

# RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMITMENTS: LAND BEYOND OWNERSHIP

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# THE LETTER OF IMAM ‘ALĪ TO MĀLIK AL-ASHTAR

Let the most beloved of affairs to you be those most centred upon the right, the most comprehensive in justice, and the most inclusive of popular contentment, for the discontent of the common folk (al-‘āmma) undermines the contentment of the elite (al-khāssa); while the discontent of the elite is compensated by the contentment of the common folk. In times of prosperity no subjects are more of a burden to the ruler as regards seeking his favour than the elite, and none who are less helpful to him in times of trial; none more repelled than they by justice, more importunate in making demands, less grateful when granted favour, slower to pardon when deprived, less patient in the face of the vicissitudes of time. By contrast, the pillar of the religion, the cohesion of the Muslims, and the implement [for fighting] the enemies are constituted by the common folk, so be well disposed to them and incline towards them. (p 221)

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Carefully examine the question of the kharāj land-tax, so that those subject to it are maintained in a proper state of well-being, for it is from their welfare, and the proper collection of the tax itself, that the benefit of others is derived. There can be no welfare of others except through them [the peasants], for all without exception are dependent on the [revenues of the] kharāj and those subject to it. Let your concern with the cultivation of the land outweigh your concern with the collection of the tax, for no tax will be collected if there be no cultivation. And whoever exacts the tax, without cultivating the land, ruins the land and destroys the people. His rule will not endure for long.

(cont)

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So if they complain of a heavy burden—or of some deficiency, or the cutting of irrigation supplies, or lack of rain, or a change in the condition of the soil as a result of flooding or drought—then lighten their burden, inasmuch as your hope is that their situation be set right. Do not let any favour you bestow upon them—by way of lightening their burden—weigh heavily upon you; for this will be an investment, which will yield a return for you in terms of the prosperity of your land and the adornment of your rule, through your reaping the finest praise from them, and taking pride in dispensing justice among them. You can then depend upon an increase in their potential as a result of what you have invested in them when you gave them respite; and you can trust them inasmuch as you have accustomed them to receiving your justice and kindness. (cont)

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It is possible that a situation might arise in which you depend upon them: they would then bear this responsibility gladly, for a prosperous land can bear a burden which you place upon it. The devastation of the land only comes about through the destitution of its inhabitants; and the destitution of its inhabitants only comes about when the desire to amass wealth rules the souls of the governors, when they have doubts about what endures, and when they profit little from exemplary teachings.

(p. 226-227)

# TANHUMA (BUBER) ON LEVITICUS 25

R. Samuel ben Gedaliah said: There is no section in the Torah that does not have a capital above and a pedestal below. How does it (Leviticus 25) begin? “Speak unto the children of Israel...the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest.” After that, the section on the Jubilee: “You shall count off seven sabbaths of years.” And if one has not observed the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee, he will end up selling his movable property: “When you sell property to your neighbor”. If he repents, well and good; but if not, he will end up selling his land: “When your brother is in straits and has to sell part of his land holding...”.

If he repents, well and good; but if not, he will end up selling his house: “If a man sells a dwelling house...” If he repents, well and good; but if not, he will end up going around begging from door to door: “If your brother, being in straits, comes under your authority, you shall maintain him as though a resident alien.” If he repents, well and good; but if not, he will end up being sold to you: “If your brother under you continues in straits and must sell himself to you.” If he repents, well and good; but if not, he will end up being sold to the gentiles: “If a resident alien among you has prospered, and your brother, being in straits, is sold to the resident alien among you...” Nor is it just merely the individual himself (who is degraded in this way), but it is both that person and all of Israel.