definitely bringing a clown with me.

**[4]** Secondly, though, is the important fact that he was allowed to take whoever he wanted into that potentially stressful meeting as a supporter.

**[5]** As you told us in your fantastic d’var Torah, Hannah, the importance of workers having rights goes all the way back to your parashah. לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂק שָׂכִיר עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן, *You are not to wrong a poor or destitute employee.*<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 24:10-18

<sup>ii</sup> Adrienne Matei, “Sad face: New Zealander takes clown to redundancy meeting”, *The Guardian* (13 September 2019): <<https://perma.cc/9VCN-Y83Q>>

<sup>iii</sup> Damien Venuto, “Auckland adman hires professional clown for redundancy meeting”, *NZ Herald* (13 September 2019): <<https://archive.ph/wz8gS>>

<sup>iv</sup> Deuteronomy 24:14

**[6]** The Yashar,<sup>v</sup> a 19th-century commentator, uses these words to lay down a more general rule that “*anyone who withholds from their fellow what their fellow is entitled to, they are called an oppressor*”.

**[7]** In other words, this isn’t just about employment. The verse gives me rights because I’m a worker, but it also gives you rights, Hannah, along with everyone else, because we all have things to which we’re entitled: basic ones like food and drink and shelter, emotional ones like love and support, communal ones like a place in society, education, and, in a few years in your case, voting.

**[8]** When you wrote to me, Hannah, you spoke about the importance of this synagogue in that it’s somewhere you feel you belong. And in your d’var Torah you added how much you’ve valued being part of a school that nurtures your unique talents and abilities and accepts you for who you are.

**[9]** And who you are is someone incredibly impressive. On top of all of the normal demands of teenage life, and on top of the extra challenges you’ve faced, you’ve invested time, effort and energy in studying an ancient language, and learning to read it – without vowels – from semi-legible calligraphy written on a piece of dried cowskin.

**[10]** Why did you do such a thing? For the party, yes, but as you said, it was also to make your family and teachers (and rabbi) proud.

**[11]** And, I think, and I hope I’m not putting words into your mouth here, because it connected you with foundational values and principles such as equality and human rights, which derive from the verses you read us so beautifully.

**[12]** And one of those human rights is the right to support. You’ve enjoyed a lot of support in preparing for today, Hannah, but most importantly, you’ve supported yourself as well. Nobody can force a 12- or 13-year-old to put in the amount of work you’ve done. Your dedication to making such a success of your bat mitzvah has inspired everyone who’s been with you on your journey.

<sup>v</sup> Ad loc



**[13]** Rabbi Dr Sonja K Pilz has written a special prayer for b'nei mitzvah for families of mixed heritage, Jewish and non-Jewish. She said:<sup>vi</sup>

Whenever we come together, we celebrate the vastness of our traditions, the depth of our stories, and the care that connects us. On this day, you are taking upon yourself a heritage older than most others on this planet. From this day on, you are a bearer of Torah, one of the sacred books of humanity. We see that you are strong, wise, and ready to hold on to this book and make its teachings part of your own story. We are proud of your pride in being Jewish. We respect the respect you show for your heritage. We love the love you feel for a people and a wisdom you chose for yourself. Go ... find your own way. Take our blessings with you.

So, Hannah, on this special and sacred day, go, find your own way. Take our blessings with you. כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Sonja K Pilz, "Blessing for a B'Mitzvah by non-Jewish family members", RavBlog (9 December 2022): <<https://perma.cc/3P2C-JYKN>>

