

Indenture

Rabbi Keren Gorban
Temple Beth El, Tacoma
Parashat R'eih 5782

A number of years ago, my grandmother was cleaning out her townhouse in anticipation of downsizing to a small apartment. Among the papers and books, she found an old album with pictures of her mother as a teen and her grandmother. As the primary Keeper of the Family History in my generation, I spent some time with her going through the album and listening to her stories about her mother Pauline, and her grandmother Lena.

My great-great grandparents, Lena and Frank, came to the US from Russia in the late 1800s. When they arrived, they had little more than the clothes on their back. Everything they needed in order to start a life here had to be borrowed, down to the pots and pans they needed to cook food. I'm not sure if they had relatives or neighbors who had already settled in the US, but if not, certainly the Jewish community provided some of that early support.

So, sometime later, when my great-great-grandparents were more financially stable, they opened a little general store that had everything new immigrants would need to get settled—pots, pans, dishes, furniture, even American-style clothes. Knowing that few of these immigrants had enough money to actually purchase anything, Lena made sure that folks could buy on credit and start paying once they had the money to do so. She was generous and kind and wanted to make sure that newcomers could get on their feet without worrying about these basic needs or falling into deep debt.

I have no idea whether Grandma Lena was familiar with this week's Torah portion, R'eih, but she certainly lived its text. Toward the end of the parashah we read:

There shall be no needy among you—since Adonai your God will bless you in the land...—if only you heed Adonai your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. ... If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements ... do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need.

In biblical times, poverty was a reality but not an ideal. In a whole and healthy community, one blessed both by God and with people who took their duty to each other seriously, everyone would have enough to sustain themselves and their families. Unfortunately, life being what it is, there might be times when individuals or families wouldn't have enough to sustain themselves. That's when the community—usually represented by a relative—was supposed to step in to provide support until financial stability could be regained.

Sometimes that support came in the form of an interest-free loan, which is, to some extent, what my Grandma Lena provided. In the Torah, that loan was to be repaid until the Sh'mitah year, the sabbatical year when the land lies fallow. If a loan had not been fully repaid by the beginning of the Sh'mitah year, the remaining debt was to be forgiven. I have to assume that President Biden knew that we are currently in a Sh'mitah year AND that this is the week we read about cancelling debts when he announced his student loan forgiveness program on Wednesday.

Not infrequently, though, the burden of debt would reach the point where a person might have to indenture themselves or their children to pay off a debt. In this situation, the creditor either already held lien or paid off a loan in exchange for an extended period of service without pay. Because they worked without pay, the indentured servant was not free, but unlike slaves, they could expect to be released to independence once the terms of the indenture were fulfilled. The Torah also required that, when the period

of indenture, which could be no more than six years, was complete, the servant would be furnished with enough goods and produce to be able to live independently. Remember, a whole and blessed community wouldn't have poverty and the indignities that go with it, so the goal was to keep people from needing to return to debt service, and especially, to keep them from having to sell themselves into unending slavery.

We, in this community, also strive to uphold the honor and dignity of everyone in our community, regardless of their socio-economic status or financial means. So we are grateful to have the opportunity to display this beautiful piece, Indenture, by Tom Torrens, in our sanctuary as a reminder of our values and ideals.

This sculpture was created in the 1980s for the then newly constructed Davies Pearson Law Firm lobby, where it remained for almost forty years. Torrens was inspired by a framed old English indenture document that the Firm showed him. Historically, an "indenture of retainer" was a legal contract written in duplicate on the same sheet, with the copies separated by cutting along a jagged (toothed, hence the term "indenture") line so that the teeth of the two parts could later be refitted to confirm that this was an authentic original document. In this piece, the layered metals reflect both the jagged edge between the two parts of the indenture contract and the slow build out of poverty that the limited term of indenture could provide.

Though I know this piece was commissioned in memory of Ruth Levy by her son Larry, when I see it, I will think of my Grandma Lena, who helped other immigrants like herself take care of their basic needs, so they could start anew in this country with dignity. It will also remind me of the work we need to do today to relieve people in our community of the burden of crushing debt, so that everyone has the opportunity of freedom and independence.