



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech 5771

By Jimmy Taber

September 24, 2011

When I was eighteen, my grandfather enlisted me in a signature-gathering campaign. We advocated for the addition of an amendment to Oregon's state constitution that would declare health care a fundamental right. Working alongside him, I found myself captivated by his tireless insistence that we each have the responsibility to care for the vulnerable. "We all know someone who lacks affordable and accessible healthcare," he repeated over and over. "These are our family, friends and neighbors who are suffering." This message became all the more real to me when, in the midst of the campaign, my grandfather was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. However, instead of slowing down and focusing on his health, he continued campaigning between chemotherapy treatments, bringing along his medical bills—totaling tens of thousands of dollars—as evidence of the injustice of the system. He would ask people how we, as a community, could expect someone without insurance to survive such financial hardship. I was deeply affected by the personalization of the issue, and felt a new and very real urgency for the need to help protect the vulnerable.

College and graduate school enriched my developing activism with theory as I sought to understand structures of inequality through the lenses of race, gender and sexuality. In combination with practical courses on nonprofit management skills, I believed that through mastering abstract ideas I would be able to persuade others to care about issues of social justice. Yet, I found my world polarized between those who "got it"—insiders in the social justice world who spoke the language—and those who did not. My message only seemed to resonate with those who were already versed in the jargon. Ironically, my education seemed to create a barrier to communicating my beliefs in terms that would inspire others. For even as it empowered me personally, it created a rift between me— as a professional— and the greater lay community that I sought to mobilize to effect change.

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech speaks directly to this type of tension in communication that can exist between complex intellectual ideas and people on the ground. Anticipating that the Israelites might view the lofty words of the Torah as irrelevant to their everyday experiences, Moshe cautions: "Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens... neither is it beyond the sea."¹ On the contrary, "the thing is very close to you in your mouth and in your heart."² In other words, while processing things intellectually is important, we must also trust our hearts. The capacity to connect is found within us.

As social activists, this passage reminds us that when seeking to inspire others, we must remember first and foremost to communicate our message directly to people's hearts. While it is both natural and useful to reach a

¹ Deuteronomy 30:11-13.

² Deuteronomy 30:14.

deeper level of understanding, for the uninitiated, abstract theories can seem as foreign as if they came from “the heavens” or “beyond the sea.”

The key for inspiring people to pursue social change is to remember that the capacity for compassion, as Moshe articulates in the *parshah*, lies in the heart of each individual. We must remember how our own hearts were opened to social justice, and use that experience to guide how we connect with and inspire others. Before I was educated in international policy issues and considered myself an activist, I was simply an individual who felt inspired because of a grandfather with health problems who believed he could change the system. Instead of communicating on a purely intellectual level, I must use those experiences that are “close to my mouth and in my heart” to create moments of personal connections for others, tapping into the capacity for compassion that lies in each one of us.



Jimmy Taber, is a second-year MA/MBA candidate at Brandeis University’s Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership. After completing his BA in Critical Theory and Social Justice at Occidental College in Los Angeles, Jimmy served as an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow with KOREH L.A., the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles’s literacy program. He has also previously worked at the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Coalition for Service, and Gateways: Access to Jewish Education. Upon completing the Hornstein Program, Jimmy hopes to work in the field of social justice. Jimmy can be reached at jimmy.ajws@gmail.com.

©2011 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

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.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org