

On Shabbat (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown), in synagogue, when we Jews gather to meet and pray, we read a weekly portion from the *Torah* (the first five books of Moses). The portion (in Hebrew ‘parashah’), which will be read this Shabbat, is called ‘*Ki Teitzei*’ after its opening words, which mean ‘when you go’ and refer to *Devarim* (‘Words’) or Deuteronomy 21:10–25:19.

*Devarim* or Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible. It takes the form of a farewell speech by the leader Moses, who liberated the slaves from Egypt, to his people, who are still wandering in the wilderness, before they enter Canaan, the Promised Land.

There are many obligations upon the Israelites recounted by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy and this particular portion contains many rules governing marriage, war, animals, burials, clothes and so on.

Some of these laws sound arcane and old-fashioned to modern ears, offensive even. For example, this line, ‘A woman must not put on man’s apparel, nor shall a man wear woman’s clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD your God.’

But others sound reasonable and fair because underpinning many of the rules is a timeless concern with fairness and justice.

Of course, orthodox Jews believe that the Hebrew Bible is the timeless word of God, transmitted to Moses who then wrote it down. Yet, there is a general scholarly agreement that the text dates to a much later period in ancient Israel’s history.

Regardless of which faith tradition you come from, or if you have no faith, and whether you believe this to be divinely inspired, or a historical text reflecting the circumstances in which it was produced, its time and location, or a piece of timeless literature, we can still find contemporary resonance in its words.

Take this example

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂק שֹׁכֵר עֲנִי וְאֶבְיֹן מֵאַחֵיךָ אִם מִגֵּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצֶךָ בְּשַׂעֲרֶיךָ:

You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land.

בְּיוֹמוֹ תִּתֶּן שֹׁכְרוֹ וְלֹא-תָבוֹא עָלָיו הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כִּי עֲנִי הוּא וְאֶלְיֹו הוּא נָשָׂא אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ אֶל-יְהוָה וְהָיָה (בְּרֵךְ הַטָּעָא: ס)

You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it; else he will cry to the LORD against you and you will incur guilt.

In these lines, we see a concern with the welfare of workers, particularly low-paid workers what, in the terminology of today, we might call those who work in the ‘gig economy’. The injunction is clear: they may not be ‘abused’ or mistreated. Their working conditions must be respected nor must they be asked to do anything dangerous. This applies to whether the labourer is native born or an immigrant. No distinction is made.

In the next verse, note the injunction to pay your workers promptly and on time because the labourer is needy and urgently depends upon this payment in order to feed themselves and their families.

We might do well to remember such words in today's heated context, especially with debates over immigration and Brexit, especially as jobs become scarcer and lower paid. The words of *Ki Teitzei, Devarim* / Deuteronomy resonate loudly today.