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Script for BBC Thought for the Day
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Possession as Responsibility

Good morning.

There is no word for “mine” in the Hebrew language. For any Hebrew speakers now shouting “sheli” at the radio, the late Rabbi Morris Swift (a leading UK orthodox Rabbinic judge of the last century, noted for powerful and idiosyncratic sermons) used to respond to similar cries of “sheli” from around the synagogue by explaining that it is a conflation of two words: “yesh” meaning there is, and “li” meaning to me. This etymological construct reminds us that the Jewish concept of property is that God assigns property to my use and control from time to time, but it remains God’s in all real senses.

The theme of the Torah portion that we will read this week in synagogues around the world is that of responsible property ownership. That includes the laws of the Sabbatical year: the farmer’s determination to maximise profit from agricultural land is subordinated to the duty to leave fields fallow once in every seven years, to preserve them for others, including future generations. The duty to remit debts at the Sabbatical year, and the Biblical prohibition of charging interest on loans, carry the same clear message: if I have spare money I should lend it in a spirit of sharing my blessings, and not as a way of increasing my wealth through the exploitation of others’ need.

Through land law, credit law and employment law this week’s Torah portion focuses the Jewish concept of property on responsibility and not on possession. I am a guardian of any property that is “sheli” – allocated to me from time to time – and I must nurture it and share it in that spirit.

This was a radical message in Biblical times in many societies where might was right and possession was ten tenths of the law: but of course today it is widely accepted throughout different societies and cultures. It chimes with environmental policies that see us increasingly as only guardians of the planet and its resources; and it fits with widespread and growing understanding of social responsibility at the heart of successful commercial and corporate culture.

Organised religion can come with a dangerous sense of entitlement: prosperity becomes a reward flowing from God's approval of my way of life. We read about Jewish property law this week shortly before the festival of Shavuot, which is a harvest festival but also reenacts our acceptance of the Torah's commandments, to remind us that social responsibility is an essential prerequisite for accepting ritual laws in a setting that makes them a benefit, and not a burden, for humankind.
