



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Matot 5771

By Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek

July 23, 2011

This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek.

Our relationship with people in the Global South is a complicated one. We (try to) move along a continuum from indifference to pity to sympathy to empathy to the vaunted level of “solidarity”—where, even though we live far from the sites of poverty and are largely insulated from the people who experience it, we see ourselves as standing shoulder to (metaphorical) shoulder with them.

But this is often a false conceit. Even when we do actually stand shoulder to shoulder—as we do when we volunteer in the Global South—the distance between “us” and “them” is just as vast. We privileged volunteers—with our heavy boots with strong ankle support, wicking underwear and a hefty medical kit (for our own emergencies only)—stand in sharp contrast with the people who have lived in this terrain all their lives. Though we come with the good intention of working “side by side” with the community, we are so clearly among them, but not *of* them. We quickly discover that it isn’t easy to generate true solidarity between people who have such a broad chasm of experience between them—and it might not even be possible.

The challenge of implementing long-distance solidarity is not new to the 21st century. As the Israelites prepare for their conquest of the land of Israel in *Parshat Matot*, the tribes of Reuben and Gad decide to circumvent the difficulties of battle and settle instead among the inhabitants on the east side of the Jordan River. There, in Jazer and Gilead—the suburbs of the ancient Near East—there is more room and better grazing for their livestock. Perhaps the Reubenites and the Gadites imagined that they could stand in solidarity with the rest of the Israelites from a distance, without doing the hard work necessary to enter Canaan.

When presented with this proposal, Moses—at least initially—seems to think it is a terribly offensive idea: “Your brothers are going to go to war and you are going to sit *here*?”¹ The anger and sarcasm drips from Moshe’s tongue. The medieval commentator Or HaChayim also criticizes their parasitic request to reap the benefits of the other tribes’ actions.²

But Reuben and Gad redeem themselves by promising to act in solidarity with the people and not simply escaping to greener pastures. They tweak their proposal and volunteer not only to fight with their brethren, but also to be at the front of the battle in the most difficult and dangerous positions. Only then does Moses allow them to live in the zones of greater comfort and still be *naki*—“clear before the Lord.”³ To be “clear,” then, requires being present to do the hardest work when it is most needed. In other words, solidarity was what you did with your bodies, at the risk of death. Everything else was dilettantism.

¹ Numbers 32:6.

² Or HaChayim on Numbers 32:6.

³ Numbers 32:22.

As contemporary volunteers, we seek to stand in solidarity with communities in the Global South. Like Reuben and Gad, we prefer to live a comfortable distance from the difficult work at hand and most of us aren't willing or able to go the extra mile to meet Moses's model of *naki*. Instead, we volunteer when our school schedules allow and do the work that is safest and most photogenic. Unless we are prepared to go where the true need is, and face the dangers and challenges incumbent with it, perhaps we should reconsider our use (or misuse) of the word solidarity altogether.

However, even if we abandon our aspiration for solidarity, our presence in the Global South need not be for naught. Though we may be unable to stand in solidarity, we can go to learn. The people we encounter are not our comrades-in-arms, they are our teachers. We show up with our backpacks and med kits to get an education in human rights—to learn how systems of oppression function and how we can work as allies from a distance; and to learn how Judaism instructs us that this is essential to our role on this planet. If we understand ourselves and present ourselves as students, and don't pretend that service-learning is solidarity, then we might not be "clear" of our obligations, but we will at least comport ourselves with dignity and integrity.



Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek is the founding director of the Emek Project (www.emekproject.org), an effort to cultivate deep Jewish life in the Hudson Valley. In recent years, he has served as the Rabbi in Residence at American Jewish World Service and the Marshall T. Meyer Fellow at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York. An experienced leader and creator of Jewish service learning experiences, Rabbi Spodek has taught extensively about spiritual approaches to justice work, Judaism and human rights and other topics in a wide variety of settings. Prior to entering the rabbinate, he attended Wesleyan University and worked as a daily journalist in Durham, NC. He can be reached at brent@emekproject.org.

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The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

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