



In this week's Parshah, *Bereishit*, the Torah describes God's myriad acts of creation. Along the way, the text uses two words – *create* and *did* – when any good editor would tell you that only one word was necessary.¹

It seems like a small point, perhaps of interest only to grammarians, but some classic Jewish commentators on the Torah argue that this textual idiosyncrasy adds a layer of meaning. They claim that the extra verb implies that creation is a two-part process – God fulfilled part of it during those first six days, but the rest of creation is an ongoing project in which human beings play the role of God's partners.² That seemingly redundant verb is just waiting there for a subject, for human beings to give life to the verb and finish creation.

This idea, which is repeated every week as part of the Friday nights blessings over wine, is stunning and beautiful in its elevation of our role and responsibility in the world. But this *parshah* not only tells us that we are to be God's partners in creating a just and orderly world, but also offers a powerful organizing vision to guide us in that work.

Famously, God forbids Adam and Eve from eating one particular fruit in the Garden of Eden – they, of course, eat it anyway. In the midst of God chastising them for this sin, the text tells us that “man named his wife Eve” upon which “the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”³

An ancient *midrash*, or parable, creatively interprets these “garments of skin” as “garments of light,” imbued with Divine splendor. According to this reading, God's wrath, which had been poured out on Adam and Eve for eating of the fruit, was transformed into blessing as soon as Adam named his wife Eve.

Perhaps this transformation occurred because at the moment of naming Eve, Adam accepted his responsibility to act as a partner with God. For the first time, he saw this woman in her specificity – not as a generic “person” or “woman” but as someone particular – an individual worthy of the respect and dignity that comes with a name.

Intuitively, we know the importance of specificity as well. We remind ourselves of it every time we devote a solid day to reading the names of those who were murdered during the Holocaust. We insist that it is not “The Six Million” who were killed as a monolithic whole, but six million individual people with names – Dwora Wieliczkie, Meyer Maria, China Wagman, and on, and on. We know it when we go to the Vietnam Memorial and see a monument that isn't dedicated to “The Dead Veterans” but to Leo Abramoski, Robert Achas, Jesse Acosta, and on, and on.

Similarly, when we engage in social justice work, we must not speak of addressing the needs of “The Poor.” To do so is to reduce actual people into characters in a play in which they are “The Needy” and we are “The Saviors.” When Adam names Eve, he refuses to see her merely as a character in a

¹ Genesis 2:3

² Ibn Ezra and Radak at Gen 2:3

³ Gen 3:20-21



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October 29, 2005

play. With a name, she becomes a unique woman, entitled to dignity and respect. That a woman stands before a man is commonplace; that *specific* Eve stands before *specific* Adam evokes a genuine partnership. That *someone* is poor is just part of the nature of the world; that six year old Rosanna, of Ciudad Romero, El Salvador is hungry is a tragedy. To see humans as “The Poor” is to reduce them to an abstraction and to shield ourselves from a serious engagement with them. We are shielded because while *they* are abstract, *we* are always self-aware, always specific. We cannot imagine ourselves in their shoes, because they wear generic shoes (if they wear shoes at all), and we wear size tens.

When we attempt to be the people who will complete the creation of the world, the actors for whom that extra verb is waiting, we need to see those with and for whom we work as individuals, not as the nameless poor who play their role of victim so we can play our role of savior. We need to see them in their specificity, as Adam saw Eve.

Questions to Consider

- In what contexts do you feel you are seen for who you really are? When do you feel you are seen as a character in someone else’s life? How are these experiences different?
- When do you see others for who they are? When do you see them as characters in your life? How are these experiences different?

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This AJWS Torah Commentary was written by Brent Chaim Spodek, a fourth year rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. It reflects the ideas and opinions of the author and not necessarily those of American Jewish World Service or its partner organizations. Brent Spodek can be reached at brspodek@jtsa.edu.



Parshat Hashavua – Weekly Torah Commentary

Parshat Noach 5766

November 5, 2005

Tucked near the back of this week's parshah, after the story of Noah and the Flood, is the baffling story of the Tower of Babel. By the end of Parshat Bereshit, God is so fed up with the spread of "wicked and evil" humanity that the Holy One decides to blot us out and repopulate the world using only the animals and people which Noah could cram into his famous ark. After the flood waters recede, and Noah's descendents branch out over the globe, the people of the world come together in an unprecedented moment of unity to build a tower with its top in the sky – the Tower of Babel. The Master of the Universe is so distressed by this building project that God confounds the speech of the builders and scatters them all over the earth. Just as the Holy One was distressed by human diversity *before* the flood,¹ God is also distressed by human unity *after* the flood.

This tension, between unity and diversity in peoples, in languages and in ways of moral thinking mirrors one of the central issues of human rights and development ethics – are there moral truths which are applicable in *all* times and *all* places, or is morality dependent on context? Is slavery absolutely always wrong? Premeditated murder? Differential treatment of women? Should organizations like American Jewish World Service work for the same thing in all places, regardless of local thinking, or should AJWS and other progressive organizations work with local communities in pursuit of their goals, even if they are in conflict with or even repugnant to our Jewish ethics?

Universal morality has always been attractive – it's at the root of the appeal of documents like the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UDHR aspires to provide an absolute, "God's-eye" perspective, above petty human differences, from which human affairs can be assessed. After all, the whole world should have common ground on which to agree that the *janjaweed* in Sudan are evil – by murdering civilians, they are violating the right to life, which is a basic human right to which people are entitled in *all* times and *all* places. But a universal moral vision, which claims that *one* morality is right at all times and in all places runs the risk of totalitarianism. In the 20th Century alone, Communist, Democratic, and Fascist régimes have all invaded other countries with the professed goal of imposing their universal system on others. A universal moral system, built into the lofty reaches of the sky like the Tower of Babel, can be seen as a foolhardy attempt by human beings to reach the level of moral certainty reserved only for God.

Moral diversity has tremendous appeal as well. Different people in different cultures have differing notions of what is good and it can seem the height of imperial hubris for one people to impose its vision on another. In some places, particularly in the West, individual autonomy is seen as the highest good; in others, community cohesion is more highly valued. The many peoples of the world speak different languages and eat different cuisines; is it so absurd to suggest that they also have a variety of visions of what is good and worthwhile in life? Yet the perspective which prizes diversity and pluralism runs the risk of indifference to human suffering. Can there possibly be a legitimate moral system in which the disabled are not considered fully human?² Could there be any justifiable culture where government uses lethal force to control public criticism? Can we accept and respect a culture in which women are sentenced to rape or death as punishment for indiscretions? What about a culture in which girls' genitals are mutilated as part of a cultural ritual?³ Or one in which boys are

¹ The exact nature of the sin of the generation of the Flood is a source of speculation among Jewish commentators. One of the central Talmudic discussions of the nature of their sins can be found on Sanhedrin 108a.

² For an analysis of one proponent of such a view, see "The Utilitarian Horrors of Peter Singer: Other People's Mothers," by Peter Berkowitz, *The New Republic*, January 10, 2000.

³ Female Genital Mutilation is the term used to refer to the removal of part, or all, of the female genitalia. It is often done as part of a cultural initiation ritual in much of Africa, and parts of Latin America and Asia. For more information, visit <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm1.htm#a7>.



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circumcised as part of a cultural ritual? Yet dictators around the world have used cultural specificity, sometimes couched in terms of state sovereignty, to justify their oppressive practices. A commitment to moral diversity runs the risk of turning a blind eye to those in peril.⁴

AJWS echoes some of the deepest Jewish values in its approach to this tension between unity and diversity. Traditionally, Judaism has held that that almost *nothing* in the universe is more important than human life. Drawing on that tradition, AJWS is committed to the belief that at *no* time, in *no* corner of the world, should anyone be suffering from poverty, hunger and disease when the world has the resources to alleviate that suffering. The right to be free of avoidable suffering is a universal right, binding at all times, in all places.

However, AJWS operates with the understanding that even this value – the centrality of human life – cannot be imposed from outside the communities in which we work. As inheritors of a tradition which understands wisdom as the ability to learn from all people,⁵ AJWS works with and funds local project partners who pursue the *universal* goal of alleviating poverty, hunger and disease but do so through *local* cultural and ethical language and practice.

Moral truths, even universal ones, must be expressed in each of the many moral languages which humans speak. To pursue sustainable development after the destruction of the Tower of Babel is to understand that even truths which are absolutely True, must be comprehensible and understandable in all the many languages we speak after Babel.

Questions to Consider

- What practices in other cultures strike you as strange? What are the roots of your perspective? Do you think those practices are strange in an objective/absolute way, or is there seeming strangeness a product of your cultural socialization? Does this distinction make a difference?
- What practices from your culture might strike a visitor as strange? Think of how you structure your time, how you relate to friends and family, how you practice religion, how you use your resources?
- What are some guidelines you think could be used to navigate the tension between moral absolutism and moral relativism?

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⁴ For more on the tension between moral diversity and absolutism, see John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Abdullahi Ahmed an-Naim, "Toward a Cross-Cultural Approach to Defining International Standards of Human Rights: The Meaning of Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment," in *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: A Quest for Consensus*, ed. Abdullahi Ahmed an-Naim (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992). Charles Taylor, "A World Consensus on Human Rights?" in *The Philosophy of Human Rights*, ed. Patrick Hayden (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2001).

⁵ Avot 4:1



Parshat Hashavua – Weekly Torah Commentary
Parshat Lech Lecha 5766
November 12, 2005

One of the most difficult challenges for many modern Jews is reconciling the holiness we find in the Torah with the injustice that can also be found there. Perhaps nowhere is this discrepancy, between the Torah, with its aspirations to Divinity and what we know to be “right and good,” more apparent than in the distinctions between men and women.

For instance, in this week’s parshah, *Lech Lecha*, we find some of the most inspiring and foundational passages in the Torah. God tells Abraham that he will be a blessing,¹ Abraham puts his trust in God² and God establishes the Divine Covenant with him.³ Additionally, Abraham and Lot begin to argue⁴ and for the first time, an argument is resolved peaceably, with both sides compromising, instead of resorting to force. The possibility of human connection to the Holy is palpable in these stories of Abraham.

And yet while Abraham and The Holy One establish this covenant, the human bonds of trust between Sarah and Abraham are broken before they ever really form. When The Creator of the Universe tells Abraham to “Go, to a land which I will show you,”⁵ Abraham goes and takes with him all the things which *belong* to him: wealth and possessions... and Sarah.⁶ When famine forces Abraham to go down to Egypt⁷ he instructs Sarah to lie to the Egyptians and say they are siblings to protect himself, even though that results in Sarah’s abduction. Later in the parshah, Sarah represses her desire to have children of her own and instead gives Abraham her maidservant Hagar in order that he might procreate with her.⁸ It seems clear that when there is tension between Abraham’s needs and Sarah’s, Abraham always comes first. Moreover, while the bonds between Abraham and Sarah seem tenuous, the bond between Sarah and God is utterly hidden. The Bible records that circumcision, the sign of the covenant between the Divine One and all of Abraham’s descendants, is to be inscribed on the male body alone.⁹ Sarah’s inclusion in the covenant is evidenced indirectly through her husband and son.¹⁰

Taken together, these instances portray Abraham as essential, while Sarah is seen as merely functional – there to help, but little else. Abraham is valued as a partner by God; Sarah is seen as an entity which serves her husband.

The impulse to see women as merely functional while men are essential is sadly not limited to the biblical worldview. Worldwide, young girls receive less food and medical treatment than young boys and as a result, there are as many as *100 million* women “missing” – women who likely would have lived longer and fuller lives if they had received the care that young boys do.¹¹ Why? As one young Indian woman who had previously aborted a female child and was now expecting a boy said, “Boys are important because they have to look after all the property.”¹² Some people today, just as parts of the Torah, assume that men are essential and women are supplemental.

And yet just as some people, both modern and ancient, are willing to treat some of God’s creatures as inherently less important than others because of their biology, some people, both ancient and modern are able to see the insane injustice of this denial of holiness and justice. The Ramban, one of the major medieval Jewish commentators on the Torah says that Avram committed a grave sin by handing Sarah over to the Egyptians and that both Avram and Sarah were deeply unjust in their harsh treatment of Hagar as a means to an end.¹³ The wisdom of this commentary mirrors the way some international development organizations work with both men and women.

Those who hope to alleviate the disease and hunger which afflict millions of people around the globe know there can’t be progress without all members of a society, including women, being included and engaged in the process. Consider [Prerana](#), a grass-roots Indian organization working to prevent the trafficking of children as commercial sex workers or [Adelante](#), a Honduran organization which helps rural poor women help themselves through providing short-term small-business loans, with the goal of reducing poverty by fostering local micro-enterprises.¹⁴ For their societies to have happier, healthier futures, they need to address the needs of both men and women.

Indeed, just as those working for a better future in the developing world know that there cannot be societal progress without women, Jewish tradition also recognizes this, even if only implicitly. While Abraham is the father of nations, there is a quiet recognition of Sarah’s centrality to the covenant between the Jewish people and God. Abraham has two children – Isaac and Ishmael – but it is only Sarah’s child, Isaac, who is seen as the inheritor of the covenant. The quintessentially male ritual of brit milah, or circumcision, is only half of what Isaac needed to enter the covenant between God and Abraham; lineage through Sarah is the other.¹⁵ Echoing rabbinic tradition,¹⁶ one contemporary scholar says that “Every Jew, whether born Jewish or a convert, must pass through the womb of a Jewish woman, or its ritual equivalent, the mikva. If you miss that womb at your birth, you must recreate it again through the waters of the womb - the mikva.”¹⁷



Parshat Hashavua – Weekly Torah Commentary

Parshat Lech Lecha 5766

November 12, 2005

For those who seek the God of Justice, it is not enough to simply do what has been done in the past; some of the paths our ancestor walk lead somewhere, while some are merely dead ends. In the realms of religion and of politics, a vision of the future which treats men as essential and women as secondary may lead somewhere, but it will not lead to a just society or to the God of Justice.

Questions to Consider

- In what ways are gender roles intrinsic or essential qualities and in what ways are they socially constructed?
- How are defined gender roles useful and how are they damaging and destructive. Give specific examples.
- What effect does your gender have in different spheres of your life?
- With which of the characters in Lech Lecha do you most identify? Why?

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¹ Genesis 12:2

² Genesis 15:6

³ Genesis 17:4

⁴ Genesis 13:5

⁵ Genesis 12:1

⁶ Whether or not Sarah and Abraham are partners in their journey is debated in the tradition, with some midrashim imagining Sarah as a partner in Abraham's spiritual journey (see Genesis Raba 39:14). The tension is apparent in the language as well: some other selected and interesting uses of the verb לקח – “And take with you double the money” (Gen 43:12) when Jacob sends his sons back to Egypt for the second time; “A spirit seized me and carried me away” (Ezk 3:14) in which Ezekiel describes his prophetic call and “She sets her mind on an estate and acquires it” (Mishle 31:16) describing the business acumen of a woman of valor.

⁷ Genesis 12:11

⁸ Genesis 16:3

⁹ Genesis 17:9-14; For a fine book-length treatment of how brit milah constructs “Jew” as “male” see *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism*. By Lawrence A. Hoffman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

¹⁰ In fact, some rabbinic traditions offer explanations as to why God speaks directly to Sarah at all! See Genesis Rabbah 20:6.

¹¹ See Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. p 104 -110. See also “Many Faces of Gender Inequality” by Amartya Sen. FRONTLINE Vol 18 - Issue 22, Oct. 27 - Nov. 09, 2001; reprinted at http://wmc.who.int/images/uploaded/Sen_gender_inequalities.PDF

¹² See *Abortions in India Spurred by Sex Test Skew the Ratio Against Girls* by Celia W. Dugger, *New York Times* Apr 22, 2001. pg. 12.

¹³ See Ramban at 12:10 and at 16:6.

¹⁴ For more on the incredible power of women to change economic reality through micro-credit lending, see *Banker to the Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty*, by Muhammad Yunus (New York: Public Affairs 2003), particularly pp. 184-188.

¹⁵ Indeed, while Isaac's biological connection to both Abraham and Sarah is essential to his role in continuing the covenant, it is not always biology alone which is determinative. Consider Esau, who has the same biological connection to Isaac and Rebecca as Jacob does and yet is not part of the covenant. However, the Torah text suggests that Esau could have inherited the covenant, but Jacob *stole* that birthright from him. Indeed, it was essential that Jacob have a biological connection to Isaac and Rebecca (see Ramban at 27:33) without it, he wouldn't have been able to steal Esau's birthright.

¹⁶ See for instance, *Yevamot* 46a: “Our Rabbis taught: ‘If a convert was circumcised but had not dipped in a mikva, Rabbi Eliezer said, ‘Behold he is a proper convert, for we find that our forefathers were circumcised but not dipped in a mikva. If he dipped in the mikva but had not been circumcised, R. Joshua said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that the foremothers had dipped in the mikva but had not been circumcised’. The Sages, however, said, ‘Whether he had dipped in the mikva but had not been circumcised or whether he had been circumcised but had not dipped in the mikva, he is not a proper convert, unless he has been circumcised and has also dipped in the mikva!’” This line of argumentation is generally established as normative in the tradition – see Tosafot on *Shabbat* 135a (לא נחלקו) as well as *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 268:1, Hilchot Gerim, particularly the opinions of the Ba'al Halacha.

¹⁷ From *Revisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* by Elyse Goldstein (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing), 2001.



Parshat Hashavua – Weekly Torah Commentary
Parshat Vayera 5766
November 19, 2005

We're told in Parshat Vayera that Sodom is a wicked and miserable place, and we know the inhabitants of Sodom were "very wicked sinners against the Lord."¹ But we're left wondering what they could have done that that was so wicked that now God wants to destroy them.

For most Jewish thinkers, the evil of the men of Sodom had nothing to do with sex². Instead, the mainstream of Jewish tradition has understood the terrible evil of Sodom to be its residents' lack of concern and even hatred for those in need. As the Talmud imagines things, the residents of the city were comparatively wealthy, as the valley of Sodom was the most fertile land in Israel.³ Knowing that those in need seek help from those who have resources, the Sodomites passed laws prohibiting any citizen from welcoming visitors, lest one poor person tell another that charity was to be found in Sodom and the city be flooded with poor people.⁴

Simply put, God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone because they were more concerned with protecting their wealth than with protecting the needy. For the earliest Rabbis of the Jewish tradition, it was hard to imagine anything more disgusting than a person who says, "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours... end of story."⁵

While the people of Sodom are concerned only with their material possessions, the Bible gives us a very different picture of Abraham. Portrayed as a man of means, Abraham understands that he cannot let his possessions determine his relationships with other people. Faced with a conflict with his young cousin Lot over the division of territory, Abraham says there should be no conflict between them⁶ and tells Lot to take his choice of land. Better that they should separate in peace than that Abraham should sacrifice his family relationship in order to preserve his wealth.

But while there are others who would also go that far, Abraham goes further. Beyond forgoing wealth to preserve his relationship with Lot, Abraham puts his relationship with God and possibly even his life on the line to pursue justice. When God announces to Abraham that God is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham steps up to resist. He does what no human to that point has done, and what few have done since. He steps before the awesome Creator of the Universe and asks "Can it really be that the Judge of all the Earth will not deal justly? Can it be that the God of Justice will sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?"

While the people of Sodom use their power to pursue and preserve *wealth*, Abraham is willing to risk everything he has to pursue *justice*. Abraham doesn't act because he knows that his is the way to save the innocent, or because he thinks that he can change the will of God. Abraham acts because the same code of justice which demands that God not kill the innocent with the guilty demands that Abraham take action. Abraham acts because if he doesn't do something, he will have stood by idly while the blood of innocent people spilled before him.

Together, Abraham and the people of Sodom illustrate the underpinnings of social justice in Judaism.

- Unlike the people of Sodom, we understand that we enter the world in partnership with both God and other humans, and from the moment of our birth, we are enmeshed in relationships of obligation to people we do not know.



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- Like Abraham, we know that when structures of power are unresponsive to, or even cause pain, we are obligated to act. Abraham knew he needed to confront even God, the Mightiest Force in the World, in pursuit of justice; so too must we confront the punier forces which sometimes seem so mighty – governments, corporations and our own complacency – when we pursue justice.

The rabbinic tradition⁷ says that Jews can be identified by three traits: loving kindness, a sense of shame, and their mercy. If we are not shamed by our wealth in the presence of poverty, if we do not use our resources to bring loving kindness to those in need, and if we use our systems of law to deny mercy to those who most need it, then we lay claim to the selfish heritage of Sodom, not the loving heritage of Abraham.

As Jews, our opportunity and responsibility is to follow the example of Abraham, not the people of Sodom. We must understand that all we have – our wealth, our power, *and even our relationship with God* can become idolatry if it is not used in the pursuit of justice.

Questions to Consider:

- What power do you have access to? How do you use it?
- Despite Abraham's efforts, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were ultimately destroyed because there were not, in fact, significant numbers of innocent people to protect. How does this bear on the praiseworthiness of his choice to "speak truth to power"?
- Are you comfortable with the definition of Judaism presented here? Why? Why not?

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¹ Genesis 13:13

² One notable exception is Rashi at Rashi at 19:5, citing Genesis Rabba

³ Genesis 13:10

⁴ Sanhedrin 109a; see also Ramban on 19:5

⁵ Pirke Avot 5:10

⁶ Genesis 13:8

⁷ Yevamot 79a



Parshat Hashavua – Weekly Torah Commentary
Parshat Chayei Sarah 5766
November 26, 2005

Just before Isaac meets Rebecca, his wife-to-be, the Torah describes him as walking in the field, “conversing.” While the topic of Isaac’s conversation is never made explicit in the Parsha, in the minds of the Talmudic rabbis this meant that Isaac was out in the field praying.¹

Within Judaism, there are many understandings of what we do when we pray and even what activities are considered prayer. Some people hold that prayer is an intimate opening of one’s heart to the Merciful One. We talk directly to God as if we were talking to a friend.² Others hold that prayer is a formal presentation of the self before an awesome and tremendous judge, who must be approached properly, with solemn reverence and respect.

Yet Isaac was doing neither of these things. When Isaac was out in the field, he was “praying” in a particular way. He wasn’t praising God or thanking God or making requests of God; Isaac was simply having a conversation.³ He wasn’t just speaking about himself, in a manner that borders on self-centeredness; neither was he just speaking about God, in a way that can border on self-negating. Isaac was having a conversation, and as in any conversation, there was give and take, a time for talking and a time for listening.

But what is it to *talk* to God, and what is it to *listen* to God? After all, few people who claim to be sane think they “hear” God “talking” to them.

To *listen* to God is to know that the Creator of the Universe has graced us with unasked for blessings. God *speaks* to us through the miracle of life, through the miracle of the families we have, and through the wisdom and wealth we enjoy. Isaac, who was once at the precipice of death and who remained alive simply because his father heard the voice of God, hears the voice of God in his every breath. The very fact of Isaac’s existence tells us that prayer should attune us to the miracle of our own life and remind us of God’s existence.

What then is it for us to *speak* to God? Just as we hear the voice of God *not only* through words, so too we speak to God *not only* with words. We offer songs and praise, but when we “hear” God in our daily lives, we are reminded of the debt we owe to God for simply being alive. We *speak* to God and repay this debt through our actions toward other people, who, unlike God, are in constant need of water, food and love. Prayer “takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy.”⁴ The action we perform with *talit* and *tefillin*, is not the fullness of prayer – it is merely the first part, the part which educates our souls towards gratitude.

When Isaac was in the field he wasn’t performing a ritual, or simply talking about himself. He was having a dialogue with God – perceiving the Divine Presence in the field and responding with words. But once Rebecca appeared, he came to the second part of prayer. He responded to God by asking after her and

¹ Genesis 24:63, discussed at *Brachot* 26b, and also in Targum Onkelos, *Bereshit Rabba* 60:14; *Bereshit Rabba* 68:9; *Pesachim* 88a and *Avoda Zara* 7b.

² There are many iterations of this idea in Jewish thought. See for instance, Bachiya Ibn Pakuda, *Duties of the Heart* generally, specifically 8:3; Rebbe Nachman generally, specifically *Likutei Mohoron* II:25 and *Likutei Mohoron* 11:97.

³ Ramban on Genesis 24:63 thinks Isaac is in the field talking to his dear and beloved ones, while Hizkuni thinks he is talking to someone who is out there with him.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 198.



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offering food and a place to stay after a very long journey.⁵ Isaac was grateful to God and he showed this gratitude in his response to Rebecca.

This week's Parsha teaches us that real conversation with God occurs when we transcend our own interests and sense the presence of God in others. Prayer in its many forms must turn us toward action, because we can't be in dialogue with God if we are oblivious to the people around us. Engagement with human joy and human pain is not a corollary to Judaism: it is fundamental to the Jewish way-of-life.

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⁵ See Ramban at 24:64, in which he describes Isaac running towards her to offer food and a place to sleep.



Parshat Hashavua – Weekly Torah Commentary
Parshat Toldot 5766
December 3, 2005

By the time we reach Parshat Toldot, Isaac is responsible for a large household: his wife Rebecca, two children, and many servants and animals. The Philistines, envious or distrustful of Isaac's wealth and success, evict him from their encampment. Suddenly, Isaac is out in the desert – and he has no water.

At first, Isaac re-digs his father's wells, but Philistine herdsmen keep chasing him away. Finally, he digs a well sufficiently far away that the Philistines let him use it in peace. Only then, after he has managed to provide his small community with water, does God appear to him and renew the Divine Covenant.

Isaac, on the move in the desert and chased by political enemies, needs water. Without water, he and everyone for whom he is responsible will die. His predicament reminds us of Ishmael, who almost died from thirst after he and his mother were banished by Abraham.¹ It also reminds us of the experiences of the Israelites, who wandered in the wilderness, sustained by Miriam's well and Moses' spring.²

Until Isaac digs those wells, he is without access to drinking water. In this, he shares the fate of more than 1.1 billion people in the world today. The number of people suffering from a lack of water is staggering – 2.6 billion lack access to basic sanitation, and 3,900 children die daily because of dirty water or poor hygiene.³

And beyond the problem of simple access to clean water, there are those who have made the destruction of existing water sources a weapon of war. The *janjaweed* militias, perpetrators of the nearly three-year-old genocide in Darfur, Sudan, have stuffed the bodies of murdered civilians and their animals into communal wells in an effort to contaminate water sources and make destroyed villages permanently uninhabitable.

For us in the West, the challenge of access to water seems impossibly distant. Americans use an average of a gallon of water every time we brush our teeth, three gallons every time we flush the toilet, ten gallons for a load of laundry, and twenty gallons for a ten minute shower.⁴ The University of Florida estimates that each Floridian uses eighty gallons of water a day for watering the lawn.⁵ And domestic uses account for only 6% of daily water consumption in the United States – 84% goes to agriculture and the balance to industrial and commercial uses.⁶ We take our access to water almost perfectly for granted – it just flows out of the tap, no questions asked.

Organizations both large and small are working to try and improve these conditions around the world. The [UN Millennium Project](#), a comprehensive effort to eradicate extreme poverty, intends to halve the number of people who lack access to sanitary water by 2015. Worldwide, dozens of local organizations such as AJWS project partner, the [Haiti Community Development Loan Fund](#), are also working to improve access

¹ Gen 21:15-16

² Num 20:8-12

³ The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Water and Sanitation, Final Report. available at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/WaterComplete-lowres.pdf>

⁴ United States Geological Survey, "How much water do you use at home on a typical day?" Available at <http://ga2.er.usgs.gov/edu/sq3action.cfm>.

⁵ University of Florida Extension, "Freshwater Consumption in Florida," available at <http://aquat1.ifas.ufl.edu/guide/drinking.html>.

⁶ United States Environmental Protection Agency, "How We Use Water In These United States," Available at <http://www.epa.gov/OW/you/chap1.html>



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December 3, 2005

to water for their communities. And AJWS is supporting partners working in Darfur to develop water sources that will replace those destroyed by the *janjaweed*.

As Jews, we have an acute awareness of the centrality of water. From our post-Sinai wandering in the wilderness to the ambitious undertaking of “greening the desert” in the State of Israel, our tradition contains both anxiety about, and reverence for, water. In the traditional Mussaf service of Shmini Atzeret, we find a prayer for rain that directly invokes Isaac:

Remember Isaac, his birth foretold while angels drank cool water.
At Moriah his blood was almost spilled like water;
In the desert, he dug deep to find springs of water.
For Isaac's sake, grant the gift of water.

And starting on December 4 for around the next six months – corresponding with the Middle East's rainy season – traditional Jewish communities will add a simple, supplementary request to the Amidah prayer:

“...give dew and rain for a blessing on the face of the earth.”

We live in a world where people die for lack of the simplest and most fundamental resource – water. Our privileges as Westerners and our values as Jews make it incumbent on us to emulate Isaac and make access to water a priority for people around the world.

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Parshat Vayetze – Looking Away

Sometimes, when I see a beggar on the street, I cringe, close my eyes and hurry along with the rest of the pedestrians.

Sometimes, when I hear of people dying in faraway places, I thank God that it's them – and not me.

Not just individually, but as a society, we don't seem to give more than a few moments of our attention to the world's most unfortunate people. In Darfur, for instance, 400,000 Africans have been slaughtered at the hands of Sudanese government militias and more than two million are displaced and dependent on international aid for food and water.¹ Yet the American media runs dozens of stories about Michael Jackson and Tom Cruise for every mention of the genocide being perpetrated in Sudan.²

Perhaps the presence of people who suffer through no real fault of their own makes us squeamish because it reminds us both of our own mortality and the simple dumb luck behind our good fortune. Maybe we keep those who are suffering out of sight because at some level, they remind us that our own blessings don't come with a "lifetime guarantee" and we'll have no basis for complaint if and when they disappear.

This impulse, to turn away while others suffer, is nothing new. In Parshat Vayetze, Leah, the last of the matriarchs, is despised by everyone around her. Fearing nobody would want to marry her, her father Laban foists her off on Jacob in a colossal act of deception. Throughout their marriage, Jacob remains distant from Leah, even after she bears him six sons. The Torah mentions no willing physical relationship³ or even any conversation between her and her husband, making it seem as if she conceived and bore her children alone.⁴ But it's not just Jacob who despises Leah – even the vagrants think that she's the lowest of the low.⁵

God knows that Leah is miserable and isolated, and the Holy One resolves to help her. Presumably, the Creator of the Universe could have simply made Jacob love Leah, but that is not the miracle that God performs. Rather, God opens Leah's womb, making her the mother of seven children. **The miracle God sends to Leah is Reuven, a child who loves this detested woman.** The fact that Leah bore children is only the necessary prerequisite for the real miracle – that her son Reuven loves her, even though she is hated by everyone else. While others see her as an object to be acted upon, and she sees herself as worthless without her husband's love, her firstborn child Reuven is different. When he brings Leah food,⁶ he becomes the very first person, perhaps in her entire life, to do something expressly for her – not to manipulate her or use her as a pawn to manipulate someone else. Reuven sees her not as an object, but as

¹ To learn more about the ongoing genocide in Sudan, see www.ajws.org/darfur or <http://www.genocideintervention.net>

² During June 2005, CNN, FOXNews, NBC/MSNBC, ABC, and CBS ran 50 times as many stories about Michael Jackson and 12 times as many stories about Tom Cruise as they did about the genocide in Darfur. For more on this, see <http://www.beawitness.org>

³ In fact, when we are told of Jacob and Leah having relations (Genesis 30:16), it has to be explained that Leah "bought" the privilege from Rachel. See also the *Or HaChayim* at Genesis 30:15.

⁴ Genesis 29:31-35; further, it's Leah who gives Reuben, Simeon and Judah their names. Even when the masculine form of the verb קרא is used in reference to Levi, Rashi explains that even then, it's not Jacob but the angel Gabriel who gives the name.

⁵ Genesis Rabah 71:2

⁶ Genesis 30:14



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a person, worthy of love. In a family founded on manipulation, deception and betrayal, he simply loves his mother and takes care of her.

Although Reuven's status as Jacob's first born son was negated because his mother was hated, he didn't look away from his Leah's suffering. Faced with her pain, Reuven might have seen his mother as a threat to his standing with Jacob and tried to distance himself from her. Instead, he sees Leah's misery and turns *toward* her in love. His actions comprise the miracle that God sent to Leah.

The end of *Birkat HaMazon*, the traditional blessing said after a meal, reads, "I was young, and I have grown older, but I have not seen a righteous person forsaken, nor his children begging for bread." Many contemporary Jews choose to read this as a dirge, because they know it's not true – they *have* seen righteous people forsaken, begging for bread. They are overwhelmed by the suffering and lament what they see. But Reuven did not wring his hands and he did not turn away from the suffering of the innocent. He responded to the challenge of human pain with love.

It is no secret that there are righteous people today who are begging for both bread and love. They begged in Auschwitz and they beg in Darfur and they beg in every city in the world. They begged when Leah sat forlorn and dejected, looking for some kind of human connection. They challenge our sense of complacency and our sense of entitlement just as Jacob's rejection of Leah challenged Reuven's position as firstborn son. But although Leah's pain touched on his deepest fears, just as the suffering of the world touch on ours, Reuven understood that he was not free to simply *see* Leah's suffering and do nothing. He understood that it was on him to act. Indeed, Reuven never did see "a righteous person forsaken," because when he perceived such a situation, he changed it. And so it is on us, to not merely stand by and watch the righteous beg, but to actually manifest God's open hand, and help them obtain what they need.

Discussion Questions

- When in the course of your day do you encounter suffering? How does it make you feel? What do you do about it?
- How do you balance the need to alleviate suffering with the feeling of being overwhelmed by the suffering in the world?
- The essayist Annie Dillard refers to the feeling of being overwhelmed by other people's needs as "compassion fatigue." Does that phrase resonate with you? Why or why not?

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Parshat Hashavuah

Making Up is Hard To Do Parshat Vayishlach 5766 December 17, 2005

Resolving conflicts, moving past old pains to a better future, is never easy. Sometimes, it seems the best plan is to “talk things through.” We take the conscious step of bringing our pain out into the open, in the hope that this action will help us find healing.

In war-torn corners of the world, truth and reconciliation commissions, where victims and perpetrators talk about and confess past evils as a way of moving past pain and guilt, are a standard part of the post-conflict “first aid kit” that can help societies transition from war to peace. According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and Chair of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future.¹

This path to peace takes place through *remembering* the evil and naming the pain that it caused. In this act of conscious remembering, those who were the *objects* of evil narrate their experiences for all to hear, and thus become the *subjects* of their own stories again, while those who perpetrated evil have an opportunity to confess and take responsibility for their crimes.² According to this approach, if we don’t engage with the past, we cannot move forward – we remain trapped by the past we refuse to confront. And indeed, this approach of openness is one understanding of how Jacob approaches Esau, his brother and enemy, at the beginning of Parshat Vayishlach.

After 20 years with Laban, Jacob returns to the land of Israel and prepares to encounter his brother Esau, from whom he has taken both blessing and birthright. Jacob sends gifts and messengers bearing words of conciliation. As he approaches Esau, he bows seven times in deference and respect. Having recognized that he has wronged his brother, Jacob is now trying to make it right. And the language of the Parshah returns again and again to his anxious hope for forgiveness: “Perhaps he [Esau] will show me favor.”

Ultimately, the moment of confrontation becomes a moment of reconciliation. Jacob embraces Esau and says: “If you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably.”³ By accepting Jacob’s symbolic offerings of apology, Esau demonstrates his willingness to forgive the wrongs done to him. And beyond apology and forgiveness, the encounter becomes a spiritually transformative experience. Jacob has already been in the presence of the Divine, but it is his reconciliation with Esau that feels “like seeing the face of God.”

¹ “[Why amnesty is a tough decision for the victims](#)” by Fred Matiangi, *The Nation*, Nairobi, Kenya. May 20, 2001.

² See Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s [Foreword](#) to the “Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa,” March 21, 2003.

³ Gen 33:10.

Interestingly, some voices in the rabbinic tradition criticize Jacob for attempting the reconciliation. Rabbi Huna, one of Judaism's earliest sages, says that Jacob should have simply passed Esau by, because to stir up painful memories which are long dormant is like grabbing a sleeping dog by the ears and then being surprised when you are bitten.⁴ According to Rabbi Huna's view, it is better to walk by quietly, not engage, and let sleeping dogs lie.

But while this path of avoidance can sidestep potentially painful confrontations, it cannot be transformative. Forgetting allows for *ersatz* relationships where none might have otherwise existed, but those relationships cannot be fully honest ones, because a large part of the shared history cannot be spoken and cannot be incorporated into the present.

Jacob could have forgotten Esau and walked on by, as Rabbi Huna would have had him do. He would have been sure to avoid the conflict that he so clearly feared, but he would not have been transformed into Israel. By deciding to confront Esau, Jacob became a different person. Jacob, the conniving trickster, who succeeded by guile and deceit was left behind, on the far banks of his encounter with Esau. On the other side of his struggle with the angel, who some say was Esau's spirit,⁵ Jacob became Israel.

Questions to Consider

- Think of one of the most difficult conflicts you have ever been involved in. How did you resolve it? What did you learn about yourself – and other people – from the resolution process?
- Are there circumstances in which you think the truth and reconciliation model might not be appropriate?

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⁴ Genesis Rabbah 75:1-3.

⁵ Genesis Rabbah 77:3



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Vayeshev 5766
December 24, 2005

Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.¹

וְלֹא זָכַר שָׂר הַמְשָׁקִים אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּחְהוּ:

Vayeshev begins the story of Joseph, whose journey from pasture to palace spans the final 13 chapters of the book of Genesis. En route, Joseph is sent to prison by the false accusation of Mrs. Potiphar, his employer's wife. Though God protects him in his state of extreme vulnerability, Joseph is nevertheless isolated and alone. That is, until Pharaoh's wine steward and baker are thrown in jail.

As the wine steward is about to return to freedom, Joseph offers a plea:

כִּי אִם זָכַרְתִּי אִתְּךָ כִּאֲשֶׁר יִיטֵב לְךָ וְעָשִׂיתָ נָא עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְהַזְכַּרְתִּנִּי אֶל פֶּרַע הַ וְהוֹצֵאתִנִּי מִן הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה:

“But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place.”² Joseph uses the verb “to remember,” twice (Hebrew root: Z-K-R): You, wine steward, you must remember me, says Joseph. Do not forget that I am here when you are freed. Tell my story to Pharaoh so that he might remember me as well.

The use of memory is critical to Joseph's plea and to the preservation of his life. If the wine steward remembers, Joseph may be freed and he may resume his life. On the other hand, if he is forgotten, he will remain hidden from his family and society forever.

Joseph's request illustrates two uses of memory found in the Tanakh. First, memory should lead to action. If the wine steward remembers Joseph, he will begin a conversation with Pharaoh and perhaps arrange for the release of a falsely imprisoned man. Memory is not simply nostalgia. The recollection of an experience should lead to an affective response. That response, in turn, should lead to action. Joseph's request indicates that memory can become a tool of transformation for the individual and, ultimately, for the community.

Second, memory sustains life. Keep me in your mind, says Joseph. Do not let the memory of me fade away, for it is only your memory that keeps me alive. The Bible is quite clear about the connection of memory to life: When God does not remember the people of Israel, they are vulnerable to attack by their enemies.³ To be remembered is to be blessed. To be forgotten is to be forsaken.⁴

However, upon his release, the wine steward does not remember Joseph; he forgets him:

וְלֹא זָכַר שָׂר הַמְשָׁקִים אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּחְהוּ:

“Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.”

¹ Gen 40:23

² Gen 40:14

³ (Psalm 42:10) I say to God, my rock, “Why have You forgotten me, why must I walk in gloom, oppressed by my enemy?”

⁴ (Isaiah 49:14) Zion says, “The LORD has forsaken me, My Lord has forgotten me.”



Parshat Hashavuah

It is a curious use of language. Not only does the wine steward *fail to remember* Joseph, he also *forgets him*. Why does the verse repeat itself? Nahum Sarna settles for an *idiomatic* explanation. To use the phrases “not to remember” and “to forget” in the same verse is a biblical mode for expressing complete forgetfulness.⁵ But even this assertion is not so simple: according to our tradition, to forget someone is to destroy them. To blot out their memory completely is to wipe them out.⁶ To suggest this kind of destructive forgetfulness here is to suggest that it is not a fate reserved only for our worst enemies; it can happen to any one of us.

In this, the Torah teaches us that there is a critical connection between memory and survival. When we choose not to remember, our choice may impact a life outside of our own. Parshat Vayeshev reminds us that our inaction is also a form of action. When we forget people, we prolong their suffering.

Every day, we are in a position to remember other human beings – to speak out about their pain, to remind others of their stories. We can choose to remember the people of Darfur and call the White House to demand action. Or we can choose to forget them. We can choose to remember the coffee farmers in Nicaragua and buy fair trade coffee that directly supports their efforts for sustainable living. Or we can choose to forget them. Remembering leads to action. Forgetting brings its own set of consequences.

We must not forget the power of memory to transform lives, not only in our contemporary community, but also for future generations:

But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children’s children...⁷

We must take seriously the obligation of memory.

Questions to consider:

- What responsibility, if any, do we have to remember people outside of our community? How would it affect our lives if we remembered the coffee workers in Guatemala, the seamstresses in El Salvador, etc.?
- What causes some remembered things to move from cognitive exercises to catalysts for activism and transformation? Why do some make that leap while others remain simply nostalgic reminiscences?

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⁵ JPS Genesis Commentary, p.280.

⁶ (Deuteronomy 25:19) Therefore, when the LORD your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (See also Jer 11:19, Job 18:17)

⁷ Deut 4:9



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Mikketz 5766

December 31, 2005

For the ancient rabbis, famine was worse than war: while the sword is quick, hunger kills slowly and painfully.¹ Yet despite famine's early warning signs, many governments, both ancient and modern have failed to plan for food crises. As a result, millions have been left dead.² In many cases, food is locally available where people are starving, but government ineptitude or cruelty prevents it from getting to those in need.

In 1943, for instance, more than three million civilians died of famine in Bengal while the British occupying force diverted available crops to storehouses for soldiers.³ In 1973, more than 300,000 people died of famine in the Wollo region of Ethiopia while food was shipped out of the region to the capital city of Addis Ababa, where people had money to buy food.⁴

But while millions of people have lost their lives due to political failures during times of famine, the first governmental response to famine, recorded in Parshat Mikketz, was a resounding success for three key reasons.

First, Joseph correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dream of the fat cows eating the lean cows to be a sign that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine.⁵ While famine forecasting technology has changed considerably from analyzing dreams to evaluating demographic patterns and weather trends, accurate interpretations of the early signs is essential. It would have been very easy for Joseph to misread this ancient "early warning system" as much of the world has done in [Niger, where more than 2.4 million people are currently starving, despite signs as early as 2004 that indicated a looming crisis.](#)⁶ Famine rarely comes as a surprise.

Second, Joseph took advantage of Egypt's years of plenty to prepare for the future. In a time when famines were seen as acts of God, Joseph persuaded Pharaoh not to surrender to the vagaries of nature, but to take action for times of shortage by storing grain during the good years.

In his final move, Joseph made the not-so-obvious choice to feed everyone – not just the elites. A lesser man might have told Pharaoh that the first and most important step was to ensure that there was enough food for him and his court, and perhaps after that, to address the needs of the population. Yet Joseph was able to harness the absolute power of Pharaoh's dictatorship to prepare the whole country for catastrophe. When the poor cried out to Pharaoh for bread, Joseph, acting on behalf of the state, was in a position to provide for them.

¹ *Baba Batra* 8b.

² For a fuller understanding of how research can accurately forecast impending famines, see the website of the USAID Famine Early Warning Systems Network at www.fews.net.

³ See Sen, Amartya, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982. For a more popular exploration of this famine from within Bengali culture, see the 1973 film *Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder)*.

⁴ See Sen, Amartya, [Public Action to Remedy Hunger](#). Speech given in London on August 2, 1990.

⁵ Genesis 41:25-27

⁶ For an overview of the situation in Niger, see the Humanitarian Policy Group [Briefing Note](#) from August 2005.



Parshat Hashavuah

Yet, despite all these triumphs, Joseph's legacy remains tainted. By accepting Pharaoh's totalitarian regime, Joseph failed to develop a political infrastructure that could reliably prevent famine in future generations. Joseph could have told Pharaoh that planning for the well-being of his people wasn't an act of loving-kindness, but rather the fulfillment of a responsibility to both God and to the people.⁷ While Joseph did an incredible job of preventing suffering from within an oppressive system, he did not work to change the system, a failure which came back to haunt his descendants when the Israelites were put into slavery.

Throughout history, total authorities like Pharaoh have more frequently enriched themselves and their allies than they have addressed the needs of the general population. Joseph, who is said to have embodied the Divine Spirit his entire life,⁸ ensured that the power of *this* Egyptian dictator was used to provide for all the people of the land. The Egyptians who lived under this Pharaoh were lucky, though even they had no guarantees that the government would provide them with food. Citizens of democracies, however, can expect those guarantees. Famines have rarely, if ever occurred in independent democratic countries, because in those countries, the media and opposition political parties are vigilant and seize upon the first reports of food shortages. This puts democratic governments under immense pressure to act effectively when faced with a threat of famine.⁹

If everyone who was threatened with starvation today could trust that their leaders would be as caring and responsible as Joseph, if they could rest easy knowing their rulers would use the power of the state to help them, then perhaps democracy could be seen as a luxury for the satiated part of the world. But until that impossibly messianic moment, the most important step towards eliminating famine is ensuring that governments, through a vigorous democratic process, are held accountable to the vulnerable people who rely on them.

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⁷ "The King should deal graciously and compassionately with the small and the great and conduct their affairs in their best interests..."
Rambam, Mishna Torah, Laws of Kings 2:6

⁸ *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezar* 38, statement of R. Pinchas

⁹ See Sen, [Public Action](#).



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Vayigash 5766 January 7, 2006

When we are confronted with problems such as genocide in Darfur, rural farmers deprived of their livelihoods by unjust trade laws, or poverty on the streets of our own cities, many of us wonder, “What can I really do about it?”

Rabbi Avi Weiss teaches that, “direct action frequently has the effect of unmasking insincerity, falsehood, and bigotry,” and that we should remember, “to act peacefully, powerfully at the point of tension, even if doing so means going into the lion’s den.”¹ No matter how just our cause, we cannot expect any results if we sit on the sidelines wringing our hands.

It is in this context that we must imagine the scene that unfolds at the opening of *Parshat Vayigash*. Joseph sits on the throne as second-in-command over all of Egypt. His brothers, starving from famine in Canaan and still oblivious to his identity, have come to beg for help. As a condition for his help, he sends them home for their youngest brother, Benjamin. Ultimately, as events unfold, he tells them that Benjamin must remain in Egypt as his slave for breaking the law.

At this moment of maximum tension, Judah chooses to intervene. In the face of overwhelming authority, he approaches Joseph to plead for leniency on Benjamin’s behalf: “Then Judah went up to him and said, ‘Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh.’”² It would be hard to imagine a greater power differential. And yet the actions of Judah, a humble shepherd, force a “strategic retreat on the part of Joseph.”³ How did he do it?

The Rabbis disagree regarding the manner in which Judah approaches Joseph. One possibility is that, “he came near for battle.” The *Midrash* has fun envisioning this:⁴ When Judah “was filled with anger, the hairs from his chest would pierce right through his clothes and force their way out, and he would put iron bars into his mouth and bring them out ground into powder!” It should be no surprise that anger begets anger,⁵ and when Judah roars like a lion, Joseph responds in kind: “He kicked a stone column on which he was sitting and reduced it to a heap of dust.” The angels exclaim, “let us go down and watch a bull [Joseph] and a lion [Judah] trying to gore each other.” This is a scene of flexing muscles and gnashing teeth, a face-to-face confrontation to see who would win the day; a confrontation which, according to *Midrash*, almost leads to carnage for Jacob’s family and for Egypt.

A second possibility is that “he came near for conciliation.” Judah offers himself in place of his younger brother, Benjamin. He essentially tells Joseph that he is right to keep one of them as a slave, but since Judah is responsible for his brother, he should be the one to remain in servitude. Whether it is intentional or not, this selfless act may have moved Joseph in a manner described by King Solomon, who taught that, “a gentle response is apt to

¹ See *Principles of Spiritual Activism*, p. 123.

² Genesis 44:18.

³ Aviva Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, p. 319.

⁴ Look for detailed descriptions of this confrontation in *Bereishit Rabba* 93, *Tanbuma Vayigash* #3, and *Tanbuma B. Vayigash* #8 and a summary in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, p. 55)

⁵ For example, Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that, “a harsh word causes anger.”



influence even the decisions of powerful kings and to assuage their feelings if they had been bruised.”⁶ Although many commentators agree that this offer is what finally causes Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers,⁷ it remains problematic. Just as the confrontational approach could have left Judah dead, this approach could have left him a slave in Egypt. Neither would have resolved the original dilemma of how to win back his brother from this apparent tyrant.

The *Midrash* offers one final possibility: “The Rabbis said, ‘coming near’ applies to prayer.” According to this reading, Judah is neither battling nor appeasing, but praying. And how might prayer help Judah? Far from being a private matter, our tradition sees prayer as a method for building relationships.⁸ In this case, if Judah wanted to effect change, he needed someone to help him.

This last *Midrashic* interpretation offers us a compelling lesson. When faced with a seemingly intractable problem, Judah does two things: he steps forward and he builds a relationship. In doing so, he achieves justice for his brother and a satisfactory resolution to a very disturbing situation. But even though it sounds easy, we are often not willing to take these two steps. When we see myriad social problems around us, do we stand up? Do we allow our voices to be heard? Do we reach out and form relationships with those who are unfamiliar or threatening, but who may hold the key to change? Each of us has the potential to be the lion or the doormat. I pray that we find the inner strength to be something more: successful arbiters of change in a world in need of action.

Questions for Discussion

1. When you find yourself in a conflict, which *Midrashic* approach do you tend to use: confrontation, conciliation, or relationship-building?
2. How might the confrontation between Judah and Joseph be instructive in your own life?

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⁶ Bahya ben Asher on *Vayigash*.

⁷ See Abarbanel and Rabbi S.R. Hirsch.

⁸ See Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *Man's Quest for God*, pp. 14-19.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Vayechi 5766 January 14, 2006

For most American Jews, “immigration” conjures up images of huddled masses arriving at Ellis Island to build a better life in America. We imagine the nostalgic “Old Country” as a place where fiddlers danced on roofs – a place to which we would never return. For most of our ancestors, immigration was a one-way street.

The earliest Jewish immigration story, of Abraham leaving for the Land of Israel, seems to follow exactly this narrative. Abraham leaves his father’s house, never to return.

But there is a different immigrant narrative represented by the life of Jacob, who fled a famine in the Land of Israel and spent the last years of his life in Egypt. Yet as he prepares for his own death, in Parshat Vayechi, Jacob tells his son Joseph that he wants to be buried in Israel, his native land.

In many ways, Jacob was the first “transnational” migrant: integrated into his adopted country, while remaining psychologically connected to the land from which he came.¹ The very first word of the parshah tells us that Jacob *lived* in Egypt for 17 years, and in the fullest sense of the word, he did.² It was Egypt where he was reunited with Joseph, whom he believed to be dead, and in the rabbinic imagination, Jacob brought tremendous benefit to his host country: when he arrived in Egypt, the famine ended and the Nile’s waters were plentiful.³ Nevertheless, Jacob spends considerable emotional energy regretting wrongs he did in the Land of Israel⁴ and he is emphatic that he be buried there with his ancestors.

Jacob, with one foot in his native country and the other in his adopted land, represents a story far more common among contemporary immigrants than it was for most early Jewish immigrants to America. Many of today’s migrants maintain tight connections to their countries of origin through financial ties, phone calls and visits. For example, the [Dominican Republic](#), a country of only nine million people, has more than two million citizens living and working overseas. Yet the overwhelming proportion of this enormous diaspora speak to their families at least once a week and most go home to visit at least once a year, changing cultural mores and traditions in the process. In the Dominican village of Miraflores, for instance, many young women only want to marry men who have spent time in the United States, because they have different ways of thinking about gender and are willing to share in housework and childcare in ways that other men are not.⁵

However, it is the money that gets sent home that has the largest potential impact. Approximately 70% of the Dominican diaspora sends money home on a regular basis, generally in denominations of only about \$150 at a time. However, these small sums add up to nearly *three billion* dollars, which is more than **one thousand times greater** than the foreign aid annually sent by the U.S. government to the Dominican Republic.⁶ Overall, individual remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean topped \$25 billion in 2004. By comparison, the **worldwide** U.S. foreign aid budget is just \$17 billion.

These remittances provide tremendous benefits directly to the families who receive them and they can help bypass the problems that sometimes plague corrupt or inept governments. More than one million Dominicans who make less than \$3,500 a year receive money from overseas; this money provides them with food and medicine they would otherwise not receive. Some immigrants pool the small sums they send home and invest in larger items or projects that benefit their entire hometowns.⁷

Stories of low wage migrants working in the developed world, saving their money and changing the lives of the global poor on a family-by-family or community-by-community basis are incredible testaments to the ability of individuals and small groups to become the agents of positive change. But this practice also guarantees that these people will continue to live thousands of miles away from their families in order to provide them with financial and material support. Jacob feared that he would die of grief trying to maintain his



family in Egypt and Israel at the same time;⁸ many of today's Latino migrants find themselves in exactly the same fragmented position, and the costs can be devastating, both to individuals and to entire countries.

While remittances have tremendous benefits, they also perpetuate a system in which Latin American countries export their workers as if they were merely products; they become nothing more than economic vassals of wealthier countries. El Salvador, where over 16% of the GDP comes from remittances, effectively abandoned its economic sovereignty in 2001 by making the U.S. dollar its official currency.⁹ El Salvador can no longer set its own monetary policy, but is dependent on decisions made in Washington and on remittance payments for its financial wellbeing.

But money isn't the only thing flowing back to Latin America as result of migration to more developed countries. For example, many of the Salvadoran immigrants who became involved with gangs in the U.S. in the mid-1980s were deported after serving time in American prisons. They brought the criminal violence with them, and now most major Latin American cities are dealing with *maras*, violent gangs whose organization stretches from Los Angeles to Chiapas to El Salvador. A number of AJWS project partners, such as the Peruvian [Intimate Pro-Child Civil Association](#) and the *Movimiento Juvenil Nueva Generacion XXI* in El Salvador offer youth work, education and non-violence training as an alternative to, or even as an escape from, this dangerous international enterprise.

Jacob went to Egypt in search of economic security, and he found it. Yet his journey also resulted in more than 400 years of slavery for his descendants. The benefits seemed clear when he left Israel, but some of the costs took generations to be rectified. Many of today's immigrants face a similar reality. They come to America seeking opportunities that aren't available in their home country, finding low-level jobs here as waiters, busboys and fruit-pickers. While many of them achieve some degree of success, the ultimate costs of this migration – dislocated families, international criminal networks and dependent local economies – might also take years to resolve.

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About the author

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¹ Levitt, Peggy. *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, p.4.

² The *Or HaHayim* (48:27) goes so far as to say these 17 years were the only happy ones of his life.

³ Rashi at Genesis 50:5; see also Rashi at 47:10 and 47:19.

⁴ See Jacob's lament about his failure to properly bury Rachel at Genesis 48:7 and also Sforno's comment that ever since then, he has been heartbroken.

⁵ Peggy Levitt, "Transnational Migrants: When "Home" Means More Than One Country," *Migration Information Source*, October 1 2004.

⁶ In sum, immigrants send more than \$30 billion a year to Latin America and the Caribbean. See Elizabeth Becker, "Latin Migrants to U.S. Send Billions Home," *The New York Times*, May 18 2004. According to the [UN Financial Tracking Service](#), US aid to the Dominican Republic was \$2.26 million in 2004.

⁷ See the short film [The Sixth Section](#), about a collective of immigrants in Newburgh, NY who purchased an ambulance and a 2,000 seat baseball stadium for their hometown in Boqueron, Mexico.

⁸ Genesis 42:35

⁹ "[El Salvador's Greenback Bind](#)," by Geri Smith. *BusinessWeek*, October 17, 2005.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Shemot 5766 January 21, 2006

When companies have a high-level position to fill, they frequently employ head hunters to locate the right person for the job. If we were given the task of finding the right person to serve as the leader of the Children of Israel during the Exodus, what type of qualities would we look for?

The job description for this executive position might read as follows: “This person must be confident, charismatic, wise, vibrant, patient, creative and intelligent. It is preferred that s/he has experience in public relations and wilderness economics. Public speaking is a must.”

While these characteristics are what we might expect of a leader, in this week’s Parsha God makes a surprising selection. His candidate of choice is Moses, a man who is temperamental, easily discouraged, and somewhat impatient.

If this wasn’t bad enough, Moses makes it clear on several occasions that he doesn’t even want the position. When approached by God to lead the Children of Israel out of slavery, Moses raises several reasons why God should choose someone else. He says, “Please, Lord, I am not a man of words, either in the past or now when you have spoken to me. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”¹

In essence, Moses confides that his problem lies not with the message, but with the messenger. Traditional and modern scholars have been fascinated by Moses’ self-depiction as *keavad peh v’kaved lashon*: slow of speech and slow of tongue. This is usually interpreted as stuttering. Rashi and several other traditional commentators embrace a literal interpretation of the text. According to their view, Moses had a speech impediment. In fact, some go so far as to try and pinpoint which sounds represented the greatest challenge to Moses.

Some modern commentators suggest that Moses declines the invitation to lead because he is neither skilled in the arena of political debate, nor is he what we might consider a charismatic speaker. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud asserts that Moses’ objection, and the need for Aaron as an interpreter, allude to the fact that “Moses was an Egyptian.”² According to Freud, Moses does not utilize Aaron as an interpreter with Pharaoh, but rather as a tool for connecting with the Children of Israel.

As described above, when Moses speaks of his slow speech, one of the Hebrew words used to describe it is *kehaved peh*. In the coming Torah portions when “Pharaoh hardens his heart,” the Torah employs the expression “*vehakbbaed et lebo*.”³

¹ Exodus 4:10

² Page 38

³ Exodus 8:11



Parshat Hashavuah

One simple word, *kaved*, which means heavy or encumbered, lays out the political tension and real communication problem between Moses and Pharaoh. A man with difficulty in speaking attempts to get through to a man who will not listen and is indifferent to human suffering.

We might assume that God wants an eloquent speaker and someone who feels ready and eager to assume a leadership role. But instead, Moses – hesitant, scared and almost the epitome of a broken vessel – is chosen. In addition to his humility and wisdom, God chooses Moses because of his imperfections. The irony of the story is that God accepts Moses as he is. It is Moses who needs to learn to accept himself. Ultimately, Moses was able to be a leader in spite of his limitations.

Our world today continues to be challenged by pharaohs with hardened hearts and modern-day “plagues,” both natural and manmade. The amount of *tikkun* – healing – that our society and our global community demands is daunting. Like Moses, we can easily feel dwarfed by the mission ahead.

It is precisely when the task seems so large that we need to remember that Moses’ inadequacies and hesitations did not hold him back from being a leader. In fact, when exposed firsthand to injustice and cruelty, he takes immediate action without stopping to consider the personal ramifications.⁴

From this week’s Parsha, we learn that the type of leadership needed to transform the world cannot easily be captured in a job description. We are all like Moses in that each of us has our own faults and shortcomings. Similarly, each of us has a unique contribution to make – to our communities, to society, to the world – if only we learn to accept ourselves as we are.

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⁴ Exodus 2:11-12



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Vaera 5766
January 28, 2006

From his early days as a well-intentioned but impulsive young man, to his ultimate legacy as the greatest leader of the Jewish people, Moses underwent a profound transformation. Even before Moses met the Divine One at the Burning Bush and was charged with leading the Israelites to freedom, he took his own steps toward making justice manifest in the world. Moses acted three times before he encountered God at the Burning Bush, and each time, he intervened to save someone powerless suffering abuse at the hands of someone mighty. When Moses first left Pharaoh's house he saw an Egyptian unjustly beating a Hebrew worker and killed the aggressor to save the victim. The very next day, he again intervened in a conflict and rescued an innocent Hebrew, this time from an evil Hebrew who was preparing to assault him.¹ In a third instinctive act of justice, Moses rescued the daughters of Reuel, whom other sheep herders had chased away from a well.² He was a man with courage and a strong sense of justice, and he was prepared to right the wrongs which the strong were perpetrating on the weak. For a God who demands that the wretched and the needy be saved from the hand of the wicked,³ Moses looked like a promising ally.

But while Moses had an instinct for justice, he didn't yet have a method for making it happen. His behavior, while powerful and inspiring, was also impulsive, occasionally violent and ultimately inadequate. There was a whole Egyptian system which allowed the innocent to be beaten, but Moses didn't address that – he simply acted on rash impulse. He didn't investigate what led the two men to quarrel, but simply imposed his own solution as lord and judge over them. And he did nothing to ensure that the daughters of Reuel would be able to return to the well in peace the next day. Moses was a momentary hero, so fixated on the injustice in front of him that he could not see deeper, into what caused the injustice

According to some Jewish traditions,⁴ it is exactly this sort of short-sightedness that the Shema cautions against when it instructs us “to restrain our hearts from wandering after our eyes.” Our eyes can be so preoccupied by the *manifest* world in front of us that our imaginations become confounded and cannot see the “world to come.” The “world to come” then, is not a far away place with angels up high in the clouds; rather, it is the *always coming world*, which comes rushing towards us with every passing hour, every passing second. The *coming world* has the constant possibility of being radically different than the *existing world*. The *coming world* is always an imagined possibility, one step out of reach, that invites us to constantly aspire to reach it.

¹ The *Or HaChaim* (2:11) explains the phrase “one of his brethren” to mean that Moses recognized a common *righteousness* with the Hebrew being beaten. The Italian exegete, Yitzhak Shmuel Reggio makes a similar point on the same verse, saying “Moses did not kill the Egyptian because he was Egyptian and his soul was tied up with that of the Hebrews, but rather, to save the oppressed from the oppressor.” Cited in Bryna Jocheved Levy, “Moshe: Portrait of the Leader as a Young Man,” in *Torah of the Mothers*, ed. Ora Wiskind Elper and Susan Handleman (Jerusalem: Urim Publishers, 2006).

² These three stories appear one after the other in Exodus 2:10-17

³ Psalm 82:1-5

⁴ See Chapter 28 of *Hochma uMussar (Wisdom and Tradition)*, which is the collected writings of Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv of Broide (1824–1898). R. Simcha was the chosen pupil of Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, which is a Jewish system of gradual self-improvement.



Parshat Hashavuah

While Moses could only see the wrongs which were immediately in front of him in the world as it is, the Omniscient One could see deeper and taught Moses how to see the structures that caused these seemingly random events. These were structures that needed to be changed if justice was to be realized in a sustainable way and not merely wished for in some far off utopia. God taught Moses to take his outrage at the world as it *is* and to imagine what the world *could be* in the moment after this one and then to work effectively to make that dream a reality.⁵

From Parshat Vaera onward, God's focus on educating Moses toward effective change is striking. God didn't harden Pharaoh's heart ten times in order to bring the Israelites out of Egypt; God hardened Pharaoh's heart again and again so that Moses, and everyone who learned from his life, would know that working to change the world can be frustrating and demands awesome persistence and discipline. Moses made a name for himself with his outbursts of passion, but he didn't make a difference until he had a plan and he stuck to it.

Thousands of years later, we know Moses as a heroic and visionary leader. But at the beginning, he was rash and impulsive. By making Moses march off to Pharaoh again and again and again, the Master of the Universe taught him that only way for humans to effect any real change in the world is through incredibly difficult work. It's easy to imagine that Moses found his calling frustrating, discouraging and even demeaning. But God didn't put Moses in this role to make him feel good about himself; God put him in this role to teach him how to make a difference.

For those of us who don't merely hope for justice, but pursue it, the lesson is the same – our efforts to ensure the coming world is a just world are most effective when they are persistent. We shouldn't call our Congressional [representatives](#)⁶ only occasionally – we should have their phone numbers in speed dial, and we should call them every day the news outrages us or makes us cry, and ask them what they are doing to fix the injustices that surround us. We shouldn't give tzedakah occasionally, but regularly, as part of a religious practice of making justice manifest in the world. Moses' intentions and passion for justice were wonderful, but alone, they weren't enough. Neither are ours. In a world where injustice is systemic, so must our response.

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About the author

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⁵ For more on this idea, see Aaron Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leader* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2005), Chapter 2.

⁶ Federal Representatives can be found at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov, and for a full listing of all your representatives on a state and federal level, go to www.vote-smart.org.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Bo 5766
February 4, 2006

For the past three weeks we have been reading about the ten plagues that God brings against the Egyptians. This week's parshah contains the final three plagues, culminating with the slaying of the firstborn Egyptian children. Pharaoh responds by finally chasing the Children of Israel out of Egypt. The ten plagues not only physically break down the Egyptians, they are also meant to teach a lesson about God's limitless abilities to two distinct audiences – the Egyptians and the Children of Israel. Both groups learn of God's power through God's total domination of the Egyptians.¹

Rashi comments that there were ancillary goals to the plague of darkness in particular.² He explains that the plague was also directed against the “insurgents” among the Israelites. Rashi notes that some of the Children of Israel had not been convinced of God's omnipotence and did not want to leave Egypt. God killed these people under cover of the darkness lest the Egyptians claim some kind of moral equivalence and say, “they are being punished just like us.”

Rashi's explanation of the plague of darkness seems inconsistent with a comment he makes at the beginning of next week's parshah. In describing the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the Torah says: “Now the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt.”³ Noting that the Hebrew word used for “armed” – *chamushim* – is linguistically similar to the Hebrew word *chamesh* which means “five,” Rashi writes: “One [Israelite] in five left, and four-fifths of them died during the three days of darkness.” According to tradition, 600,000 Israelite males left Egypt.⁴ If this number represents only 1/5 of the total number of Israelites who were enslaved in Egypt, then according to Rashi there were at the very least three million⁵ Israelites who died during the plague of darkness. Even if the Egyptians did not see them die, it seems inconceivable that the Egyptians would not notice such a huge loss of numbers among the Israelites. Why, then, did God specifically wait for darkness to kill the insurgent Israelites? What difference would it make?

There is an important lesson to be learned from Rashi's explanation of the plague of darkness. The ten plagues destroyed the land and people of Egypt. Each plague attacked another aspect of Egyptian life, religion and terrain. After the slaying of the first born, the Torah says: “there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead.”⁶ Every single Egyptian felt the devastation of the plagues slowly attacking their water, cattle, land, and finally their own families. Their lives were so consumed

¹ For the message to the Egyptians, see for example Exodus 8:18 and 10:1. For examples of the intended message to the Children of Israel see Exodus 6:6-9 and 10:2.

² See Rashi's commentary to Exodus 10:22. In addition to the reason discussed below, Rashi also explains that the darkness allowed the Israelites to go into the Egyptians' homes and scope out where their valuables were stored. This way, as they were being expelled from Egypt and stopped to ask for their “due compensation,” the Israelites could preempt the Egyptians' attempts to deny them by pointing out exactly where the valuables were located.

³ Exodus 13:18

⁴ See Rashi to Exodus 16:16

⁵ It is unclear whether the insurgent Israelites who were killed during Darkness consisted of only men or women as well. If the number includes women then the total number of dead is potentially much greater. In any case, according to Rashi a huge number of Israelites died and were not part of the Exodus.

⁶ Exodus 12:30



Parshat Hashavuah

by the tragedy that even something as monumental as the death of three million Israelites could have gone completely unnoticed in light of the havoc wreaked by the plagues. When the circumstances of one's life seem hopeless and crippling, it becomes almost impossible to see beyond the immediacy of one's own situation. The Egyptians were so preoccupied with their own problems that the three million Israelites would have had to die right in front of them, in the bright light of day, for them to even notice.

Rashi's insight on human characteristics remains true today. Our lives are full of demands for our time and energy – from our jobs, studies, families, and recreational activities. We are often blinded to the needs of others by our own seemingly infinite responsibilities. It becomes easy to make excuses for why we aren't involved in causes and activities that we know are valuable and worthwhile. Don't we all say that we wish we could fit more into our busy schedules? Rashi's explanation of the plague of darkness sends a powerful message. We should never let the circumstances of our lives – no matter how desperate or all-encompassing they may seem – prevent us from being aware of and sensitive to the hardships of others.

Indeed one of the tenets of Judaism is that everyone is obligated in the *mitzvah* of charity or *tzedakah* – even poor people who are supported by the charity of others.⁷ Implicit in the act of giving charity is the ability to be sensitive to the needs of others. If in the most extreme example of the poor, our tradition expects that they remain concerned for others and not let their difficult situation dominate their lives, all the more so for those of us who are financially stable. We are all busy and the demands on our time and resources are legitimate. But an important lesson to learn from Rashi's insight is that we must always be sensitive to the world around us.

Questions for Discussion

1. If you had “more time” what would you do with it? What are some activities or causes that you wish you could be involved with?
2. What are ways that we can show we are sensitive to others if we have many personal responsibilities? What if we have limited financial resources?
3. Can you think of any modern day examples that may be compared to the Egyptians not realizing three million Israelites had died?

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⁷ See for Example Babylonian Talmud, *Gitin* 7b: “Mar Zutra says: Even a poor person who is sustained by [the charity of others] should [nonetheless] give *tzedakah*. This is codified by Maimonides in *Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 7:5 and by R. Yoseph Caro in *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 248:1.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Beshalach 5766

February 11, 2006

Nature and History

In the very first of the Ten Commandments, we are told to imagine the Divine as “the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Indeed, for many Jews, there is no image more powerful than that of God as the outstretched arm which liberated the Israelites from Egypt in Parshat Beshalach. God entered human history with signs and miracles on our behalf, and that is a cornerstone of the human connection to the Divine.¹

Others think that while the irregular and unpredictable appearance of God in history is an occasion for pouring out beautiful songs, it is an unstable basis on which to build faith. Although the Israelites sang after crossing the sea, “The LORD is my strength and might, He is become my deliverance; This is my God and I will enshrine Him,” they soon complained that it would have been better for them to stay in Egypt, where they remembered at least having food to eat. It is easy to sing at those moments when the Divine Presence is palpable, but God is often elusive, or absent altogether. Because even if God *did* miraculously intervene to liberate the slaves from Egypt, God didn’t intervene to relieve the hundreds of years of Jewish suffering during the Middle Ages or the profound crisis of the Holocaust. God didn’t intervene to relieve the suffering of Rwanda, and to this day, God has not yet intervened to relieve the suffering in Darfur.

From the very earliest periods of Jewish history, the tradition has been aware that God often seems cruelly absent at moments of crisis. During the brutal siege of Jerusalem,² the Roman army murdered thousands of people and desecrated the Temple, an event which remains one of the darkest moments of Jewish history, even after the Holocaust. Looking back on the destruction of Jerusalem, one Talmudic rabbi argued that if God is to be praised for miraculous appearances, perhaps God is to be cursed when God is absent. This sage confronted God with ironic “praise” for being “among the silent ones” while innocent people were devastated.³ Indeed, to straightforwardly praise a God who *could* intervene but chooses to stand on the sidelines while innocents are raped and murdered is to blaspheme against the aspect of Divinity which manifest in every human being.

Others though, say that their faith in God doesn’t come from miracles, and it can’t be upset by the absence of miracles either. God does not approach humanity by intervening in human affairs, but *humanity can approach God through acting in the world.*⁴

¹ Kuzari 1:25, cited in David Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). p 38.

² The Roman siege of Jerusalem (70-72 CE) starved hundreds of thousands of civilians. This catastrophe is marked by the fast of Tisha b’Av.

³ *Gittin* 56b - In the school of Rabbi Ishmael, the verse “who is like you among the Mighty Ones, Oh Lord” (מי כמוכה באלים) is taught “Who is like you among the silent ones, Oh Lord (מי כמוכה באלמים).”

⁴ This idea is played out on *Bava Metz’ia* 59b, in which R. Eli’ezer receives Heavenly support for his legal arguments but is rebuffed by R. Judah, who says that we don’t accept proof from miracles. R. Judah is obviously not simply making a point about halachic process; he is making statement about the role of human initiative in maintaining a religious *posture* vis a vis God.



Parshat Hashavuah

This idea, that humans approach God through their behavior on earth, is the foundation of the entire project of religious law. According to the Rambam,⁵ the most important of the medieval Jewish philosophers, the primary purpose of every person is to contemplate the world and the God who formed it. For the Rambam, knowledge of God is manifest as proper action in the world – both what is sometimes considered ritual action, like kashrut or tefillin, and what is considered ethical action, like caring for the sick or the poor. Knowledge of God is manifest as good; ignorance of God is manifest in the world as evil.⁶

Moses had intense, personal knowledge of God – he is the only prophet described as speaking to God face to face. And what did Moses do after obtaining this knowledge? He returned to earth and liberated his people. He returned not despite his lofty revelations in the heavens, but *because* of them. His knowledge of God inevitably turned him outward and compelled him to act in the world.

Moses encountered God and as a result, he liberated humanity from the idea that slavery was inevitable. What might this mean for those of us who do not encounter God face to face, if at all, and who are unlikely to liberate a nation?

It might mean this: at the fleeting moments of transcendence, when we sense the knowledge of God in our lives, that knowledge will inevitably turn us toward other humans, who are reflections of the Divine on earth. At those times when we become aware of the grace through which we wake up every morning, that knowledge will turn us outward to those other humans whom God created. It might mean that when our souls reach upward to God, as Moses' did, our hands reach outward to humanity, as Moses' did. And more than this, it might mean that at those moments when we are not turned toward others, we are not worshiping God, even if it looks like we are.

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⁵ Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135-1204), or the RaMBaM was a physician and one of Jewish history's most important philosophers. Born in Spain, his two central works are the *Mishna Torah*, which is one of the central codifications of Jewish law, and the *Moreh Nevuchim*, a philosophical work.

⁶ Guide for the Perplexed, Chapter III:11



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Yitro 5766
February 18, 2006

Sinai: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

“We have always both to recover tradition and to recover from it.”
– Rev. William Sloane Coffin

At first glance it is difficult to understand the meaning of the rabbinic teaching [Avodah Zarah 2b] that the Holy Blessed One offered the Torah to each and every nation of the world, and that it was only after they rejected it that He came to our people. It is hard to imagine that it was possible for God [to even consider] giving the Torah to non-Jews. In truth, the Holy Blessed One did this in order to [deepen His] love [for] Israel. By approaching each and every nation, having them decline acceptance [of the Torah], and having the seed of Israel accept it, His love for them [Israel] increased. And so, by making these rounds, [additional] love came to Israel and additional hatred came to the nations of the world. It is for this reason that our sages of blessed memory said, “It [the mountain] is called Sinai, because hatred (sinah) descended upon the nations of the world [from it] (Shabbat 89b).”

—Kedushat Levi, Yitro

This teaching, attributed to the famed hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, (1740-1809) is an important source for contemporary Jewish activists to reckon with. All too often we pluck from the Jewish tradition those texts that support our contemporary ethical sensibilities (the *Tikkun Olam* “top ten”), without addressing seriously the many teachings from our past that challenge, agitate, or anger us. While it is necessary to choose carefully the texts that guide our lives, privileging some over others, we cannot ignore the materials that disturb us. To do so is not only intellectually dishonest, but it also denies us the opportunity to refine our spiritual visions against the grain of these disquieting texts. Further, without this exegetical grappling we cannot adequately respond to those in the Jewish community and in other religious communities that defend uncritically the views of sages from earlier times.

I have chosen this particular homily to illustrate this point because it is a teaching from one of my most beloved spiritual masters. Ironically, what I love most about Levi Yitzhak is his compassion for the people of Israel—rich and poor, learned and uneducated. But the *Berdichever* (as the Hasidim call him) lived in a world that was sharply divided between Jews and non-Jews, and as a member of a persecuted minority he was the victim of regular Christian abuse. Levi Yitzhak used the pulpit (armed with anti-gentile texts from past sages) as an outlet to express his outrage and to uplift his community. He proclaimed fiercely that despite the claims of his Christian neighbors, God still loved the Jewish people, they had not been cast off nor replaced by a “new Israel.”

But this is not enough. While placing such texts in their proper historical contexts is important, we must also address the theological claims presented in these teachings. Do we believe that God loves Jews and hates (*sonah*) non-Jews? Do we believe that the Torah is the only path to the Divine? My answer to both of these questions is no. I do not know a God who chooses one group of people over another, nor do I believe that Judaism is the only true religion. How, in a world of such immense diversity, could there be one



spiritual path for all people? In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, “I believe that it is the will of God that there should be religious diversity.”

I actually think Levi Yitzhak would appreciate this challenge. As a pioneering figure in Hasidism—a great mystical revival movement—he regularly preached about the importance of religious renewal, calling on the leaders of his generation to fashion a Judaism that was reflective of the spiritual and ethical demands of the hour. He goes so far as to say that in every age there is a different prophetic spirit, and that one cannot address present-day issues by simply invoking the spirit of the past.

In an age of religious fundamentalism and violence, the Jewish people has an obligation to articulate an inclusive vision of the relationship of God to the peoples of the earth. Freed from the heavy burdens of past victimization, we must learn to celebrate our particularism while also acknowledging the sanctity of other religious (and non-religious) communities. This is not to suggest that people of faith should not continue to debate matters of ultimate concern, but this discussion must be suffused with humility and accompanied by a genuine willingness to learn from one another.

In his book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that we are members of not one, but *two* biblical covenants: the covenant of Sinai and the covenant of Noah. While Sinai is a special pact between God and the Jewish people, we are also a part of an earlier bond forged between God and humankind. Allegiance to these two covenants requires us to honor and care for the Jewish people and for the other peoples of the earth.

Questions for Discussion

1. Are there particular Jewish texts that you find disturbing? Why? How do you respond to them?
2. What spiritual or ethical lessons have you learned from other faith traditions?
3. Do you believe that the Jewish people are the “Chosen people?” What does this mean to you?

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Parshat Mishpatim 5766 February 25, 2006

In the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis were dying from cholera because of unclean drinking water. The international aid community encouraged the construction of millions of tube wells, which were supposed to provide easy access to clean water in underground aquifers. These wells were responsible for bringing the villagers of Bangladesh something the Western world had long taken for granted – easy access to clean drinking water.

But now, 30 years later, the World Health Organization has said the arsenic contained in those wells has caused the “largest mass poisoning of a population in history.”¹ Though no one knew it at the time, the ground water was contaminated with arsenic, and now an estimated 40% of Bangladesh’s 125 million inhabitants are drinking poisoned water which will lead to innumerable health problems and premature deaths from lung, bladder or skin cancers.

It is safe to assume that the agencies which encouraged well water in the 1970s never meant to poison millions of people. They did what many of us do, albeit on a far more dramatic scale – they tried to help, and in fact made things much worse. Nevertheless, those organizations still bear part of the responsibility for the devastation which Bangladesh has suffered in the last 25 years. They are liable because responsibility for the outcomes of our actions, even the unintended ones, is one of the hallmarks of human freedom.

This idea, that we are responsible even for the *unintended* consequences of our actions, is among the first things which the Torah teaches the Israelites when they leave Egypt. As the Israelites move from captivity to freedom, the Torah shifts from a collection of narratives to a catalog of laws, delineating the responsibilities of this newly freed people. The Torah states that we cannot be considered free if we do not take responsibility for our actions. Among the responsibilities enumerated for the Israelites in Parshat Mishpatim are the just treatment of slaves, the establishment of a fair judicial system, and the principle that people are responsible for the foreseeable harms they cause, even unintentionally.

Like many of its ethical laws, the Torah teaches this by way of prosaic examples: If a person opens a pit and an animal falls in it, he is responsible for its death.² If someone lights a fire and it spreads and destroys grain, she is responsible for the loss of the grain.³ Neither person meant to kill an animal or destroy a field, but their intentions are beside the point. They bear responsibility because damage resulted from their carelessness. In the Jewish legal tradition, anytime we cause someone else harm, even unintentionally, we are held responsible. One is only exempt if she has taken all the reasonable precautions for foreseeable accidents. And to be sure, being responsible for “reasonable precautions” and “foreseeable accidents” can involve a huge amount of forethought. To be free is to be responsible and to recognize that there are no neutral acts in the world.

It as if the Torah is teaching our ancestors, these former slaves who have never been responsible for anything before, that there are no neutral acts in the world, and when they contribute to suffering in the world, even with the best of intentions, they are responsible.

This is true for the aid agencies that dug wells in Bangladesh, and it’s true for all of us who pursue justice in the world. And yet, there’s a risk in taking this logic to its extreme. Knowing the potential for unforeseen calamity, would it have been better not to dig the wells in Bangladesh? At least then the aid agencies wouldn’t be culpable for things going awry.

¹ “The Lethal Water Wells of Bangladesh,” by David Rohde, *The New York Times*, July 17, 2005.

² Exodus 21:33-34

³ Exodus 22:5



Might it not be better for us to avoid the thorny and complex problems that confront us in the developing world because we can't possibly anticipate and manage every possible way our work can go wrong or every negative consequence that may result?

The rabbis recognize and anticipate this risk that we will be paralyzed by our fear of liability and fail to fulfill our obligation to act. In the Mishna in Bava Kamma (6:6), we read:

If a camel laden with flax passes through a street, and the flax overflows into a shop, catches fire at the shopkeeper's lamp, and sets the building on fire, the camel owner is liable; but if the shopkeeper placed the light outside [where the camel owner cannot be expected to foresee a lamp], the shopkeeper is liable. R. Judah said: In the case of a Hanukkah lamp [which is supposed to be placed outside] he is exempt.

The first part of this ancient law code seems clear – a camel owner bringing “hazardous material” through town is responsible for not endangering the community. That said, the community is responsible for not creating dangerous hazards which can easily become disasters. These rules sensibly assign liability based on greatest negligence and reasonable precautions. But how can we understand Rabbi Judah's note at the end? Wouldn't it also be reasonable to demand that the shopkeeper place his lamp, for example, high enough or in a marked way so the camel owner won't stumble on it?

The Talmud asks just this question in Tractate Shabbat 21b. It says, “Yet perhaps if the shopkeeper, who is obligated to light the Hanukkah lamp is put to too much trouble, he will refrain altogether from the observance of the *mitzvah* of lighting the Hanukkah lamp.” Placing the lit *hanukkiyah* outside is a *mitzvah*, an obligation which we are forbidden to abdicate. Taking precautions for the sake of the camel owner is important, but if we impose too great an onus on the shopkeeper, he may be tempted to abandon the *mitzvah* altogether, and that is a choice the rabbis will not abide.

In the same way, while we must accept responsibility for the consequences of our actions, we cannot allow the weight of responsibility to prevent us from acting at all. The aid agencies that responded to the cholera epidemic in Bangladesh were doing the right thing – they were trying to alleviate the suffering of desperately poor people. Perhaps there were greater precautions they could have taken, and certainly they must act to rectify the consequences of their choices. But to not intervene, not engage, and not seek solutions to the great problems that confront us would be an abdication of our responsibilities.

The yoke of freedom, which our ancestors took up at Sinai on our behalf, demands a daunting level of ethical responsibility. But responsibility is an inevitable part of the freedom which awaited us outside of Egypt, and we do not have the luxury of being overwhelmed.

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Parshat Terumah 5766
March 4, 2006

The *Mishkan* and a Chocolate Bar

What is the connection between a chocolate bar and the *mishkan* – the sanctuary for God that the Israelites built in the desert?

It may be hard to see at first, but there *is* a connection, and the connection does not have to do with the end result of the labor involved in either one, but rather with the process – with intentionality and knowing what you are getting.

Parshat Terumah begins with God instructing Moses to tell the Israelites to bring gifts to God – but it is not just *what* the Israelites are to bring that is important, but also *how* they are to bring it. First, God says that the people must bring *terumah*, and *terumah* does not refer to just any kind of gift, but only to gifts that are dedicated for a holy purpose. God instructs Moses to accept *terumah* from every person whose heart moves him to bring something, and these gifts are to be used to make a sanctuary for God. God also specifies what the Israelites are to bring – and the items are not insignificant; they include gold, silver, copper, various fine yarns, skins, gemstones, and other precious items.

The Chatam Sofer¹ points out the paradox of the people bringing gifts to God, for everything they will bring is part of God's creation, and thus already belongs to God. However, what the people are uniquely able to bring is their intentionality – their motivation and their enthusiasm. Materials given reluctantly, the Chatam Sofer reminds us, cannot be accepted and cannot be used in building God's sanctuary. The intentionality with which the *terumah* is brought is part of its holiness.

Special gifts, dedicated for a holy use, and given willingly from the heart – these are the building blocks of the *mishkan*.

So, what does it mean to be moved in your heart to bring a gift? And how does the biblical understanding of the heart as the seat of the intellect inform our understanding of the answer to this question?

The word *yidvenu* comes from the same root as the noun “volunteerism,” and the verb “to donate or to volunteer.” Being moved in one's heart *doesn't* mean bringing something because everyone else is bringing something. And it *doesn't* mean bringing something because God told Moses to tell you to bring it. And it also *doesn't* mean bringing something because someone is standing over you with a shotgun or a whip and forcing you to bring it. Rather, being moved in our hearts to bring a gift means bringing something because we decide on our own to do it and because we want to bring it. It means bringing something because we think and feel that it is right for us, and not because the need to bring a gift is imposed on us by someone outside of us. Giving that is a result of being “moved in one's heart” is giving freely, willingly, and voluntarily.

¹ *Chasam Sofer: Commentary on the Torah, Shemos*, selected by Rabbi Yosef Stern. Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd., pp. 166-167.



Just as the question regarding the ingredients that made up the *mishkan* is not simply *what* was brought, but also *how* it was brought, so too it is with the ingredients that make up a chocolate bar – or any other food we eat, or in fact, *any* item that we buy. When we purchase food, we are likely to be concerned with the end product – is it fresh? Does it taste good? But as we know from the laws of *kasbrut*, holiness is not just about the end product. “God is ... process without end,”² plus, if we are to truly walk in God’s footsteps, then, just as God was concerned with the *how*, the intentionality behind the bringing of the materials for the *mishkan*, so, too, should we be concerned with the *how* – how foods are grown and raised and packaged and prepared. We may be concerned with whether or not the foods are prepared in a *halachically* correct manner, but we should also be concerned with how workers who harvest or prepare the foods, as well the land on which the foods are grown, are treated. We should view the source of our foods in the same way that God views the source of the *mishkan*.

The major ingredient in many chocolate bars is cocoa that has been grown and harvested by slave labor – often by child slave labor. The public became generally aware of the problem of slavery and cocoa as a result of a British documentary released in 2001, but the problem has not gone away. Last month, a lawsuit was filed alleging that several major chocolate companies are involved in a system of human trafficking and slavery in the Ivory Coast.³ Slave-grown cocoa is the antithesis of the *terumah* that was used to build God’s holy sanctuary in the desert. Slave labor is labor given under duress of the greatest kind: slaves are ill-treated; they are beaten and given little food and no money. Slave labor is not labor that is given willingly by any stretch of the imagination.

A chocolate bar is no *mishkan*, but we as human beings, created *b’tzelem elohim* – in God’s image – are holy, and the food we eat should be holy, too. Preparing foods according to the laws of *kasbrut* is one way to raise the level of sanctity of our foods, and reciting a *brachah* before eating is another way, but just as gold and silver brought unwillingly for the building of the *mishkan* did not have sufficient holiness for God’s sanctuary in the desert, so, too, even a *hechsber* given under the strictest of supervision and even 1000 heartfelt blessings cannot bring holiness to a food that from its origin is unclean, *tamai*, because of how it was harvested. Products harvested or prepared by people who are forced to give of their labor for no money under threat of being beaten or killed can never achieve the holiness of products harvested and prepared by people who give of their labor willingly, voluntarily, and for a fair wage. We who at Pesach spend eight days reminding ourselves with every bite of food that we were slaves in Egypt have a special responsibility to recognize the need for a touch of *terumah* in everything we eat.

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² Green, Arthur, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992, pp. 18-19.

³ <http://marketplace.publicradio.org/shows/2006/02/06/PM200602067.html>



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Tetzaveh 5766

March 11, 2006

Exodus 27: 20-21

God tells Moses: *“You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly. Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain which is over [the Ark of] the Pact, [to burn] from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages.”*

He might have told them: “The oil you bring this day may seem like nothing special to you. It comes from the olives that you take for granted. You have grown and picked them, beaten them to render the oil clear and pure, as you have always done. But this simple oil when you all contribute – is capable of lighting the Tent of Meeting! And furthermore, this oil today kindles the light in our Mishkan that will become a ner *tamid*. Without your oil there can be no light to inspire our people today and bind them to future generations for thousands of years ahead. That which is most common to you is the resource with which we build the community, inspire the mission and develop the strength to build a future for our people. One day we will build a Temple, it will be destroyed but God will not abandon us. WE will create study halls and synagogues. And in every synagogue a ner *tamid* will hang over the aron where the Torah scrolls will be kept, a sign of the covenant I will make with you. Your descendants for thousands of years will remember you, and will remember to fuel the light.”

As with the building of the structure and exterior of the Mishkan, the Israelite people were invited to contribute from what they had at hand – the materials they knew how to work with. They were inspired by Moses to transform them into objects of beauty and utility. {How they had access to olive trees in the desert is a question relevant to understanding the chronology of the writing and editing of the Torah, but not to finding meaning here.} For our purposes, Moses organized them to use local resources to generate social and spiritual capital for their community and a future for their children’s children. The Israelites took what had been given them by God, refined it with their own labor, and returned it to God through the medium of community – transcending their own individual lives to become infinitely more powerful.

The wisdom revealed in this opening paragraph of the parshah is the fundamental premise of community organizing and sustainable development. When people are organized to work collectively, in community, with the resources that are closest at hand, they can learn how to make something valuable and gain power to control their lives. These may be the simple items that – when withheld – represent their economic power – as in the bus fare of the Montgomery citizens boycotting the buses, or the salt made by the followers of Gandhi to replace the salt they refused to buy from colonialist England, or the tea thrown into Boston Harbor by the American revolutionaries. Or they may be local agricultural or artisanal products that can generate income, improve the diet and income of families and create the confidence and collective power that can move political change. Or they may be the local natural resources – like the olive oil – such as



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petroleum, medicinal plants, waterfalls – that can be controlled by local rather than foreign interests and provide the basis for self-sustaining economies.

God is giving the people a strategy to turn what they have into what they need. The work of AJWS echoes this strategy as it supports grassroots leaders to build communities that mobilize their collective wisdom and resources to solve the challenges facing them.

The work of AJWS also strengthens our Jewish lives, as it leads us to broaden the framework for thinking about Jewish meaning in our world today. Learning about the lives, the stories and the challenges of communities in the developing world through the lens of Torah, we are inspired to act. The Israelites wandering in the desert, building their sacred space, became a community in a dynamic relationship with God. And we, as their descendants, also in an evolving and dynamic relationship with God, receive their gift of light. The text tells us that we too, today, are commanded to bring new oil for the eternal light. We must ask, what is the oil that God has given us? How do we refine it? How do we return it to God? We will only find out by building communities that enable us to transcend our individual selves and inspire and enable us to pursue justice, freedom and shalom?

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Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Ki Tisa 5766

March 18, 2006

Stop for a moment, and look around the room. What do you see that's made by hand – a basket, perhaps, or a drawing on the refrigerator? Do you know the names of the people who made any of the objects in your room? Now think back to the last few meals you ate. How much of the food you consumed recently was cooked with you in mind, and how much was manufactured?

If you are like most Americans today, your home and your life are filled with “anonymous articles,” items produced, packaged, and promoted by people you'll never meet. Although we don't know the names of those who worked to make the items that surround us, they are not nameless. They have independent existences and, somewhere on the planet, the people who assembled our shoes and our computer monitors are working, eating, walking, talking, and dreaming. When we contemplate the goods and services that touched both our hands and theirs, we become aware of the connection between us. We come to understand that the lives of all human beings are intertwined through invisible lines of connection.

In our Torah portion this week, Ki Tisa, we meet Bezalel ben Uri, builder of the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Pact, and all the Tent's accoutrements. He is endowed by God with “divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge of every craft” – including metallurgy, stone masonry, and carpentry. He's even a fashion designer! We also meet Oholiab ben Ahisamach, Bezalel's helper. Together, they create the Hebrews' sacred spaces, utensils, and vestments, and are honored by having their names recorded in our sacred text. Because the two are named, we know that the holy objects were not produced in heaven, but are the work of human hands. They are not anonymous.

In our own lives, it is exceptionally easy to slip into the anonymity of commerce. Yet this robs us of the warmth and power of human contact. And it turns the people whose labor we enjoy into drones whose existences mean next to nothing to us. They become as interchangeable as the widgets they manufacture.

Bezalel and Oholiab come to instruct against this. We have an obligation to get to know the people whose labor we enjoy.

We honor Bezalel when we buy locally. We honor Bezalel when we learn about the lives of the people who work in the factories that supply our wants and needs, and when we purchase clothing that isn't manufactured in sweatshops. We honor Bezalel when we know the labor practices of the companies from which we buy, and when we make things ourselves instead of buying them. It is not hard to locate local Farmers' Markets,¹ learn about industrial working conditions,² find “No Sweat” apparel,³ and consider corporate labor policies on the web. We honor Bezalel when we take the time to research, and act on what we learn.

¹ For a national listing of Farmers Markets, visit <http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/map.htm>.

² For example, <http://www.workersrights.org/> and <http://www.maquilasolidarity.org/>.

³ www.newdream.org, for example, links to several online catalogues of sweatshop-free and organic clothing, and also provides information about conscious consumption. Both SweatShop Watch and the Inter Religious Task Force on



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Two summers ago, I spent a few weeks with the archaeological dig on Tel Megiddo⁴ in Israel. I remember sitting, filthy dirty and overtired, in a deep pit, having just lifted the base of a large pot from the earth. It was strong and utilitarian, yet perfectly smooth and graceful. Although I could not possibly know who had made it, or eaten from it, or carried it, I felt a powerful connection to those people. I tried to imagine their handmade world and how they lived in it. Had they ever contemplated the distant future? A remnant of their lives had touched mine; such is the power of things made by hand. The lines of connection run across time, too.

Look around your room once more. Imagine the person who ran the looms that made your carpet, or the curtains hanging in your window. Think about the people who cut the cloth and stitched your shirt. The threads you are wearing run around the globe, all the way to their homes and factories. Their labor and our comfort cannot be severed from each other. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote.⁵ The lines of connection are invisible, but powerfully strong.

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Central America provide information about labor practices in sweatshop factories and offer links to a range of online stores featuring sweatshop free clothing. www.sweatshopwatch.org/sweatfree and www.irtfeleveland.org/Sweat%20Labor.htm.

⁴ For more information about the dig at Megiddo, visit <http://megiddo.tau.ac.il/index.html>.

⁵ Letter from A Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963.

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Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudai 5766

March 25, 2006

Although Shabbat is considered the most precious of the Divine gifts, few of its laws are actually mentioned in the Torah.¹ We're told it's forbidden to plow or gather wood, and in Parshat Vayakhel, God forbids lighting fires on Shabbat.² Based on these brief Biblical references, the rabbis of the Talmud developed the fullness of Shabbat, an exquisite pearl which is seen as a small taste of Paradise.³ But while nearly all Jewish thinkers have agreed that Shabbat is of utmost importance, there have been many suggestions as to what Shabbat is actually for. Some say it is a day for enjoyment and delight, others say it is for Torah study. Some think that Shabbat is the ultimate unifying agent of the Jewish people, while others say it is a cathedral in time.⁴

But one of the most remarkable conceptions of Shabbat is alluded to by Rashi, the most important of the medieval commentators. Commenting on a lengthy Talmudic debate concerning which behaviors are and are not allowed on Shabbat, Rashi seems to reject the widespread assumption that building is completely forbidden on Shabbat. Instead, he explains that it's only forbidden to *improve* something, but it is perfectly fine to restore things which have fallen into disrepair.⁵ In modern terms, Rashi implies that if your rotted bathroom collapses and sends your bathtub crashing through to your living room, you can legitimately spend Shabbat restoring the situation to what it was before things went wrong. What you *can't* do is decide to spend Shabbat replacing your perfectly functional bathtub with a Jacuzzi.

Using the detail-driven language of the Rabbis, Rashi distinguishes between *needs*, which can be accommodated within the holiness of Shabbat, and *wants*, which cannot. If our house has collapsed, we can fix it because we *need* a place to live; if everything is working fine, we can't improve it, even if we really *want* a Jacuzzi. We can satiate our hunger within the sanctity of Shabbat, but not our appetite.

This distinction has far reaching implications. How do we distinguish between our needs and our desires? According to some modern thinkers, the line between needs and wants in America is about \$30,000 a year.⁶ This amount can cover our needs, but money spent beyond that is really spent to meet our *wants*. But when a year's tuition at many universities is more than that, it's hard to feel that the line separating hunger from appetite is so low.⁷

¹ *Shabbat* 10b

² See Exodus 20:10; Exodus 35:2 and Deuteronomy 5:14

³ *Midrash Tehilim* 92:1

⁴ Ahad Ha-Am, the foremost Cultural Zionist said "*It is no exaggeration to believe that more than the Jews have preserved Shabbat, Shabbat has preserved the Jews*" [Ahad Ha-Am, "Shabbat v'Tziyonut (Hebrew)," in *Al Parashat Drachim*, ed. Yirmiyahu Frenkel (Tel Aviv: DVIR Publishing, 1978)]. Alternately, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that while some cultures have built cathedrals in space, Judaism has built Shabbat, a cathedral in time [Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Noonday Press, 2001)].

⁵ It is not completely clear how Rashi is coming to his interpretation; what's presented here is actually Tosafot's understanding of Rashi, which is presented here as Rashi's understanding for reasons of clarity. See Rashi's comments at Shabbat 73b and Tosafot at 94a, *Rabbi Shimeon Poter*.

⁶ See Peter Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 5 1999, and Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁷ Harlan Levy, "The Price of Admission Is on the Rise," *The New York Times*, September 26 2004.



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But the distinction takes on a different cast in the context of the world as a whole. While investing in higher education seems reasonable, if expensive, much of the rest of our material culture can seem grotesque when seen through a poor person's eyes. After returning from travels in the developing world, many people see the "basic" accoutrements of their lives as luxuries they indulge in while the rest of the world struggles to subsist.

One resolution of this tension is to denigrate the material world we occupy, and feel remorseful every time we turn on the iPod, get a latte at Starbucks, or go to the movies. But when we feel attacked by our own guilt, we often psychologically defend ourselves by venerating the simple lives of the "saintly poor" or saying that our "average" Western lives only seem decadent when taken out of context.

Another resolution is the one hinted at by Rashi – to distinguish between hunger and appetite. For Rashi, the distinction between need and desire can only be determined in context, and it is inexorably tied to one's specific reality. The house which one repairs, even on Shabbat, might be a luxury to others, but to its inhabitant, it is a necessity. Rashi is recapitulating the idea that *tzedakah* should be given to restore people to the lifestyle they enjoyed before misfortune befell them, but not beyond that.⁸ Even for those who live lives of relative comfort, distinctions can be drawn between need and desire.

However, even once we have made the distinction between hunger and appetite, many of us don't have the strength or the desire to abandon our luxuries. Indeed, the prospect of fundamentally changing our lives to ones of ascetic simplicity so as to donate the bulk of our resources can be so overwhelming that we shrink from the very idea of personal responsibility for global justice. In this context, the traditional Jewish teaching that we donate ten percent of our income to justice can seem very moderate and attractive⁹.

The most difficult challenge can be recognizing that not every desirable thing is needed and that our desires are not the only factors that need to be considered when spending our money. It can be threatening to acknowledge that we are actually committing an injustice if we do not recognize that at least some of the tremendous resources we control are more justly given to meet other's *needs* than our own *desires*. Justice demands that we distinguish between our needs and our desires, and if we cannot, we will not be able to access the sanctity of Shabbat. We will only see the false sanctity of our own possessions.

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About the author

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⁸ *Yoreh Deah* 250:1

⁹ *Yoreh Deah* 249:1



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Vayikra 5766

April 1, 2006

In case you believed that our leaders are infallible, the Torah teaches us otherwise.

Tucked in among the sacrificial rules of Parshat Vayikra are instructions for what to do when those whom we trust to lead us do not live up to the faith we put in them. We're told that "if the whole community of Israel has erred and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation... the congregation shall offer a bull as a sin offering."¹ Rashi, the most important of the medieval Torah scholars, believes this verse describes a situation in which communal leadership has failed and thereby led the community to sin. But while in some situations, the Torah demands that transgressors be expelled from the community, in situations like these, the reparations are done through sacrifice, and the community stays together, with the leadership intact.

In Pirke Avot, an early rabbinic compilation of ethical teaching, Hillel alludes to the tension inherent in being part of a community and following its leaders while remaining aware of the ways in which leaders and communities can fail. He teaches that we are not to "withdraw from the community and not to trust [only] in ourselves till the day of our death" and then immediately says that "in a place where there are no people of integrity, you should struggle to be a person of integrity."² Hillel doesn't want us to leave our community and seek another one with better leaders or find a lone mountaintop and set up our own community. Rather, from within our community with its failing leaders, we are to struggle to be people of integrity.

But if we follow Hillel's first piece of advice, and don't trust ourselves, how are we to "struggle to be people of integrity"? If we suspect our leaders are not guiding us to the path of what is right and good, but do not trust ourselves, how will we find justice?

Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman, one of the forefathers of contemporary orthodoxy, addressed the problem of how to trust our own judgment while remaining part of a community whose leadership might be imperfect, or even failing. He noted that at one point, the Jewish tradition commands us to obey proper leaders³ even if they say right is left while at another point, it commands us to unswervingly obey God.⁴ Since we know that our leaders are capable of error and even sin, we can easily find ourselves in a situation where our obligation to the Divine demands that we separate from the community and disobey authorized communal leadership. The challenge is to accurately discern when we are in one of those moments.

¹ Vayikra 4:13-14

² Avot 2:4-5

³ Deut 17:11 and even more strongly at ספרי דברים ק"ז

⁴ Deut 28:14. David Zvi Hoffman, *The Highest Court*, trans. Paul Forchheimer (New York: Maurosho Publications, 1977). page 111-112 as cited in Gordon Tucker, "A Principled Defense of the Current Structure and Status of the CJLS," in *Responsa: 1991-2000*, ed. David Fine (New York: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1993).



Parshat Hashavuah

When is defying communal leadership an act of integrity, and when is it foolishly and wrongly separating from the community?

Rabbi Hoffman first addresses someone who is not knowledgeable about the issues which the leaders are addressing. Such a person, he writes, can fully fulfill his obligations if he follows proper leaders without any study or investigation on his own. In a complicated world we often choose to follow trustworthy leaders, just as we follow the advice of a doctor who might understand the workings of our bodies better than we do.

However, someone who *has* studied and considered an issue in great depth, and is prepared to say on her own authority that the leaders are wrong, is *obligated* to follow her own judgment and obey the will of God as she, and not her leaders understand it. Rabbi Hoffman writes, “the Torah has been given as an inheritance directly to the whole community of Jacob, and no authority of the [court] is able to delete even one word from the Torah.” While Rabbi Hoffman is discussing a situation in which a local rabbi differs from a centralized rabbinic court, the principle stands for all who stand in relationship to authority: If we are uneducated about the topic being discussed, then we might be well-served to preserve communal cohesion and obey proper authorities. However, if we are knowledgeable about the matter at hand, we are *obligated* to resist authority when it is wrong. It is possible to extend R. Hoffman’s argument and say that if we suspect the authorities are acting improperly, it is on us to educate ourselves before we dissent, just as a patient will research his own disease before disagreeing with his doctor. On complicated matters, there is no virtue in uneducated dissent.

Today, our leaders are facilitating our sin by letting our country stand by while a genocide is being perpetrated in the Darfur region of Sudan. Since 2003, more than 400,000 people have been killed there. Have your teachers, your rabbi, your President told you about this? Have they told you how you should respond? Or have they, with their silence, enabled you to stand by while the death toll creeps higher?

You, as an individual, might not be guilty of the sins our nation has committed. But all of us are surely responsible for our nation’s failure to act during a genocide which we know about and which we know to be evil. No person and no nation can claim integrity when they stand by in the face of genocide. When the evil is so clear that everyone can understand it, everyone is responsible.

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Parshat Hashavuah

Shabbat HaGadol 5766

April 8, 2006

Passion for social justice is embedded deep within the collective Jewish psyche. This defining quality lies at the very core of our national character, born in us before we were birthed as a people, in the experience of slavery that was the crucible for our emergence as a nation. Our founding experience of enslavement and oppression is essential to who we are, central to the consciousness that has animated our collective journey through time and directed our work in the world. Our celebration of Pesach is, above all, a celebration of this fundamental aspect of our national identity.

Some argue that the Jewish people has become unhealthily absorbed in its own history of persecution, leading us to think of ourselves as victims, for whom defending ourselves against danger is the primary value. The Torah allows for no such interpretation of our experience of slavery in Egypt. The Torah reminds us repeatedly that we were slaves in the land of Egypt, using this memory as the rationale for many elements of both ritual and civil law, and no mitzvah in the Torah is repeated more times than the command to attend to the stranger, the orphan and the widow. The message could not be more clear: we are a people born in the depths of slavery, precisely so that empathy for the downtrodden would be indelibly written into our national psyche.

Of all the ways in which the Torah articulates this quality, for me the most evocative is the verse, “You know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9) This verse, placed in the context of commandments ensuring a fair and equitable judicial system, applies to every dimension of our lives as Jews. We were strangers – first in Egypt and then, God knows, in many other places and times. We have been on the receiving end of every imaginable form of persecution. We know the soul of the stranger – the suffering, the humiliation, the rage, the sense of betrayal that oppressed people feel. That knowledge can never become incidental to who we are, and can never justify our turning our backs on those on the margins of our society or of our world. We are commanded to use our own experience not only to protect ourselves from future suffering, but to do all in our power to defend others from such treatment.

Rabbi Nasan Tzvi Finkel (19th-20th Century Lithuania, also known as the Sabba of Slobodka) calls us to deepen our understanding of this familiar call to empathy for the oppressed. He teaches that it does not suffice for us to read this majestic verse only on the level of its simple meaning, commanding us to rigorously protect the stranger from oppression, based on our own experience of persecution. This Mussar master calls us deeper, connecting this verse with what is arguably the central mitzvah of the Torah, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) Rabbi Finkel implores us to take this mitzvah literally, insisting that we share in every joy and every sorrow of another human being as if it were our own. “No relationship of one person to another is complete without our feeling that we and the other are one, with no difference between us.”¹

¹ *Itturei Torah*, volume 3, p. 196.



Parshat Hashavuah

By this logic, it is not enough to see the people on the margins of our own community or to view news coverage of injustice around the world and “simply” remember that we, too, have known such adversity. Rather, we are commanded to feel the other’s suffering in the present, as keenly as if it were our own.

We may protest that this is impossibly burdensome, an instruction for saints or for people with unlimited time, resources and inner strength. And perhaps it is. But this, after all, is the very same logic that directs us not merely to reread the story of the Exodus from Egypt at our Sedarim, but to literally eat the bread of affliction and taste the bitter herb, physically re-enacting the journey from slavery to freedom. The story of the Exodus from Egypt is far more than an historical memory; it is the core of who we are as Jews.

To live out such a rigorous call to empathy is indeed a high aspiration, and, as we know, we cannot complete the task. But as Jews, we can do no differently but to hold this radical level of passion for justice – animated by our own deepest self-understanding – as our truest work in the world. May our work soon bear fruit in a world longing for liberation.

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Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Shmini April 22, 2006

In this week's parshah, after painstaking preparations, the tabernacle is finally ready. Aaron offers the first series of ritual sacrifices, and all is well; God accepts them. By the next chapter, though, things are not so good. We are told that Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron's sons, go to offer sacrifices:

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before God, which God had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before God, and devoured them, and they died before God.

Their deaths are narrated to us tersely; there's no explanation of what has just happened. To me, and to various commentators, this is problematic. What was Nadab and Abihu's sin, after all? Weren't they just trying to bring an offering before God? They may not have been commanded to do so, but shouldn't it be even more commendable to bring offerings voluntarily? Why should they be killed for their attempt at worship?

The key hint in the story, according to most commentators, is the term "strange fire" – they bring something totally inappropriate into a new and holy place. Rather than relying on God's fire – that is, the final touch of what is intended to create holiness – they bring their own fire without consulting or planning with anyone else.

For those who work in international development, this story resonates on several levels. In the same way that Nadab and Abihu were moved by their devotion to offer their own fire, we are moved, by our emotion and conviction and by the suffering in the developing world, to respond with action. This is commendable and valuable. But our good intentions are not sufficient – we have to consider what is appropriate to the contexts in which we work as well.

AJWS' focus on grassroots development is based on this principle. Rather than imposing our own ideas about development and how it should be done, we follow the visions, knowledge and hard work of community organizers who know their communities' problems intimately and hence have a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of what solutions will work. As people affected by the same problems they seek to change, they generate ideas and methods that might not occur to us in our offices in New York and Washington.

All too often, international organizations use their significant resources to impose ideas that fall into the category of "strange fire" – they threaten to exacerbate the situation they are intending to improve. For example, in a rice-farming area in the Philippines, an international organization decided that the best way to improve families' living situations was to encourage the planting of higher-yielding rice, so that families would have more of a surplus to sell. The new variety of rice, however, had shorter stems, and the international organization wasn't aware that weaving baskets and mats from rice stems was a traditional craft



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in the area. With the new variety of rice, this was not possible, and families lost the income from not having those crafts. Overall, this represented a greater loss than what was gained from the increased yield of rice.¹

Anyone from that community would have known that rice-stem crafts were a crucial part of the economy and would have taken that into account when introducing new varieties of rice. The “strange fire” of the new crop may have seemed like a great idea, and was brought with the best of intentions, but because it wasn’t appropriate for the place, it didn’t work.

But when project ideas come from the people whose lives they will affect, the results can be transformative for all involved. In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, one of our project partners, Rural Organisation for Social Education (ROSE) addresses the interlinked problems of poor health and poverty using precisely that approach. Through ROSE’s programs, poor rural women cultivate herbs to make traditional herbal home medicines. This both improves community health and generates a profit for the women and their families.

ROSE works within a structure of Self-Help Groups organically created by the women from the community. The suggestion for this particular herbal medicine project came directly from a Self-Help Group meeting, and the women have been involved in all aspects of the project’s planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation.

One project participant, Mrs. A. Madhavi, a 32-year-old farm laborer and mother of two, spoke about the how the project’s rootedness in the community is crucial to its success:

The community spends a lot of their income in health care and found the difficulties and cost of medicines gone up. Now they started to realize the importance of herbals and raise the same for us. It is very important as the community has the medicines around its village rather than depending on outsiders and corporate pharmaceutical companies.

None of us expect holy fire from God to consume misguided development advisors. That kind of direct reward and punishment is rarely how we experience the world, and that vision doesn’t make intuitive sense to many of us. However, precisely because of that, we need to take particular care that the offerings we bring are appropriate. No matter how good our intentions are, and how important technical assistance can be, the transformative vision that will ultimately change the lives of poor people in the developing world will come directly from them.

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¹ Peace Corps, “Basic Knowledge on WID, GAD, and PACA,” Section 3, page 20, available on website.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Tazria-Metzora April 29, 2006

It's hard to know what to do with the wretched of the earth.

Sometimes, the strongest impulse is to draw them close and tend their wounds. We, the comfortable, see those who endure hunger and illness around the world and want to right every wrong they have suffered. Sometimes, we really do want to throw open our doors and invite all who are hungry to come and eat.

Other times, however, we don't. We are overwhelmed by the suffering which the unlucky endure. We see the homeless and the sick and we want to keep our distance from the painful disorder of their lives. Their suffering reminds us that our comfortable lives could be overturned in a moment and we prefer to keep that disturbing idea at arm's length.

The rabbis of the Talmud however, recognize these contradictory impulses of compassion and disgust when they consider the leper who must be put outside the camp, certainly one of the most wretched characters of the Torah. The parshah of Tazria-Metzora is full of characters who suffer from frightful skin diseases, and suggests all manner of incantations and salves and offerings to rehabilitate these unfortunate characters, but ultimately the vilest of them have to leave society and live outside, where they don't pose a threat to everyone else.

The Torah demands that an incorrigible leper must publicly declare his wretchedness by running through the community screaming "Impure!! Impure!!"¹ The rabbis of the Talmud ask why someone so afflicted should have to compound his shame and make a spectacle of himself.² Rabbi Abahu, perhaps speaking for all of us who make sure our car doors are locked when we travel through a bad neighborhood, says it is so we, the healthy, can protect ourselves from him. Seemingly cursed, this man threatens our healthy and ordered lives and needs to be kept at a distance.

But the Talmud, which knows that life's complex questions are not easily answered, contains another voice as well. Another teacher, speaking for those of us who want to cry when we see a person sleeping on the street, says the leper announces his shame so the public will pray for him. This teacher hears the cry of the wretched and his first impulse is to respond to him in the best way he knows how. The miserable aren't to be feared, but loved.

The Talmud, which tries to capture the fluid and contradictory nature of human existence, lets both teachings endure. Both compassion and fear stand, intermingled in our response to the miserable.

But while the rabbis of the Talmud acknowledge our contradictory responses to suffering, the Haftarah³ subtly announces its preference. This week's Haftarah opens with four lepers who have been put outside the city of Samaria, which is besieged to the point that some of its inhabitants have turned to cannibalism to survive. With no access to food or medicine, the lepers are left to wonder if their death will come from hunger, illness or violence when suddenly one asks the other, "Why should we sit here, waiting to die? Let's go over to the besieging Aramean army who will either give us scraps of food or kill us on the spot. We have nothing to lose."

¹ Leviticus 13:45

² *Moed Katan 5a*

³ The haftarah is the prophetic text read after the Torah reading on Shabbat morning. The haftarah for Tazria-Metzora is II Kings 7:20.



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The four lepers set off and discover that unexpectedly, the besieging Aramean soldiers have abandoned their camp, leaving their stockpiles and supplies for anyone who might want them. The lepers feast like kings and then, shockingly, they suppress any impulse toward vengeance against the city that left them to die, and return to inform the Samaritans that the siege is over.

In the span of a day, the lepers are transformed from the weak to the powerful. In the morning, they had nothing, not even a reason to live, and by nightfall, they had the knowledge to save the once-mighty city of Samaria. No doubt, they also had two competing impulses, one to reach out to those who suffered, and one to abandon the city and let its inhabitants reap what they had sown. But while they may have felt both impulses, they acted on the better one.

Perhaps the lepers knew that when fortunes change, so do responsibilities. When they were abandoned they didn't owe anything to anyone, certainly not the city which was willing to let them die in order to try and save itself. But when the lepers left the Aramean camp, they left laden with food and wine and stockpiles of silver and gold. In this new condition of plenty, their responsibilities changed. The inhabitants of Samaria were dying and the lepers would have committed a great evil if they had not informed the city that its deliverance was at hand.⁴

It could be that the Talmud offers two possibilities for responding to suffering for the two different sets of circumstances embodied in the Haftarah – one response which was legitimate for the city's residents, who were operating from a posture of fear and self-preservation, and another for the lepers who unexpectedly found themselves in comfortable circumstances.

Like the lepers, many Jews came to America fleeing frightful circumstances – pogroms, the Holocaust, totalitarian governments in Eastern Europe. Many of us came with practically nothing and were rightly focused on our own survival. But now, in a turnaround scarcely less dramatic than the lepers' reversal of fortune, we, as a community, are very comfortable.

The lepers who returned to Samaria recognized that when their fortunes changed, so did their responsibilities. So have ours. There was a time when it was legitimate for Jews to be focused only on their own survival. But now that we are considerably more comfortable, we have responsibilities we didn't when we were the lepers of the world. The desperately poor people of the developing world are suffering in ways that many Jews once did but mercifully few do any more, particularly in America. The lepers, who recognized how their responsibilities changed when they became wealthy, challenge those of us who are at least as comfortable as they were to be at least as righteous.

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⁴ II Kings 6:29



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Kedoshim – Acharei Mot May 6, 2006

In *Parshat Kedoshim*,¹ the Holy One instructs Moses to say to the entire Israelite community: “You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” The instruction is addressed in the plural, not to Moses and not to the elite, but to the entire community. This implies that holiness is a project for the group, not the individual. The command is not for an isolated ascetic on a remote desert island nor is it written for a lone Jew in suburbia; it is written as a blueprint for an entire community – the priests, the common folk, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers.

After that first overarching assertion: “All of you – be holy!!” the Torah’s laws come fast and furious, each offering another disparate instruction – revere your parents, reprove your kinsman, leave the surplus of your crops for the poor and the stranger. And the list continues – don’t steal, don’t lie or take false oaths, don’t mock the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. Do this, but don’t do that. Do not profit from the blood of your neighbor and love your neighbor as yourself.

Taken as a whole, these instructions say very clearly: “Be in community!” More than any given dictate, the core of Parshat Kedoshim, and perhaps the entire Torah, is the idea that the Jewish people are to form a holy society and recognize the obligations each one has to the other. Although it is very important, the community’s role is not simply to provide for the material needs of the indigent, but to build a social structure which includes everyone.

This holy society is not a federation of individuals who have come together because it’s an efficient way to work for their various goals; rather, being part of a community, whether rich or poor, is part of what it is to be holy.

In a lengthy discussion about the persistence of poverty, the Talmudic Rabbi Akiba said **now** is the time not only to feed the poor, but to break your bread with them, and bring them into your house.² There are many significant, important ways to care for the poor, including donations for their material well-being and advocacy for their political well-being. Indeed, those important activities bring us closer to the religious ideal of *justice*. But “All of you – be holy!!” demands not only that we provide for the material well-being of the needy and seek justice, but that we take the poor and the suffering into our hearts and into our homes in order to pursue *holiness*.

Parshat Kedoshim tells us that holiness is not, and cannot be an individual activity. None of us can operate without regard for the weakest members of our community and think we are doing right and good in the eyes of God. A religious community that is not concerned with the widow, the orphan and the stranger is neither religious nor a community. It is a group of loners playacting as Jews.

¹ Which is read together this year with Parshat Acharei Mot.

² *Baba Batra 10a*



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Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Emor May 13, 2006

More than almost any other parshah in the Torah, Parshat Emor is packed densely with commandments.¹

Coming fast and furious, there are commandments which define the requirements for the ancient priests, commandments which define the purity of the animal sacrifices in the Temple and commandments which establish the holiday calendar. But tucked among the 63 commandments of Parshat Emor, there is one which the rabbinic tradition elevated to an unusually high status. The Torah says that a Jew “must leave the edges of his field and the gleanings of his harvest for the poor and the stranger,” and the Talmudic tradition decided that this commandment in particular is an indispensable part of the process for conversion to Judaism.²

Traditionally, there are two components to the ritual through which a Gentile transforms into a Jew – some address the body and others, belief and practice. With regard to the body, the rabbinic tradition demands that all converts immerse in the mikva, the ritual equivalent of the womb of a Jewish woman,³ and that men get circumcised in the name of conversion. In these respects, the ritual of conversion replicates the bodily aspects of the covenant between God and Abraham.⁴

In addition to these physical changes, the rabbis of the Talmud mandated changes in the thoughts and behaviors of a convert as well. They said that the rabbi⁵ supervising the conversion should inform the convert of the persecution which Jews often face and should choose a few simple and a few complicated commandments to teach the convert. Very specifically, however, the rabbi is also *required* to teach the convert about the commandment that a Jew must leave the edges of his field and the gleanings of his harvest for the poor and the stranger.

It seems strange that while the rabbis thought that any of the other myriad commandments of the Torah would do in order to explain Jewish law generally, this one *had* to be mentioned. Why not require that the convert be informed of Shabbat, prayer, kashrut or any of the other mainstays of Jewish life?

Perhaps the rabbis were subtly suggesting that while Shabbat, prayer, kashrut are incredibly important things which Jews *do*, concern for how the poor and the stranger are going to eat tonight is part of what a Jew *is*.

¹ Parshat Emor has 63 of the 613 mitzvot (24 positive and 39 negative). Only Ki Tetze (with 74) has more.

² Leviticus 23:22; see also *Yevamot* 47a; *Mishna Torah, Isurei Bia* 14:2, *Tur, Yoreh Deah* 268:2. Thanks to Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky of Congregation Ansche Chesed, NY for highlighting the importance of this tradition.

³ Moshe Adler, quoted Elyse Goldstein, *Revisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2001), page 125

⁴ Genesis 17:9-14

⁵ Conversion, like most Jewish ritual, does not need to be supervised by a rabbi, per se, but simply by an appropriately knowledgeable practicing Jew. However, nearly all conversions today are supervised by rabbis.



Parshat Hashavuah

From the time of the Torah to today, there have been Jews who have been very interested in observing the ritual mitzvot and Jews who have been less interested – but without a doubt, they have all been Jews. But compassion is seen as such an indispensable part of what it is to be Jewish that a Jew who is cruel is suspected of not being Jewish at all.

The rabbis of the Talmud relate a story in which King David declares that mercy, modesty and benevolence were the characteristics which define who could possibly be considered part of the Jewish people.⁶ It is as if King David is saying “Of course people who don’t believe in God, or don’t care about Shabbat, or who aren’t interested in kashrut can be Jewish in essence. But can there be Jews who are cruel and indifferent to suffering? No – that’s impossible.” Hundreds of years later, this story was codified as part of Jewish law, establishing that, for communal purposes, someone who is hateful or cruel is suspected of not really being a Jew.⁷

It seems the Talmudic tradition wants this particular verse from Parshat Emor to be the one explicit piece of the conversion ceremony in order to make it clear that to be a Jew is to be constantly aware of the responsibility to look out for the hungry of the world. Abraham, the paradigmatic Jew was confronted with three strangers, whom he very well might have thought were non-Jewish idolaters,⁸ and nevertheless, he ran to offer them water, food and shelter. Those of us who imagine ourselves as the heirs of Abraham, either through blood or through conversion, inherit this difficult tradition of unending concern for the well-being of other people.⁹

In establishing the instruction to leave the corners of the field for hungry and the stranger, it is as if the rabbis were saying that there are many aspects to being Jewish, but only one of them is essential – to be perpetually turned outward in a posture of compassion, to be perpetually concerned about others.

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⁶ *Yevamot* 79a; see also the teaching at *Beitza* 32b – Whoever is not compassionate with people is certainly not a descendant of our forefather Abraham.

⁷ *Mishna Torah, Isurei Bia* 19:17

⁸ Rashi at Genesis 18:4; see also *Baba Metzia* 86b

⁹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), page 99; also Rambam’s epistle to Ovadia the Proselyte Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House Publishing, 1976), page 476.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Behar-Behukotai May 20, 2006

Liberty Throughout the Land

Does slavery exist in America? This was the provocative subtitle of a 2003 report in *The New Yorker* magazine about the conditions faced by tomato pickers in Immokalee, Florida. According to the article:

Immokalee's tomato pickers are paid as little as forty cents per bucket. A filled bucket weighs thirty-two pounds. To earn fifty dollars a day, an Immokalee picker must harvest two tons of tomatoes, or 125 buckets.

...workers are usually employed by labor contractors who can exert near-absolute control over their workers' lives; besides handling the payroll and deducting taxes, they are frequently the sole source of their workers' food and housing which...they provide for a fee.

Workers are reluctant to discuss abusive situations with employers for fear of losing their jobs...Workers often borrow money from loan sharks back home at interest rates as high as twenty-five percent a month. If they are deported the loan is foreclosed. Frequently, homes are put up as collateral, so deportation can be a calamity for the entire family.

All these factors combine to create in South Florida what a justice department official calls "ground zero for modern slavery."

This week's Torah portion, *Behar-Bebukotai*, discusses agricultural slavery and how to prevent it from reaching across generations. The *parshah* presents its vision of an economy that periodically corrects the imbalances created by normal market functioning. The mechanism for this correction is the 50-year sabbatical cycle, marked by periodic breaks in economic activity and a country-wide redistribution of land during the jubilee year at the end of the cycle.

Redistribution of land!? But doesn't that usually take a revolution to implement? Indeed, the jubilee year is one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas.

According to Leviticus 25:10, every fifty years we are commanded to *proclaim release throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof* (words many of us know from the inscription on the Liberty Bell). What is the nature of this release? *Each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family's land.* (Leviticus 25:11)

In other words, the Torah recognizes that over the course of years, some families may fall into debt and be forced to sell their ancestral land to creditors. In this way, some people will become dispossessed tenant farmers and some will become wealthy land owners. To place a limit on this kind of social stratification and to ensure that no one becomes permanently dispossessed, the Torah provides a fresh start every fifty years. Debts are cancelled (see Deuteronomy 15:1) and land is redistributed back to its original owners.

A description of how debt can trap a family in poverty is provided in Leviticus 25:25-55, which Biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom calls "three stages of destitution."

First (verses 25-28), an Israelite farmer is forced to sell part of his land to cover his debt. If he cannot buy back his land, a relative can do so for him, and that relative retains ownership of the land until the jubilee year.



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Second, if crops fail on the remaining portion of the farmer's land, he may need to take out a loan to buy seed for the next year's crop. If the farmer defaults on the loan, he loses the remaining portion of the land retains the right to work it as a tenant farmer. If his crops succeed, he may earn enough to buy back the land (verses 35-38).

Finally, if the farmer cannot pay off the loan, he loses all claims to the land and he and his family become the ancient-day equivalent of migrant workers, dependent on the landowner for wages and survival (verses 39-40).

Were it not for the jubilee year, this process would easily lead to the permanent impoverishment of large numbers of people. The jubilee rescinds debt, restores land, and makes it possible for families to regain the means for economic self sufficiency.

What relevance does this ancient concept have for us today? For one thing, it teaches that there needs to be a viable path out of debt for individuals and societies whose economic progress is stuck in what Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs calls "the poverty trap." Sachs argues that ending extreme poverty in the world is possible if we can help the poorest of the poor get even one foot onto the ladder of economic development, but notes that development is often blocked by huge debt burdens that prevent the kind of savings and capital investments required for economic sustainability and growth.

This week's Torah portion provides a mechanism to break the cycle of poverty and dispossession through the jubilee year. However, since at least the time of the destruction of the Temple, the jubilee system has not been observed. In its absence, we might ask ourselves what we can do to fulfill the spirit of this teaching. Helping societies and individuals get out from behind the burden of debt that forecloses the possibility of economic advancement is one step, and protecting workers from exploitation as they struggle to support themselves is another.

On this last point, preventing exploitation of workers is often difficult and risky, but there is good reason to persist in these efforts. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it often really works. For example, last year the *New York Times* reported that the workers of Immokalee waged a successful four-year campaign to convince Taco Bell, one of the main buyers of tomatoes from the area, to pay a penny more per pound for Florida tomatoes and to adopt a code of conduct that would allow Taco Bell to sever ties to suppliers who commit abuses against farm workers. They are now setting their sites on forging agreements with other buyers as well.

For these workers, whose fate is described nearly word for word by this week's Torah portion, and for the millions like them throughout the world, Jewish values require the modern-day equivalent of the jubilee year: a way to prevent dispossession and destitution from becoming the inheritance of families and countries over generations. Our work to keep the door to economic development open for all people proclaims liberty not only for the poor, but - because our fates are surely bound up with theirs - throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof.

About this commentary

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Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Bamidbar May 27, 2006

The Tanach counts Israelites three separate times in order to send them to war.¹ First, almost a year after leaving Egypt, Moses counts more than 600,000 Israelite men of fighting age at Mount Sinai by having each of them submit half a shekel.² Second, at the beginning of this week's parshah, Bamidbar, Moses counts the number of Israelites capable of bearing arms as they prepare to conquer the land of Israel.³ In fact the English name for *Sefer BaMidbar*, the Book of Numbers, comes from this enumeration of warriors. Finally, generations later in Jewish history, King David has his chief-of-staff spend nearly a year counting 1.3 million soldiers who are "ready to draw the sword."⁴ Here, the Tanach seems to count people in order to know how many of those people are ready to go and kill.

But it is not only for war that the Torah contemplates the number of Israelites. God promises Abraham progeny as numerous as the stars in the sky⁵ and God promises Jacob that his children will be as numerous as the dust of the earth.⁶ Impossibly large numbers to be sure, but numbers nonetheless. Here, the Torah seems to count people in order to know how many of them will continue the covenant of Abraham.

We can count people for good, or we can count them for ill, but ultimately, the Jewish tradition thinks we shouldn't count people at all. Based on the verse, "the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea which may not be measured nor counted,"⁷ Rabbi Eleazar, one of the rabbis of the Talmud, taught that the counting of Jews prohibited by Biblical law. That reticence was absorbed into Jewish law⁸ and continues in the practice in many synagogues of counting the number of people present for prayer services indirectly. In some places, people are counted negatively – not one, not two, etc.; in others, they are counted using each word in a ten-word biblical verse as a number.⁹

Why has counting people become forbidden? One explanation is that counting is a preparation for war, but clearly, this is not always the case. We count for prayer, we count our children and our children's children. One rabbinic tale even imagines God counting the Jewish people one by one with tremendous love, the way a rich man might count the number of fine pearls on a string.¹⁰ In fact, in the same Talmudic discussion in which counting is prohibited, Rabbi Isaac says explicitly that it is forbidden to count Jews even for commanded ritual acts.¹¹

Whether we count people for good or for ill, we reduce people to their function when we count them. Six hundred thousand soldiers. Ten people for prayer. Twenty thousand people at a rally. We lose sight of them as individuals

¹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Census

² The census takes place at Exodus 38:26; Benno Jacob suggests that perhaps the half shekel was anticipatory atonement for the blood they would shed on the battlefield. See the *JPS Etz Hayim Torah Commentary* to Exodus 30:12.

³ Numbers 26:2, 51 records 601,730 adult males

⁴ II Samuel 24:9

⁵ Genesis 15:5

⁶ Genesis 28:14

⁷ Hosea 2:1, which is part of the haftara usually read with Parashat BaMidbar

⁸ Mishnah Torah, Sefer Avodah, Hilchot Temidim Umussafim 4:4

⁹ One common verse for this is Psalm 28:9: Save Your people and bless your heritage, tend them and elevate them forever

¹⁰ Bamidbar Rabba 4:2

¹¹ *Yoma* 22b



and tie their worth to some external goal, be it as hateful as war or as laudable as prayer. But when it comes to human beings, Jewish tradition argues that **one** is the largest possible number. There are 600,000 *individual* soldiers, each his own parents, his own loves and hopes. Each with his own favorite flavor of ice cream, and to see each only as one among many is to reduce his human form to his soldierly function.

Each human is valuable simply for being a Divine creation and to count him or her is to suggest that human value stems from the purpose for which it is being counted. The Torah demonstrates this concern in the way the text itself counts its inhabitants. When the sons of Jacob are counted, the Torah begins by saying that he had twelve sons.¹² These twelve sons *do* serve a purpose – to continue the line of their father and fulfill God’s blessing to him. But then, the text goes on to list the sons each by name and by the name of his mother, showing that each is more than just this purpose. Although the sons are counted, they are listed by name and thereby their individuality and their humanity are maintained:

Reuben
Simeon
Levi
Judah
Issachar
Zebulun
Joseph
Benjamin
Dan
Naphtali
Gad
Asher

Each is important not only for his contributions towards some external goal, but simply for his existence.

It is too easy, when listing numbers of people, be they ten, one thousand, or six million, to forget each of the people that makes up that number. An infinitely patient God may count infinite people seeing each and every one, even though they will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, but we cannot. From the vantage point of infinity, God can look at the stars and see each one individually, in all its unique beauty. We humans see only the night sky.

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¹² Genesis 35:22-26



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Naso
June 10, 2006

Many people who live a “religious life,” or aspire to one, pray that God will appear to them in a cacophonous moment of revelation. Every morning in many synagogues, particularly in Israel, Jews hope for a glimpse of the divine presence when they dramatically reenact the Priestly Blessing from *Parshat Naso*:

May GOD bless you, and keep you;
May GOD make God’s face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you;
May GOD lift up God’s face towards you, and give you peace.¹

What is it that we hunger for when we pray to see the face of God?

Perhaps we pray for a moment of God’s unending love which will ameliorate all of the pain and suffering inherent in human life. God will appear as a gentle glow, in whose light we can bask and be okay.

Or perhaps we hope to know God as intimately as we know a friend, or even to believe that such intimacy is possible. For what is a face, really? More than an amalgam of features, it is the vehicle of interaction, the vessel through which we connect to other people. If God were to turn the Divine face toward us, then suddenly God, who so often feels distant or even nonexistent, would be as immanent as a lover.

Perhaps when we pray to see the face of God, we hope for the certain knowledge that would follow if God lifted God’s face toward us. Suddenly, we would know that God is real, just as Abraham knew. We would know that God is real in the way that Moses, who spoke to God face to face, knew. We would see the face of God and then revelation and faith would cease being mysteries and would instead become concrete realities in our lives.

Perhaps revelation isn’t what happens when God decides to reveal the Divine face to us as a supernal visage, filling the sky with thunder and lightning. Perhaps God’s face is lurking in the face of every human being, and revelation is the moment when we recognize the flesh and bone faces we see walking down the street as traces of the Divine.

As the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas put it, “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face.”²

We pray to see God’s face, but perhaps the face has already been revealed, set atop every human body, and we would be better served to pray for the ability to see it. We are like Joseph’s brothers, who hope for a miracle to save them from famine. They look for signs and miracles, manna falling from heaven, but they

¹ Numbers 6:24-26.

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969), page 78.



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cannot recognize their brother sitting in front of them³. We too are hoping for a revelation with trumpets, a revelation to which we can proudly stand up and declare our presence, as Abraham did when God called to him. We spend tremendous time enmeshed in our painful hopes for something transcendent, something extra-ordinary, when it might be that the revelation of the divine is only possible in the face of God which is sitting across from us on the cross-town bus.

But perhaps like those early morning Jews, who cover their heads with their prayer shawls, fearful of the force of God's blessing, we too are hesitant to actually encounter the immanence of God. We are hesitant because we know that nobody can see the face of God and live, at least not as they have been. When we recognize the face of another human being as the face of God, we encounter something outside of ourselves which disrupts our own self-obsession. Could Moses have possibly heard the call of God from the burning bush and said, "Thanks for calling, but I'm doing something more important now. I look forward to getting back to you as soon as possible"? Divinity demands a response, certainly no less when it appears on a person than when it appears on a bush.

When we recognize that face on the bus as the face of God, we cannot go on living as we have.

The Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;

But only he who sees takes off his shoes
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries
And daub their natural faces unaware.⁴

One cannot see the face of God and continue with business as usual anymore than one can hear a lion roar and not be afraid. When we perceive God's face in nature, perhaps the response is to fall on our faces. When we perceive God in the pages of a book, then perhaps the response should be with words. But when the face of God appears in the faces of other people, then our response should take place in the syntax of ethics.

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³ Genesis 42:8

⁴ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005), page 134.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Beha'alo-techa

June 17, 2006

What exactly is it that we Jews are trying to do?

Against considerable odds, the Jewish people have survived for thousands of years, and sometimes it seems that's all we're trying to do – hold on in order to pass the venerable baton of tradition from one generation to the next. The task of the living seems to be ensuring that the chain of heritage isn't broken on our watch.

But while continuity is certainly part of what Jews are trying to do with our Judaism, it is not the only thing or even the most important thing.

The Torah tells the story of the Jewish people's halting and uncertain progress towards a goal. The Israelites didn't leave Egypt and travel through the desert for the sake of traveling or because the journey was the destination. They traveled through the desert because they were trying to get somewhere. Having been liberated from generations of deprivation and suffering, the ragtag collection of former slaves set off for the Promised Land, a place flowing with milk and honey, so they could taste some of the comfort and luxury their masters had.¹ They didn't leave Egypt to change the way humanity conceived of the Divine or to take part in some grand project of national redemption. The Israelites left Egypt for one very pragmatic reason – after more than 400 years of servitude, they knew it was better to be free than to be enslaved.

Their desire for something better than a life of making bricks out of straw comes through in the complaints which characterize *Parshat Beha'alo-techa*. Even as God sends manna from the sky, the Israelites complain that back in the Egyptian good old days, they had access to fish and other delicacies. They aren't interested in miracles and wonders from the Divine, because they didn't sign up for the “religious quest workshop.” The Israelites signed up to have a better life than the one they left behind and they have no qualms about raising their voices if they aren't getting it.

For some Israelites, however, the journey through the desert wasn't just a search for a more comfortable life. It was a prophetic journey of aspiration, a journey to create a different kind of people. Just as the Holy Blessed One promised a land of milk and honey, the Divine also promised that Israel had the *potential* to become a nation of priests and a holy people.² The promise of holiness was conditional – *if* you “obey me faithfully and keep my covenant,” *then* you will become a nation of priests. The desert for them was not a long highway upon which to travel to the Promised Land, but a crucible in which slaves could be transformed into priests.

In the desert, though, the complaining Israelites risked forgetting their prophetic aspirations as they pursued pragmatic concerns. In the course of *Parshat Beha'alo-techa*, God grants temporary powers of prophesy to seventy elders of Israel in order to keep the nation focused on its aspirations precisely at the moment when the practical concerns of feeding the complaining Israelites seem so overwhelming. The seventy elders prophesy for a while, and then stop, with two exceptions: Eldad and Medad, who continue to offer prophesy.³ Joshua, the Israelite political

¹ Exodus 19:6

² Exodus 19:6, see also Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). Chapter III for more on these ideas generally.

³ Numbers 11:24-30



leader, asks Moses to restrain them, but Moses lets them continue, saying only that he wishes that all of God's people could be prophets.

Joshua, the practical man-at-arms, speaks out of concern for the vision of milk and honey. He is the leader who ensures that the people's physical needs are met, even to the degree that one of the many things for which the Jewish tradition remembers him is ensuring that Israel traveled easily on the roads.⁴ Joshua is a religious leader who saw the religious demand for justice in the realm of practical politics, much in the same way as Gandhi, who said during a meeting about India's independence, "It is good enough to talk of God whilst we are sitting here after a nice breakfast and looking forward to a nicer luncheon, but how am I to talk of God to the millions who have to go without two meals a day? To them God can only appear as bread and butter."⁵

Joshua is not concerned or impressed with the prophetic aspiration of Eldad and Medad because like many of us, he is suspicious of any talk of spirituality and prophesy when hungry people are waiting to be fed. From his perspective, the Israelites should be focused on building stable, reliable institutions, and unregulated prophesy threatens to destabilize society and interfere with meeting the very real material needs of people. In Joshua's eyes, it seems that unless Eldad and Medad were prophesying about how to bring God to the people in the form of bread and butter, they were offering nonsense, not prophesy.

But where Joshua had sight, Moses had vision. Food and material sustenance for the Israelites is essential, but it is not the *goal*. Where Joshua envisioned a stable and just society, Moses envisioned that and more – a *holy* society. Moses envisioned a society in which God's justice was manifest so that all people could be prophets. In a just society, where people's basic needs are met, people can pursue holiness, those joyful moments when closeness to the divine Presence seems not only possible, but immanent. Where Joshua was worried about the risk of focusing on the transcendental before addressing the practical, Moses was worried about just the opposite, about losing the transcendental in the grinding focus on the practical.

As it was for Joshua and Moses, working in tandem, so it is for us. Pursuing justice without holiness is politics, not religion, and the pursuit of holiness without justice is a sham. Joshua teaches us to build a just society in which everyone has a taste of milk and honey, and we are right to be suspicious of religious visions which are disinterested in real material needs. But Joshua alone can only take us so far. On the one hand, in a world where people suffer and starve, nothing worthy of being called religion can leap-frog the practical to focus on the holy. On the other hand, nothing focused *only* on justice is worthy to be called religion, because justice is the necessary precondition for holiness, not its replacement.

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⁴ Eruvin 22b

⁵ Young India, personal diary entry, 15 October 1931



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Sh'lach

June 24, 2006

In this week's parshah, Sh'lach, Moshe sends twelve men to investigate the land of Canaan. Moshe charges them, "Go and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they dwell in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land."¹

After forty days, they return with enormous fruit and an enormous sense of foreboding. They report, "The country we traveled and scouted is one that devours its settlers! ... All the men that we saw are men of great size, and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them." And the people of Israel believe them; they break into loud cries, lamenting that it would have been better to die in Egypt than to confront this ominous situation.

But two of the scouts, Caleb and Joshua, have a very different story to tell. They say, "The land we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land." They go on to express their faith that God will aid them. And yet the people of Israel react by threatening to pelt them with stones.

Clearly, we have a major case of reporting bias on our hands here. Though all twelve of the spies saw the same land, ate the same fruit, and observed the same occupants, their reports could not have been more different. Their pre-existing perspectives, personal political agendas, and feelings at that particular moment affected what they perceived and how they reported it.

We also see a very clear case of the way in which the information transmitters, be they political leaders or the media, have the power to shape future events. When the children of Israel choose to believe the ten men and their vision of danger and foreboding, they seal their own fate – because of their reaction, they are doomed to wander in the desert for forty years. Indeed, only Moshe's pleading keeps them from being eliminated by God entirely.

Conventional media tell us about the developing world, but the messages they transmit are shaped by a variety of sources, from U.S. policy to corporate interests to editors' personal predispositions. Thousands of stories are never deemed worthy of reporting at all – the degree to which a story is judged "newsworthy" often has more to do with publications' perceptions of readers' interests rather than the events themselves. Mainstream media gave us extensive coverage of the December 2004 tsunami, at least for a few months, because it hit areas where European tourists wielded video cameras. No such coverage was available when, just 10 months later, an earthquake hit Pakistan, killing 75,000 people and leaving 3.5 million homeless and vulnerable to disease and hunger at the start of the harsh winter months.² Mainstream media tell us that people are dying of AIDS in Africa, but only rarely mention that that their deaths could be averted if they had access to generic drugs, access which multinational pharmaceutical companies and U.S. policy do not support.³ Mainstream media sometimes tell us about the conflict in Sudan, but they largely ignore the conflict that has been raging for eighteen years in northern Uganda.⁴

¹ Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, Numbers/Bamidbar chapter 13, verses 17- 20

² <http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=53793&SelectRegion=Asia>. See also <http://www.theirc.org/where/Pakistan-Quake-Aiding-The-Survi.html>.

³ See <http://www.healthgap.org/camp/trade.html>, as well as <http://www.accessmed-msf.org/>

⁴ See <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2005/top10.html> for more info on both of these conflicts.



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Beyond the unreported disasters, though, mainstream media also rarely tell us of causes for hope, the work that people in the developing world are doing every day to improve their own lives and the lives of their communities. Every day in Guatemala, rural health promoters trained by our grantee Rxiin Tnamet are going door-to-door, talking to their neighbors about disease prevention and good prenatal care. In Maharashtra, India, fifty tribal activists affiliated with our new grantee Lok Dhara are conducting interviews and community assessments to figure out how best to serve the needs of nomadic tribal groups which lack state services and face discrimination. In Liberia, the Committee For Peace and Development Advocacy, another AJWS grantee, provides training in carpentry, soap-making, and tailoring for former child soldiers who have recently withdrawn or escaped from the ongoing violent conflict.

But all too often, we don't hear these stories. We hear the same ones over and over again, about formidable giants and dangers that cannot be overcome. We do not hear that the land is fertile for change; we do not hear of the depth and the richness of the work done by community activists. And so, too often, we lament, we break into loud cries, and we give up hope.

Certainly the situation is dire. I do not want to minimize the very real obstacles faced by people in the developing world. But I would like to highlight the stories of hope and struggle and resistance as well. Every time I travel to the developing world and meet with our grantees, I am impressed again and again at their work, and that is what gives me the energy and excitement to continue with my own.

The media is powerful – it shapes the world for good and for ill. Since we can only act on the basis of what we know, it is crucial that we seek out information from many sources. AJWS grantees have Web sites, and their countries have newspapers, often available on the internet. An abundance of blogs carry alternate news and describe world issues on a personal level; the Independent Media Center network (also known as Indymedia)⁵ features Web sites and reporters all around the world. When researching any issue, seek out a broad range of sources of information and check them against each other; look for media directly from the relevant countries and parties; follow references and links from already trusted sources; ask friends with expertise on these issues. When I seek out information, instead of searching for the chimera of “objectivity,” I seek to understand the particular subjectivities an author brings to a piece. Each of us also has the power to, as the IMC puts it, “be the media”: by writing articles for alternate papers, by writing letters to mainstream newspapers, and by spreading information in many forms to our friends and communities.

We, as North Americans, have powerful voices and great comparative ability to shape the course of world events. For the sake of the actions we are taking, and the actions we are not yet taking, we owe it to the rest of the world to seek out various sources of media, non-mainstream, non-corporate, and grassroots. Otherwise, we run the risk of seeing only a tiny fraction of the picture, and in the process, keeping ourselves and others from any sort of promised land.

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⁵ www.indymedia.org; scroll down and click on the links on the left sidebar for various country pages.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Korach

July 1, 2006

Despite their many flaws, the Founding Fathers are generally considered heroes by most Americans. They are justly honored for producing what remains a cornerstone of contemporary human rights:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Just as the leaders of the American Revolution imagined a political future different from the one in which they lived, so too does Korach, the leader of one of the many rebellions in *Parshat Korach*. Chafing under Moses' leadership, Korach gathers 250 prominent Israelites and says that Moses and the *kohanim* have done too much to raise themselves above the other members of the community, all of whom are holy. Just as the American Revolutionaries denied the right of England's King George III to rule them, so too do Korach and his followers deny the right of Moses to lead them.

But while the American Revolution as embodied in the Declaration of Independence has endured to celebrate its 230th anniversary this coming Tuesday, Korach's rebellion was over before it began. The *parshah* opens with Korach and his fellows rising up against Moses, and before the *parshah* ends, they have been swallowed up into the bowels of the earth.

Why should two seemingly similar egalitarian revolutions meet such different ends? Why should American Jews curse one set of rebels, and then three days later celebrate the other?

Given the tremendous differences in the historical circumstances of the two rebellions, it's remarkable that their claims are as similar as they are. But these claims are not identical. Thomas Jefferson says that all men are **created equal**, while Korach claims that the community **is holy**. Jefferson speaks of our origins relative to each other; Korach speaks of where we currently stand in an absolute sense.

Jefferson articulates humanity's common origin and says that the role of government is to make that equality manifest. The aspirations which fueled the American Revolution continue to drive America at its finest moments, when it honestly and justly seeks more liberty for more people

The Revolutionary War ended with the Treaty of Paris, but the Revolution kept going. It ran through the Emancipation Proclamation which freed almost all American slaves in 1863 and through 1920 when the 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave American women the right to vote. The Revolution ran through the 1965 Voting Rights Act which finally harnessed the power of federal law to enshrine the "self-evident" right of African Americans to vote.

In contrast to the aspirational character of the American Revolution, Korach simply announces that the people are, at the moment he is speaking, holy. With a voice of complacent nihilism, Korach essentially claims that there is nowhere left to go – the people are already holy. While Thomas Jefferson and his



contemporaries spoke hopefully of who Americans *might be*, Korach spoke erroneously about who the Israelites *were*.

But the people weren't holy – not at that point, anyway. God told the Israelites that they had the *potential* to become a nation of priests and a holy people, but they weren't there yet. The promise of holiness was conditional – *if* you keep my covenant, *then* you will be a holy people.¹

Korach's sin was his complacency – it was as if he said, “We don't need any leaders because we don't have any goals toward which we can be led.” He had no vision of the Jewish people being greater than they were – only of him being their leader.²

His complacency is one of the most egregious heresies a Jew can commit. For Korach to say that Jews were holy was to say they had no higher level to reach. For a people who were born slaves and were now free, complacent acceptance of the world as it is was apostasy of the worst kind.

Although the dream of the Declaration of Independence is far from realized, the American Revolution – not only the Revolutionary War, but the ongoing revolutions which strive to make our society more egalitarian – aspires to bring us ever closer to a world in which the essential equality of all people is manifest and protected.

Korach's mistake wasn't in thinking that we were all equal, but that we are all holy. One who thinks she grasps holiness most certainly doesn't. One day, God willing, we will all merit to be called holy. But until then, holiness is a beacon, not a prize.

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¹ Exodus 19:6

² There is a great deal of uncertainty as to exactly why Korach rebelled. Some, like Michael Walzer, say that he was primarily a social and economic rebel. Other voices in the rabbinic tradition say he was expressing dissatisfaction with the restrictions of the *mitzvot*. Rashi, citing the Tanhuma, explains that Korach's primary concern was not substantive change, but his own glory. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp.111-112, the comments attributed to On's wife at Sanhedrin 109b and Rashi's comment at Numbers 16:1.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Chukat-Balak July 8, 2006

Like many people, Moses doesn't get the reward he's been working toward his whole life.

Venerated through the generations as God's faithful servant, Moses discovers in *Parshat Chukat Balak* that, because of his own actions, he will die before the Israelites enter the land of Israel.

The scene leading up to God's announcement of this punishment is seemingly innocuous. The Israelite people complain about the lack of water in the desert, and Moses turns to heaven for guidance. The Holy Blessed One tells Moses to take his staff in his hand and order a rock to give water. Moses takes his rod, strikes the rock twice and brings forth copious water. God then says, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."

Generations of Jewish commentators have offered their best guesses as to what, exactly, Moses did to warrant this incredibly severe punishment.

Some have suggested that his sin was to strike the rock *twice*, while he was told only to hit it *once*,¹ while others think the problem is that he struck the rock and didn't speak to the rock.²

Possibly the most audacious claim comes from Moses Mendelssohn, the father of the Jewish enlightenment, who wrote that Moses' sin was that when the people began to complain of thirst, he fled from answering them directly and went to Tent of Meeting to speak to God.³

A traditional religious mindset might assume that, far from being punished, Moses should be rewarded for this pious turn towards God in a moment of need. But Mendelssohn makes the radical claim that in an age when miracles are few and far between, turning to God at a moment of human need is a grave sin.

Yet many of us in need – the thirsty, the sick, the barren – hope that God will choose to intervene in the normal functioning of the world and miraculously rescue us from our ailments. But miracles are hard to come by. Most of the time, the God who might turn nature on its ear and create the reality we so desperately want seems painfully distant.

We know that the sea is unlikely to split tomorrow and that the hungry of the world are unlikely to wake up to pots full of manna. We know that those who are sick are unlikely to be miraculously cured. And yet at some level, we pray that God will somehow intervene to alleviate human suffering.

¹ Abravanel to BaMidbar 20:12

² Rashi to BaMidbar 20:12

³ Mendelssohn to BaMidbar 20:6, 12. See also Ibn Ezra to BaMidbar 20:6. Thanks to Dr. David Frankel for teaching me about this source.



The human insistence on reaching out to God is a testimony to the resilience of human hope and the faith that in the past, God did intervene in human history and might yet do so again. But inherent in that turn to God is a flight from responsibility.

After all, if the omnipotent Creator of the Universe might yet reach down from the heavens and transform sickness into health as completely as God once turned darkness into light, then perhaps we mere humans don't have to get involved. Perhaps we can keep doing what we were doing and not be distracted by all those people in need

But Mendelssohn is pointing us toward a truth we already know - hoping that God will solve human problems isn't simply ineffective, it's wrong. It's wrong because it functionally abandons those in need.

The people of Israel cried out to Moses, and he turned away. Perhaps there was some yet undiscovered way for him to stay with the people and address their needs with the resources he had on hand.

We also often have greater resources than we acknowledge. Even if it seems the only relief can come from a miracle, many of the natural and man-made disasters from which humanity suffers can be addressed by human action.

No supernatural miracles were needed to change the course of the Holocaust, and none are needed to change the course of the genocide in Darfur. Nothing more than human empathy, willpower, competence, and the reallocation of resources and priorities, are needed to alleviate famine or to mitigate the effect that natural disasters have on the poor.⁴

God did send water to the thirsty Israelites, yet according to Mendelssohn, Moses was punished terribly for asking for it. Perhaps the Torah wants to make it clear that God's mercy on the Israelites is the exceptional response to irresponsible leadership, not the rule.

The rule is that we humans can respond to the plight of the suffering, or we cannot. We can hear the cries of those in need in our homes, in our cities and in our world, or we can ignore them. But we cannot honestly think that someone else will respond if we don't.

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⁴ {Sen, 2001 #4} Chapters 1 & 3.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Pinchas July 15, 2006

Torah is life. It courses with an elusive energy that can sustain the reader, but it is also fed by the reader who brings a wealth of personal experience and insight to the text. The Torah is a powerful piece of literature but it becomes something more when it is read in light of our struggles, victories, hopes, and dreams. Reading Torah is a two-way street. It is an ever-flowing spring, constantly providing insights and inspiration for our lives, but also revealing more of its wisdom the more knowledge and experience we bring to it.

One of the benefits of reading Torah through the lens of social justice is that we not only find texts that support and strengthen the connection between Judaism and ethics, we also discover new ways of understanding these very old words. An example is found in this week's *parshah*, *Pinchas*. In Numbers 26:52-56, we find the procedure for how the land is to be divided up among the tribes when they enter the Land of Israel. But the passage contains a contradiction, long noted by commentators. The text first tells us that the land will be apportioned according to population; that is, a tribe with more people will get more land while a tribe with fewer people will get less land. Then the text goes on to inform us that the territory will be divided by lot, meaning each tribe will be given a random section of land, regardless of whether it is appropriate for the number of people in the tribe. These two methods are contradictory. If one allocates the land randomly, without reference to any of the characteristics of the tribe, how can one give more land to a larger tribe and less to a smaller one? And if the apportionment is done based on population size, what need is there for a lottery? Various medieval commentators have offered suggestions, but the best resolution to this problem is the one provided by the modern scholar Jacob Milgrom, who bases his interpretation on Abravanel, the 15th century Spanish commentator.¹ The lottery is used to determine the geographic location of each tribe within the Land of Israel while the distribution based on population is used to decide how much land each tribe should get. Each tribe should get enough land to sustain its population, but no tribe should be able to use its size to acquire a preferential location.

The Torah is a product of an agrarian society, and the text reflects these origins. The story of the entrance of the Israelites into the Land of Israel is a utopian tale. The people have a fresh start in their new land and the Torah sets out to create a society based on fairness and equity. No tribe should be forced to dwell on a territory that cannot sustain its people, but at the same time no tribe should be allowed to seize a prized area because of its strength in numbers. This is not the only instance in which the Torah dictates a set of rules meant to ensure an equitable and sustainable agricultural society. The best example is the laws of *shemittah*, the sabbatical year, when the land must lie fallow and debts must be released. These examples of biblical social justice seem distant to those of us who live an urban or suburban lifestyle, but they are highly relevant to the rural poor who live in the Global South today. Land and land reform are vital issues for subsistence farmers all over the world. The Torah's utopian land distribution instructions resonate with modern-day small farmers who struggle against the kind of entrenched power that the Torah sought to avoid. Unlike today, when wealthy corporations and families are able to seize control of most of the money, land, and power, the Torah instituted legislation meant to create an egalitarian society where a group, class, or individual could not dominate.

¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 480-482.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Pinchas provokes us to think about how land is distributed in our world. It is noteworthy how the text uses the present and the past to determine the best course for the future. “Each [tribe] is to be assigned its share according to its enrollment,”² that is according to the census that was just completed. But at the same time “the allotment shall be made according to the listings of their ancestral tribes”³ which came into being generations before. In order to move forward, the nation must assess the present realities while taking note of cherished traditions. A society that is enslaved to the past cannot grow, but one that concerns itself only with immediate problems has no foundation. We must certainly listen to those who live on the land, understand their history and their customs, but we must also face the realities of a constantly changing world. The great challenge, raised by the Bible millennia ago, is to find a path that integrates both the past and the present in a vision of the world perfected.

While the Torah can teach us much about how to approach life, sometimes the stories of the people we meet can spark profound insight into the ancient text. These individual and communal narratives deepen Torah by making it personal. In January I participated in the AJWS Rabbinical School Delegation to El Salvador. Most of our time was spent in the town of Ciudad Romero, a community with a narrative that resonates with the story of the exodus from Egypt and the entering of the Land of Israel. Most members of the community were forced to flee their town during the bloody civil war in El Salvador in the 1980’s. They literally lived in the wilderness in Panama for years until they were able to return to their country. While they were not able to go back to the part of El Salvador from which they came, they were allowed to settle in Ciudad Romero as a part of the land reform that was central to the peace accords ending the civil war. Today, using sustainable agriculture, they live on land that can support them. Unlike in the past, when a small number of families controlled the land in the area and the peasants were farm hands and tenant farmers with no independence, the villagers are able to grow crops to feed their families. While they are not a tribe and were not given the land of their ancestors, they were nonetheless able to settle as a group in one area. Their sense of community and solidarity has sustained them through difficult times, has made them strong, and has helped them to succeed. The community is an example of how modern land reform can work and how the wisdom of the Torah can transcend time and distance.

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² Num. 26:54

³ Num. 26:55



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Mattot-Massei July 22, 2006

There is a fascinating symmetry to this week's double portion Mattot-Massei, which both begins and ends by focusing on women. At the beginning of Mattot we read about the circumstances in which a woman's own vows, specifically her religious promises to God, may be ratified or annulled according to the will of her father (if she is unmarried) or according to the will of her husband (if she is married). To the woman who is divorced or widowed, the text speaks in no uncertain terms: any vows she makes "shall stand against her." In other words, the woman who makes a vow while in the control of a father or husband has no autonomy to make her own decisions; the woman who makes a vow without the "protection" of male authority makes commitments at her own peril.

The women we find at the end of Massei, the daughters of Zelophehad, also find themselves in a marginalized position. We have met these women before: in parshat Pinchas God decided in their favor when they vocally argued that in the absence of sons, daughters should have the right to inherit. But the ruling in Massei in effect changes all of this. To ensure that their land remains in the possession of their tribe, the daughters of Zelophehad – whose voices are never heard in the parshah – are required to marry only within their father's own tribe. While women are able to inherit land, this ruling renders it an inheritance in name only. And that is not all: the "ability" to inherit is something that controls them, rather than something over which they have control.

As I read these chapters in Mattot-Massei, I couldn't help thinking of some of the powerful women I had the opportunity to interact with last year in Cambodia. While there are multiple ways of choosing to read any text, I found myself imagining what the women I encountered might have thought if they were to hear or read the words pertaining to women in Mattot-Massei simply as they are written: without commentary, without historical or religious contextualization and without alternative interpretations.

My guess is that none of them would be particularly surprised to learn about the precarious position of women in other cultures and traditions. Yet my experiences with them also lead me to think that they would be far more interested in discovering how other women have managed to overcome challenges and oppression, in order to take control of their own lives.

Take Mart Prang, for example. She is a 44-year-old woman from Leangng Dai village, in northern Cambodia. We met outside of her home to discuss her involvement in an anti-domestic violence project organized by AJWS project partner, Banteay Srei.

Mart Prang told me that prior to Banteay Srei beginning work in her village, women were both verbally and physically abused by their husbands; men spent money on alcohol and karaoke while their families went hungry; husbands often accused wives who dressed nicely of looking for new husbands (while contrary to Cambodian law some men in the village had more than one wife). She also talked about how her own life had improved after so many people – women, men and the local police – were educated about preventing violence, and how villages were now cooperating in



responding to cases of violence. In Mart Prang's own words: "Women are no longer alone in solving this problem in their families."

After some time, Mart Prang (who in addition to her anti-domestic violence work also sells groceries, raises 12 pigs, works in the rice fields, takes care of two children and, as a result of Banteay Srei's project, now serves as a liaison to the local government) turned to me and through our translator said: "But now gangs are a much bigger problem for us. Can you tell me how you prevent gang violence in your country?" We talked about the facts and the implications of this violence and of life in Cambodia in general: there are limited employment opportunities, especially for young, unskilled men living in villages; HIV is on the rise; and just as in so many other countries around the world, for many Cambodians drugs and violence appear to be the only viable alternative.

As I talked to Mart Prang, it became clear to me that it is she, and so many women like her, to whom we are referring when we use the term "women's empowerment."

Being an "empowered" woman in the developing world isn't a nebulous concept. It means learning to read and write, making sure your children are able to go to school, and becoming an advisor to the local government. It means educating community members and encouraging the police to impose fines on perpetrators of domestic violence as a deterrent measure. It means doing all of this at the same time as working seven days a week to support a family, while constantly looking to the future and planning how to overcome the next challenge. It means having enough strength to break away from community mores and traditions, and to create new practices and systems.

Communities all over the world – not least the Jewish community – have a long way to go before women and men are truly empowered and equal. While the inheritance law in Massei fell out of use over two thousand years ago, as a result of the law against voluntary oaths in Mattot, women are traditionally still unable to serve as *eydim* (witnesses) in a Jewish court of law. Women are still dependent on their husbands for a *get* (a Jewish divorce), and the recent furor over the failure of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute to include women leaders in its conversations is another example of just how much work the Jewish community must do before it can claim anything close to real equality.

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Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Devarim
July 29, 2006

Devarim and Tisha B'Av: Standing at the brink of redemption, amidst the destruction

This week's *parshah* is the beginning of the book of *Devarim*: "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all the Israelites across the Jordan..."¹ We have wandered for 40 years in the wilderness waiting for this moment of final redemption. We are about to cross over into the Promised Land and Moshe stands before us recounting our journeys and travels, trials and tribulations.

He recalls the establishment of judges and a system of justice: "Hear between your brothers, and you shall judge rightly between a man and his brother or his sojourner. You shall recognize no face in judgment. You shall hear out the small person like the great one. You shall have no terror of any man, for judgment is God's."² This story that Moshe begins to review reminds us of where we have been and tells us where we are going. But it also tells us how we must live our daily lives; with justice for all, Jew and non-Jew, great and small. Perhaps these laws and instructions are a type of road map for getting to the Promised Land on the other side of the Jordan.

Yet, the message of this *parshah*, this moment of standing at the brink of redemption, is juxtaposed with the mourning of destruction and exile which will take place next week. *Devarim* is the *parshah* that is read every year before *Tisha b'Av*, the most serious day of communal mourning on the Jewish calendar, which begins this coming Wednesday evening. According to tradition, both the first and second Temples were destroyed on this day,³ making *Tisha b'Av* the anniversary of the beginning of exile.

The traditional mourning practices of *Tisha b'Av* mirror those of *shiva*, as if a family member has died. The entire community acts for a day as if we have lost a parent or a child. This is the level of sadness and anguish that these rituals are meant to invoke – the same pain as if you had lost your brother or sister.

And for what are we mourning? Among the descriptions of exile and destruction found in *Eicha*, or *Lamentations*, which we read on *Tisha b'Av*, is the following:

"Our heritage has passed to aliens,
Our homes to strangers.
We have become orphans, fatherless...
We are hotly pursued;
Exhausted, we are given no rest...
We get our bread at the peril of our lives,
Because of the sword of the wilderness.
Our skin glows like the oven,
With the fever of famine."⁴

¹ Deuteronomy 1.1

² Deuteronomy 1:16-17. Trans. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*

³ 586 BCE by the Babylonians and 70 CE by the Romans, as the story goes.

⁴ *Lamentations* 5:2-10



Parshat Hashavuah

While this text no longer describes the physical reality of most Jews in the world, it is a hauntingly accurate portrayal of what is happening to the people of Darfur, Sudan. 400,000 are already dead in Darfur, the number of orphans and fatherless unfathomable. According to the United Nations, 2.5 million people have now been exiled from their land, their “heritage has passed to aliens.” Despite a peace agreement signed in May, violence continues in Western Sudan,⁵ as those who remain are “hotly pursued...given no rest.” According to the World Food Programme, 3.5 million are now hungry, their “skin glows like the oven with the fever of famine.” And when many of those in exile in the refugee camps go out to collect firewood or water, they face the threat of violence from the *Janjaweed*. And so they are forced to attend to their basic needs at “the peril of their lives, because of the sword of the wilderness.”

While Jews are no longer living in physical exile, millions of other people are. And, with this type of tragedy, is not the entire world in spiritual exile as well? As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “God himself is not at home in the universe. He is not at home in a universe where His will is defied and where his kingship is denied. God is in exile; the world is corrupt. The universe itself is not at home.”⁶

Yet it does not have to be this way. We are also always standing at the Jordan about to cross over to the Promised Land. We have the power and the responsibility to stop the violence and the destruction, to prevent the famine, and create better, safer conditions for the refugees and the internally displaced people of Darfur. A UN led peace-keeping force can and must be sent to the region so that there will be “no terror of any person.”

There is a clash, a butting of heads, between the seemingly contradictory themes of the *parshah* and those of *Tisha b’Av*. In our *parshah* we are on the verge of redemption; our slavery and wandering have ended as we stand across the Jordan about to enter into the Promised Land. But Wednesday night and Thursday of next week on *Tisha b’Av*, we will mourn our exile and read about destruction from the book of *Eicha*.

Our challenge is to hold both of these extremes: to stand at the brink of redemption and stand simultaneously amidst the destruction. Our work in the world, the work of *tikkun olam*, is everything in between these two polar opposites.⁷ We must live in the tension between destruction and redemption, and work from the awareness of exile towards a time of liberation. We can do this by following Moshe’s lead: by reflecting on where we’ve been, where we are going, and the justice we will need to pursue for everyone, in order to get there.

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⁵“Darfur Violence Worse Since Peace Deal,” *Washington Times*. 7/6/06. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/06/AR20060706006662.html>

⁶ *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 258. Cited Samuel H. Dresner in *I asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Pg. 23.

⁷ Thanks to Rabbi Nancy Epstein for clarifying this concept.



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat V'Etchanan August 5, 2006

The following story is found in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a):

One day, Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi was out walking when he encountered Elijah the prophet. The rabbi was thrilled to meet Elijah, and he asked the prophet where he might find the Messiah. Elijah replied, “You will find him sitting amongst the suffering lepers at the gate of Rome.”

Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi set out on the long journey to Rome. When he arrived at the city gates, there was the Messiah, just as Elijah had predicted. The Rabbi ran up and asked him, “When will redemption come?” The Messiah replied, “Today –,” The rabbi, excited by the good news, hastily thanked him and hurried home in anticipation...

When the rabbi once again met Elijah, the prophet asked him, “So, how did your visit to the Messiah go? What did he say?” Disappointed, the Rabbi replied, “The Messiah told me that he would come today – but he still has not arrived.”

Elijah then told him, “Ah, but you did not hear the divine message correctly, for the Messiah told you that he would come ‘today – if you but heed His voice.’ (Ps. 95:7)”

This story is puzzling, in both its symbolism and its message. Why is the Messiah, who is supposed to herald our redemption, sitting in Rome, a city symbolic of our people’s exile? Moreover, why is the Messiah, a king, found sitting among the suffering, impoverished lepers? And, even with Elijah’s explanation, why is his message so unclear: if redemption will come speedily (if not immediately) once we hear the Divine voice, what is the voice telling us to do?

Let us begin by grappling with the categories of exile and redemption, categories which also appear in this week’s *parshah*, *V’etchanan*. In the *parshah*, the Israelites receive a warning about future exile:

I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess; you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out. The Eternal will scatter you among the peoples, and only a scant few of you shall be left... (Deut. 4:26-7)

In these verses, Moses foretells both a physical and spiritual exile. In the physical exile, the Israelites will be distant from the Land itself. In the spiritual exile, they will be distant from God; losing their connection with the Holy One, they will be forced to turn to “gods of wood and stone” (Deut. 4:28).

We, like our ancient ancestors, continue to grapple with exile and redemption, and not in a purely physical sense – we too experience spiritual exile. Perhaps we are seeking a sense of completeness, of wholeness. Perhaps we yearn to be at one with creation or to be closer with the Holy One. Our experience of spiritual exile manifests in our longing to bridge this distance.

According to our *parshah*, our ancestors suffered exile because they failed to heed God’s commandments. The Talmudic story builds upon this idea: Rabbi Yehoshua continued in exile because he did not heed the Voice of the Holy One. What was the message addressed to him? What is the voice that we are not heeding, that keeps us in exile, causing us to experience such distance from our Creator?



Parshat Hashavuah

Perhaps the voice we are to heed is expressed by the prophets. For instance, Zechariah (7:9-10) says, “Execute true justice; deal loyally and compassionately with one another. Do not defraud the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor; and do not plot evil against one another.”

Zechariah reminds us to execute true justice, which is measured by our treatment of the most vulnerable – the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor. Justice, says the prophet, is not only for the wealthy; rather, all human beings should live with dignity.

Yet justice is not evenly distributed. In December 2005 I traveled with rabbinical students to El Salvador for an AJWS work-study mission. As I walked through the town Ciudad Romero I realized just how much we, citizens of the United States, take for granted. As our group sat and studied at the headquarters of La Coordinadora, a local economic improvement organization, we played with little blonde-haired girls who ran through the model vegetable patches and sucked on the cucumbers. Only at the end of the trip did I learn that their beautiful blonde hair was a sign of malnutrition. Children tilled the soil wielding sharp hoes and pickaxes in their bare feet because they didn’t own shoes. I learned that while school is free, parents often cannot afford the paper and pencils necessary for their children to learn.

These sorts of scenes are repeated throughout the world. Children in impoverished countries die from preventable diseases such as malaria because they lack mosquito bed nets and basic medication. Families face starvation because the sweat of their brows does not guarantee adequate rainfall for their tiny fields. Towns and villages lack access to safe drinking water. HIV/AIDS devastates and impoverishes entire communities in Africa.

When I compare these images with my comfortable life back home – complete with wardrobe, spending money, automobile, college diploma, the occasional vacation – it makes me uncomfortable. Not only am I struck by the vast difference in wealth, health and education, but I am also struck by how easy it is to remain ignorant and indifferent.

Zechariah calls to us: are we dealing loyally and compassionately with our fellow human beings, or are we defrauding them, plotting (whether intentionally or not) evil against them by our selfishness, our ignorance, our inaction?

Indeed, it is no accident that Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi found the Messiah amongst the suffering, the ill, the poor gathered outside the city gates as the wealthy inside the walls continued to live their comfortable lives, for these injustices are the source of our exile. The Rabbi journeyed to Rome; he saw the injustices around him; but he did not stay long enough to heed the Divine Voice, to begin to mend the injustices he encountered. And we continue in our spiritual exile because we fail to hear and see and respond to the suffering of the oppressed, the suffering of the Messiah himself.

We, like our ancient ancestors, have been warned about exile. We too have heard the voice of prophets, the message of the Messiah. Are we prepared to heed the call?

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Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Eikev August 12, 2006

Judaism's framework of blessings on food can appear utterly bewildering.

According to the rabbis, everything edible falls into one of six categories, each with its own blessing, and it can be more than a little confusing to determine how to categorize any given piece of food. Bananas, for instance, seem to grow on trees, so you might assume that when you are eating a banana you would say, "Blessed are you, Adonai, Master of the Universe who creates fruits of the tree." Not so fast! Due to a quirk in how banana trees grow, the rabbis consider them part of the earth, and the proper blessing is, "Blessed are you, Adonai, Master of the Universe who creates fruits of the *earth*." Of course, if you were eating a banana with yogurt, you would have to decide whether the essence of that eating experience was the *banana*, in which case you'd make the *b'rachah* on "fruits of the earth" or the *yogurt*, in which case you would say, "Blessed are you, Adonai, Master of the Universe whose word brings everything into existence."¹

The intricate complexity of this system seems very far from what Moses tells the Israelites as they prepare to enter the land of Israel. In *Parshat Eikev*, he says "And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you."²

How simple and uncomplicated! Eat to the point of satisfaction and offer God blessings for the bounty we enjoy. That's it.

Indeed, within the rabbinic tradition, there is a strong voice that says that our blessings of gratitude need not be more complicated than "Blessed is the Merciful One, the master of this bread."³ According to Rav, one of the central authorities of the Talmud, one could fulfill the obligation to thank God with that simple blessing, which seems so congruent with Moses' teaching – eat, be satisfied and give blessings.⁴

Yet ultimately, the rabbinic tradition went in a different direction altogether, toward greater specificity and greater potential for confusion, and no explicit reason was ever given for this decision. The earliest layer of rabbinic history⁵ takes it as a given that there are different blessings for different foods, and the rest of the tradition follows from there.

In demanding that we offer God blessings specific to the gifts we have received, perhaps the rabbis were making a profound statement about how to navigate a complicated world. We can travel through the world, oblivious to the complexity all around us. Or we can stand in stupefied wonder at the systems which we inhabit, and feel incapable of understanding those systems, much less acting within them.

¹ Orech Hayyim 204:12; for more on blessings in general, see Klein, I. (1979). [A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice](#). New York, KTAV. [Chapter 3](#).

² Deuteronomy 8:10

³ Brachot 40b

⁴ Rav's commitment to an informal, even intimate form of blessing is congruent with his teaching at *Yerushalmi Brachot 9:1* where he insists that the standard blessing formula include "You" in addressing God because of Psalms 16:8 which reads "I have set the Lord before me always."

⁵ Mishna Brachot 6:1



Parshat Hashavuah

For those of us who aspire to live an ethically demanding Judaism, neither of these options is sufficient. The Jewish tradition demands that we understand the complex systems which we inhabit.

It really is difficult to remember that bananas grow from the earth, or to know how Congress works, or to understand the conditions under which our food is produced. To even come close requires serious attentiveness to, and engagement with, a world that defies complete comprehension. Yet the Rambam teaches that the root of human evil is lack of knowledge.⁶ We simply cannot do good in the world which God created if we don't understand how it works. Conversely, knowledge of the universe brings us closer to God and closer to just behavior.⁷ To be ignorant of the world, particularly when knowledge is available, is to reject the world which God created. Every day, most of us eat food grown by far away strangers and wear clothes whose origins are a mystery to us. It would be very hard to learn about the provenance of everything we put into or on our body and discern whether we are benefiting from the suffering of others. But as Jews, we are obligated to try to understand this complicated world, from how bananas grow to how banana growers are paid.

The rabbis mandated that we understand the differences in our food before we approach the Creator of all food with thanks. Even more than that, when we are faced with the complexity of the world, we should dive in. Just as this is true for the complexities of how plants grow, it is also true for the complexities of the economic system that brings our food to us – who grows it and who pays their wages; what kinds of businesses our financial investments support; how our tax money is spent; who makes the decisions which affect our lives; and on and on and on. God is in the details, and that is where we should be as well.

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⁶ Guide to the Perplexed, Chapter III:11

⁷ Guide to the Perplexed, Chapter I:59



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Re'eh August 19, 2006

For many Americans, the notion of intrusive religious law is unsettling, if not simply repugnant. After all, we expect law to interfere with our lives as little as possible – to provide us with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – and no more. We Americans are heirs to a tradition which recognizes that we are naturally in a *state of perfect freedom*, to make choices and dispose of our property as we see fit.¹

But as American *Jews*, we are heirs to another tradition as well, and Judaism has a significantly more expansive vision of what law is and might be. The ancient rabbis didn't concede that the law would be as unobtrusive as possible; rather, they imagined a holy society built on a foundation of justice, and saw the law as a necessary tool in realizing that vision. Yet the rabbis, who brought God's inchoate voice to earth in the form of Jewish law, were also well acquainted with its limitations.

For instance, Rabbi Yehuda, who compiled the Mishnah and is one of the central figures in the codification of Jewish law, ruled that if you know of two objects which are lost, one of your own and one belonging to someone else, you should search first for your own and then for the other one.² He derives this principle from this week's *parshah*, *Re'eh*, in which God promises the Jewish people that there shall be no needy people *in you*. The rabbis understand this to mean that you should first look after your own needs, and then look after the needs of others. Even if your parent or your teacher has lost something, the law allows you to search for your own lost object first. But, Rabbi Yehuda is quick to add, one who lives according to this self-centered world view will eventually become needy himself.

By ruling this way, Rabbi Yehuda acknowledged the formal, minimal requirements of *mishpat*, or **legal** justice. *Mishpat* is the aspect of Jewish law which resonates with law as we know it in the free societies of the West. It is law which permits people to pursue their own interests as long as they do not infringe on the rights and freedoms of others. It's the minimum, baseline legal framework that (at its best) treats every person equally, regardless of race, class, gender, or any other narrow identifier.

But Rabbi Yehuda recognizes that while *mishpat* is necessary, it is not sufficient for a holy society. While he knows that in the case of lost items, Jewish law allows people to pursue their own naked self-interest and look for their own items first, he warns against that sort of behavior, because the purpose of the law is not simply to create a law-abiding society which embodies *mishpat*, but a holy society which embodies both *mishpat* and *tzedek*, or **distributive** justice. For a society to be holy, simple *mishpat* isn't enough.

A society in which some feast while others starve might very well be a society of *mishpat*, but it is not a society of *tzedek*. To be the holy society which the Torah imagines, we need both. *Mishpat* allows that we each have to pursue our self-interests and it protects against the abuses that such pursuit can yield. But *tzedek* demands that we go further.

¹ See John Locke, Second Treatise of Government (1690)

² *Baba Metz'ia* 33a



Parshat Hashavuah

This discrepancy, between the formal minimal demands of the law and the thoroughly just society toward which it points, suffuses the Jewish textual tradition, particularly in *Parshat Re'eb*. As the Israelites are preparing to finally enter the land, Moses tells them that if they hear the voice of God and also keep all the instructions which are enjoined upon them, they will not know poverty.³ The vision is beautiful – a society in which there are no needy people – but the preconditions for reaching it are incredibly demanding. The people would not only need to adhere to the law, but they would need to hear the voice of God, describing the just society in which they might live, and bringing that society into the world. Fulfilling both these objectives is a monumental aspiration.

There is a role for *mishpat*, for formal laws which proscribe our behavior and allow us all to pursue our own ends, as long as they don't bother anyone else. But Moses demands that we follow the law and we *also* hear God's voice. Many of us choose to follow the laws of *mishpat*, but so rarely do we hear God's voice demanding *tzedek*. When our failure to hear God's voice becomes too dissonant, we fall back on a hollow formalism, following God's law, but deaf to God's voice. We hear the *halachah*, which tells us what to do, but we fail to see the vision which tells us why we do it. We mistake the servant for the master and hear the laws but remain deaf to God. We need to hear the formal demands of *mishpat*, but without hearing God's voice calling us towards *tzedek*, we are hearing nothing.

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³ Deuteronomy 15:2



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Shoftim August 26, 2006

Looking back on their oppression at the hands of the Egyptians, the newly liberated Israelites might have said, “Never again should *anyone* suffer slavery and oppression at the hands of another nation.” Alternately, they might have said, “Never again should *we* suffer slavery and oppression at the hands of another nation.”

The Torah was well aware of the risk that the Israelites, preparing to take control of the Land of Israel, would simply replicate the Egyptian society under which they suffered, shifting only their place in the hierarchy from the bottom to the top. Speaking almost directly to this concern, the Torah demands that the Israelite people see the Land of Israel not as a reward, but as a proving ground. Israel is not the end of the road for them, but the beginning of the difficult work of self-governance. The Land of Israel will be the place where the Jews pursue their fundamental goal – establishing a holy society, built on justice

In *Parshat Shoftim* alone, there are three major developments which work to mitigate the sense of complacent self-indulgence the Israelites might have felt upon reaching the Promised Land.

First is the injunction to appoint magistrates and officials who will govern with justice. The rabbis understood this to mean finding a balance between following the strict interpretation of the law and approaching each individual case with openness to its particular circumstances.¹ The pursuit of justice is a necessary condition under which the Israelites will thrive in the land. If they simply occupy it with brute force, they have achieved nothing, because the goal is to govern the Land of Israel with justice.

Beyond that, the Torah reiterates its ambition for a just society in the Land of Israel by defining the circumstances under which the Israelites might appoint a king. While the Torah acknowledges that the Israelites might wish to be like all other sovereign nations and have a king, it rejects this nationalistic mimicry, in which the goal is to have Jews in power, regardless of whether they replicate the evils of other nations. The Torah demands that the king of the Israelites be modest in his possessions and that he have a copy of the Torah with him at all times, from which he will neither deviate to the left nor to the right, so that his subservience to the law will be clear. The Torah recognizes that any petty dictator can establish power by force, but it is the rare leader than can unfailingly govern within the bounds of justice. In practical terms, the Torah’s vision of human leadership might seem naively idealistic, but it makes clear the critical importance of humility for leaders who aspire to righteousness.

Finally, *Parshat Shoftim* demands a strange ritual to attend to a *met mitzvah* – the body of a murder victim found slain in the open.² After sacrificing a heifer, the elders of the town nearest the corpse are to declare, “Our hands did not shed the blood of this man, nor did our eyes see it done.”³ Although there is no suspicion that the elders of the town actually perpetrated the murder, they still must ritually proclaim they are innocent of turning this person away. Had they looked the other way and left this man to the elements,

¹ Deuteronomy 16:18; *Sanhedrin* 32b

² Deuteronomy 21

³ Deuteronomy 21:7



they would be as guilty as if they had committed the act themselves.⁴ The leaders of the Land of Israel cannot simply avoid overt wrongdoing. They must also take responsibility for the unintended consequences of their actions. They are not leaders in order to govern well enough, but to do all that is necessary to create a just society.

Were it simply the Torah's goal that the Israelites be a free people in their land, there would be no need for these superogatory demands. The Israelite people could simply inhabit the land and govern as they see fit. But for the Torah, the goal of the Jewish people taking control of the Land of Israel was never simply to be free, but to prove they could live within the demands of justice. Anything less would be a failure.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some historical instances in which victims later become perpetrators? What do you think causes this? Aside from establishing laws like those in *Parshat Shoftim*, what are some ways to mitigate it?
- In the case of the *met mitzvah*, the Torah suggests that crimes of commission – actively harming someone – and crimes of omission – failing to protect someone – are in some ways equivalent. What do you think are the qualitative differences, if any, between these kinds of crimes?

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⁴ *Sotah* 38b, 45b



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Ki Teitzei September 2, 2006

Parshat Ki Teitzei offers one of the first instances of building code in human history – the precursor to restrictions on asbestos insulation and circuit breaker requirements. At a moment in time when houses had flat roofs, the Torah tells us, “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.”¹ It’s a simple principle – a flat roof, where family and friends might hang out and barbecue, is an inherently dangerous place. We should anticipate that danger and build a railing so no one falls.

This is an intuitive proposition, but we shouldn’t fail to note one innovative implication. The parapet requirement provides a practical application of the more abstract principle of *לא תעמד על דם רעך* – “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.”² Beyond demanding that we not perpetrate sins of commission against one another, the Torah now concretely prohibits a sin of omission. It’s not enough for us simply to refrain from pushing someone off of a roof, we must anticipate and proactively protect against that danger.

It’s not an especially radical leap to apply the principle more generally – if we can easily foresee that something we own may cause danger, we should take precautionary action to mitigate the danger. It’s in the spirit of this verse that American law has seen fit to regulate some of the most mundane details of home ownership. Homeowners must clear their sidewalks of ice and snow so postal workers won’t slip and fall. Swimming pool owners are required to cover their pools when they’re not in use to prevent wandering children from falling in and drowning. And in many jurisdictions, it is unlawful to dispose of a refrigerator without first removing the door – children have suffocated while playing in discarded refrigerators.

These are sensible precautions and represent a reasonable approach to assigning responsibility and accountability. The Rambam,³ however, expands the principle dramatically. In his legal commentary on this verse, he writes:

Both the roof and any other object of potential danger, by which it is likely that a person could be fatally injured, require that the owner take action... just as the Torah commands us to make a fence on the roof... and so, too, regarding any obstacle which could cause mortal danger, one, not just the owner, has a positive commandment to remove it... if one does not remove it but leaves those obstacles constituting potential danger, one transgresses a positive commandment and negates a negative commandment “Thou shall not spill blood.”⁴

Here, the Rambam builds upon the radical step already taken by the Torah. In addition to being responsible for acts of omission as well as commission, we are now responsible not only our own property, but “any other object of potential danger.” Our universe of obligation now encompasses everyone, even people we can’t see, and we are bound to anticipate potential dangers and preemptively protect people against them – poverty, violence, disease, hunger.

The potential applications of this principle are myriad. Take malaria, the most widespread of transmissible diseases in the world. Each year, malaria causes over 300 million acute illnesses and over one million deaths. In sub-Saharan Africa, the World Health Organization has documented a 20% decrease in child mortality among families that use insecticide-treated mosquito-nets over their sleeping areas. By the Rambam’s logic, a malarial mosquito seems a perfect extrapolation from an unfenced roof and we should be bound to provide mosquito nets for all people living in regions affected by malaria.

¹ Deuteronomy 22:8.

² Vayikra 19:16.

³ Rabbi Moses ben Maimonides, the great medieval synthesizer of Jewish law.

⁴ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Murderer and Protecting Life, 11:4.



Parshat Hashavuah

But where would such responsibility end? If we take the principle to its logical extreme, we run the risk of being paralyzed by compassion fatigue – the feeling of our inadequacy measured against the overwhelming needs we face around the world. It can't be that the Torah and the Rambam would set us up for such an exercise in frustration.

The tradition offers a couple of solutions to this dilemma. First, in a well known Talmudic passage, we read:

Whoever can prevent his household from committing a sin but does not, is responsible for the sins of his household; if he can prevent his fellow citizens, he is responsible for the sins of his fellow citizens; if the whole world, he is responsible for the sins of the whole world. (*Babylonian Talmud 54b*)

The key word here is “can” (אפשר in Hebrew). If one can intervene only in one's household, that is the purview in which one is responsible. If however, one can intervene globally, one's responsibility extends that far. The Talmud's assertion can be summed up by Uncle Ben's admonition to Peter Parker in “Spiderman”: “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Second, in response to a question about the extent of a person's obligation to save a human life, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach offers an alternate possibility. R. Auerbach considers two situations. In the first, the questioner is the sole potential savior of a person at risk of dying. In the second, the questioner is one among many people who could intervene to save a life. He writes:

As to what to do in our case: it looks to me certain that in a case such as this, where one sees his friend drowning in the river and there is no one to save him, he has to spend all his resources to save him. But when the matter is publicly known to everyone, we rely on the lenient opinion, and one is not obligated to give more than his fair share.⁵

Instead of assigning responsibility in proportion to power, R. Auerbach imposes a “flat tax” approach to responsibility. Everyone has a fair share, presumably based on the distributed allocation of need among all the people capable of contributing.

When we look at the world, at all the roofs left unguarded, all the dangers that imperil people, the implications are daunting. As we begin the season of personal reflection of the high holidays, the question of how much responsibility each one of us bears becomes paramount. We must think deeply about whether we have acted to prevent others' wrongdoing and we must begin the work of constructing parapets, of institutionalizing precautions against destruction, willful or accidental. It's hard work, but if we truly want to avoid “standing idly by the blood of our neighbor;” it must be done.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Applying the Uncle Ben principle to your own life, what are some areas in which you have power to pursue justice, but you fail to exert it well?
- Building on R. Auerbach's principle, what do you think a person's “fair share” should be in regard to saving lives around the world?

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⁵ R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, *Minchat Shlomo*, V. 2, 86:4



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Ki Tavo September 9, 2006

The Double-Edged Sword of Debt

The Torah is not shy about outlining the blessings which will accrue to those who follow the law, and neither is it reluctant to list all of the consequences which will befall those who transgress.

In *Parshat Ki Tavo*, the Torah teaches that if the Israelites simply obey God's law, then their children will be healthy, their breadbasket will overflow and their enemies will flee from them. But if they are wicked and transgress, then the opposite will be true – their children will be enslaved, they will be reduced to cannibalism and their enemies will overrun them.

And yet amidst these seemingly simplistic visions of feast and famine, there is one promise which is somewhat more complex. The Torah promises that if the Israelites behave as they should, they will be a creditor to many and a debtor to none,¹ but if they transgress, then *they* will be indebted to a stranger.²

On the face of it, this admonition makes good sense – indebtedness would have been a debilitating liability for an emerging nation like B'nai Yisrael. Today, the world's 29 poorest nations collectively owe more than \$59 billion to world financial institutions.³ Their interest payments siphon critical financial resources away from important investments in health, education, and infrastructure.

Indeed, for the residents of the Global South, who suffer from excruciatingly high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and premature death, debt is often the most monstrous of afflictions. Their countries carry debt burdens which can never be repaid. Between 1970 and 2002, world financial institutions loaned African countries approximately \$540 billion in loans. Because of rising interest rates, those countries have paid back more than \$550 billion, but still owe more than **\$295 billion** today. Collectively, they spend more than five times as much on debt service as they do on health care.⁴ Not only that, but for many of these countries, the original loans were made to illegitimate governments whose corrupt leaders embezzled huge sums and failed to invest the loans in their countries' economic development.

But while the problems of debt can be overwhelming, there are times when debt is actually the best, if not the only way to advance. Few Americans could go to college, buy a house or start a business if they weren't able to borrow money when they needed it. In fact, Reish Laquish, one of the rabbinic giants of the Talmud, taught that giving a loan is greater than giving charity, and loaning money so that an impoverished person can create a business is even greater still.⁵

¹ Deut 28:12

² Deut 28:44

³ [The Enhanced HIPC Initiative](#) at the website of the World Bank.

⁴ "Debt Cancellation: Historic Visions, New Challenges", Foreign Policy In Focus, May 2005

⁵ Shabbat 63a. Rashi explains that this because a poor person is less embarrassed to take a loan than a handout



Within the lived history of the Jewish people, there is a proud tradition of interest-free loans provided to the indigent. From the beginning of the 20th Century in America, Jewish immigrants engaged in micro lending through the [Hebrew Free Loan Societies](#) which provided interest-free loans to Eastern European Jewish immigrants enabling them to start small businesses – petty retail stores, small workshops or peddlers’ pushcarts and wagons. At their peak, more than 500 Jewish free loan societies operated throughout the United States. In 1920 alone, the New York Hebrew Free Loan Society distributed more than \$1 million in loans to Jewish-owned small businesses.⁶

Similarly, even though many developing nations are struggling today under debt owed to faraway banks, small-scale debt, of the type which the Hebrew Free Loan Societies offered (and still offer) in America, is one of the most promising avenues out of poverty for many citizens of the developing world.

Since 1976, the [Grameen Bank](#) of Bangladesh has been offering microcredit loans to small groups of extremely poor women who monitor each other at weekly meetings to ensure repayment. As loans are repaid, people are allowed to borrow more, enabling borrowers to begin small-scale businesses.

As of today, the Grameen Bank has loaned out more than \$5 billion to nearly 6 million borrowers, nearly all of whom are women.⁷ It has been a model of responsible debt which has been replicated around the world to great success.⁸

In the mind of the Torah, and in our age as well, debt is indeed a curse when it is owed to faraway creditors – strangers who are unconcerned with the circumstances of the borrowers and see them merely as pathways to profit. But not all loans are predatory, and not all lenders see borrowers as means to an end. For Reish Laquish, the clients of the Hebrew Free Loan Societies, and the clients of the Grameen Bank, loans which give the weakest members of society the opportunity to help themselves can be the most tremendous resources there are.

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⁶ See *Chapters in American History* at the website of the [American Jewish Historical Society](#)

⁷ See *Grameen Bank At a Glance* at <http://www.grameen-info.org/bank/GBGlance.htm>

⁸ See “The hidden wealth of the poor,” Nov 3rd 2005, *The Economist* print edition



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech September 16, 2006

Divine Service

Toward the end of his life, Moses calls on the Israelites to resist temptation and to stand firm in their devotion to God. Moses, who initially tried to demur when God called on him to take part in the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt,¹ knows full well how hard it can be to respond to the Divine. So he reminds the Israelites of all the miracles which God has done for them² and threatens them with terrible consequences if they turn astray.

As Moses speaks to the Israelites in the double *parshah* of *Nitzavim-Vayelech*, so too is he speaking to us, his readers and inheritors thousands of years in the future. We, like the Israelites are constantly pulling away from God. Our very real complaints that prayer is often boring, that *tzedakah* can be terribly expensive and that Shabbat can feel like a burden have their antecedents in the grumbling of the Israelites in the desert. Moses insists that the Torah is not in the heavens but right here on Earth,³ and yet the Israelites still complain that the Torah is too hard, too esoteric. To put it mildly, the ancient Israelites were not instantly enamored of the Torah and its system of rewards and punishments.⁴

But while we today are so similar to the cranky, skeptical Israelites, we are very different as well. Where the Israelites were tempted to worship foreign gods, many of us find it difficult, if not impossible to worship any God at all. The Torah assumes that the ancient Israelites turned to heaven with supplications; the only question was *where* in heaven. For many of us though, the difficulty is in turning to heaven at all. We turn to doctors and lawyers and therapists, of course, but to actually turn to heaven for manifest help with practical issues can seem silly.

Yet regardless of our skepticism, much of Jewish religious life is focused on beseeching the Master of the Universe to respond to us, to be pleased by our *mitzvot* in order that God might grant some request and be merciful in punishing us for our sins. Love God and heed God's commands, says Moses and you will live long on the land which God swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁵

Despite appearances, we post-Holocaust Jews are hardly the first generation to try and make sense of the enormity and seeming pointlessness of human suffering. From Job through the Talmud and well into the present day, Jewish theology has understood human suffering, particularly the persecution of the Jews, in light of a relationship with the God of the Torah. But we are among the very first generations for which it is essentially an article of faith that the Torah is the product of humanity, not Divinity. Many Jews, particularly liberal Jews, see in the Torah a profound message about how God and humans might find each other in the world in which we live,⁶ but do not see that its *mitzvot* represent the will of God. We live with the scholarship of the 20th Century, and to deny that learning so we can live by a pre-modern theology in a post-modern world is to live an ersatz Judaism which betrays both the religious heritage of liberal Jews and the modern world in which they live.

¹ Exodus 3:11

² Deuteronomy 29:15-16

³ Deuteronomy 30:12

⁴ One rabbinic source even imagines the Israelites running from God's Torah like a child running from school lest he get more homework. See *Yalkut Shimoni* 729

⁵ Deuteronomy 30:19-20

⁶ My thanks to Rabbi Gordon Tucker for some of these theological and linguistic phrasings.



Parshat Hashavuah

Moses told the Israelites that if they were very good, behaved properly, and turned to God with all of their hearts and souls, they would live in abounding prosperity and God would inflict curses upon their enemies but not on them.⁷ Despite its centrality in Deuteronomy, this proposition rings false to many modern ears. Many of us who have been denied our earnest pleas that a loved one live, that a child be born, that suffering end, suspect that petitionary prayer is, at best, an innocuous balm for our anguished spirits. Prayers and *mitzvot* are terribly important for developing our souls and supporting our communities through space and time, but they don't induce God to change the material reality of the world. We humans are both the actors and the audience for our own prayers and for the rest of the *mitzvot* which Moses demands throughout the book of Deuteronomy – nobody else seems to be watching.

While many Jews intuit that that the God who brought the world into being is not the author of the Torah, and is not particularly interested in our *mitzvot*, this is not the whole story of human existence. God has written no books, but God has written every human being, and we are intertwined with God as intimately as the characters of a book are intertwined with their author. Even if God might be disinterested in *mitzvot*, whose origins are human, God is passionately interested in humans, whose origins are Divine

Through mechanisms which are best described through science, not scripture, God has given us all the gift of life. Simply to exist is to be indebted to the One who brought us here, yet God can accept no repayment from us. God needs nothing which we do – the enormity of God mocks the very idea that we have something to offer to the One who laid the earth's foundations.⁸ God created the world and its inhabitants without us, and needs nothing from us. But like a wealthy man who loans money on condition it be repaid one day to his children, our debt to God for our existence can only be repaid to God's children. It is through serving God's creatures that our debt to our Creator is acknowledged, even if it cannot be repaid.

Voluntary service to those in need can be seen as a pleasant or even trite addition to religious life, or a way to mitigate the severity of Divine judgment as we approach the High Holidays. But true service is an acknowledgement of our indebtedness to the Creator of all life. In serving God's creatures who suffer in Darfur, on the streets of New York, and in AIDS clinics around the world, we serve God more directly than we ever can with words.

One who mocks the poor affronts his Maker⁹ just as surely as one who serves them praises his Maker. When we serve others of God's creatures, we make the only possible move towards repaying the debt we owe for our own existence. Prayers and *mitzvot* are incredibly important for they develop our souls and create our communities. But God's essence is intertwined with the tendrils of every living thing, and when we assuage the suffering of human creatures, we assuage the pain of humans' Creator. When we assuage the suffering of human creatures, we live religion at its purest.

About this commentary

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⁷ Deuteronomy 30:6-10

⁸ Job 41:4

⁹ Proverbs 17:5



Parshat Hashavuah

Parshat Ha'azinu September 30, 2006

For some Jews, the margins and crevices of every ritual act are inhabited by doubt. Even as they lay *tefillin* during morning prayers or *kasber* pots in their kitchen, they still wonder if the Creator of the Universe is really pleased by these acts.

To be sure, these acts matter deeply in the human realm – our souls are enlarged by methods of prayer which Jews have practiced for millennia, and, at its best, prayer can provide a framework in which we can turn away from self-absorption. Similarly, the laws of *kasbrut*, which have often been cited as an inherently incomprehensible set of commandments,¹ bind Jewish communities together through time and space. They have shaped and influenced Jewish cooking, a mainstay of Jewish culture.²

But the question remains – while the individual or the community might rejoice in the performance of *mitzvot* such as these, does the Creator of the Universe rejoice as well?

For Moses, the answer is clear – God delights in human adherence to Divine law and is furious at the Israelites for their disloyal transgressions. As his life draws to an end in *Parshat Ha'azinu*, Moses tells the people that God sees them as a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them.³ Even at the very end of his life, Moses gives voice to God's lament that the Israelites ignore the Divine commandments.

The rabbis of the Talmud, however, are not so sure that our performance of *mitzvot* really affects our relationship with God in any meaningful way. In the course of a lengthy disagreement on an entirely different matter, Rabbi Yehuda argues that we are considered “children of the Almighty” only when we behave as such – when we are obedient and do as we are instructed by God. But Rabbi Meir takes a different position entirely. He argues vociferously that we are “children of the Almighty” at all times – when we are faithless, when we worship idols, and even when we perpetrate evil. In his defense, he quotes that very same line of Moses – “the Israelites are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them”⁴ – treacherous children, perhaps, but children nevertheless.

Between these poles of Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Meir hangs a critical question: What purpose do the *mitzvot* serve? Rabbi Yehuda maintains that the *mitzvot* serve to establish us as God's children because our relationship with God is conditional – if we do what is right and good, then we are indeed “children of the Almighty;” if not, not.

¹ See the Rambam's Guide to the Perplexed, Book III, Chapter 26.

² Rosen, C. (1999). *The Book of Jewish Food*. New York, Knopf. Page, 18.

³ Deuteronomy 32:20

⁴ Deuteronomy 32:20



But Rabbi Meir says that it doesn't matter. One's relationship with the Divine is stable – and whether we are kind and generous or bitter misers, our relationship with the Divine is secure – we are children of the Almighty just the same.

One who lays *tefillin* is a child of God, as is one who doesn't. One who *kashers* his kitchen is a child of God, as is one who doesn't. If this is the case, why bother adhering to all these ritual requirements? Rabbi Meir doesn't say, at least not in this part of the Talmud.

Taken to the extreme, each of these positions becomes absurd. Rabbi Meir's philosophy can lead to a nihilism in which nothing matters – no religious development is possible and so all aspirations are pointless. At the other extreme, Rabbi Yehuda's conditionalism can lead to an uncritical slavishness to the decrees of human rabbis, be they ancient or modern. If we are good boys and girls, and do what we are told, then perhaps at some point in the future, our distant God will recognize us as children of the Divine.

But between these two polarities, Rabbi Akiba makes a very different claim about what it is to be a “child of the Almighty.” Elsewhere in the Talmud,⁵ we find Akiba arguing with a Roman magistrate who, like Rabbi Yehuda, maintains that our relationship with God is conditional – when we follow the commandments of God, *then* we are as children, but when we are disobedient, we are not. But Rabbi Akiba refuses this paradigm. He says that at this very moment, when we take the wailing hungry into our homes and feed them, we are the children of the Almighty.

The claim is peculiar on its face – right now, very few of us are feeding starving strangers in our homes. Rabbi Akiba knows that at the moment he is arguing with the Roman, he is not feeding the hungry.

Rabbi Akiba knows that faith and doubt accompany every ritual act. He holds out the promise that we will draw close to the Divine by doing the will of God, while at the same time wondering if there is a God who even notices these acts, and wondering also if we can draw close to God by performing them. We very well might find a latent Divinity in the laying of *tefillin* or the *kashering* of pots or any of the other acts which have defined the Jewish people. But in the wretched face of starving people, God is manifest. Right now, at the moment when we come face to face with the needy and take them into our homes as guests, then we are unquestionably the children of God, in relationship with the Divine. The Divine is right in front of us, waiting to be fed.

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⁵ Baba Batra 10a