



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei 5775

By Sigal Samuel

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As a teenager, I used to groan when it came time to read *Vayakhel-Pekudei* each year. Privately, I referred to this as the “interior decorating” section of the Torah, and the detailed descriptions of the *mishkan* bored me to no end. Who cared about the exact height, width and depth of every vessel in the Tabernacle? Who cared what materials, colors and patterns were used? But the Israelites revel in every lush detail, thrilled at the prospect of having a visible—and Divinely sanctioned—sign of God in their midst. Years later, I can see why.

Their enthusiasm makes perfect sense against the backdrop of last week’s *parshah*, *Ki Tisa*, which depicts the Israelites as a people whose desire to see God is both tremendously strong and fraught with difficulty: Up on Sinai, Moses begs to see God’s face, but God refuses, saying that the experience would be too overwhelming.¹ Down below, the Israelites’ desire for visual evidence of God is so great that they fashion the golden calf—a visible, if false, symbol of divinity that calms their fears that God and Moses have disappeared. Even when their desire is met—as when Moses descends the mountain with his face aglow with Divine light—the sight of true godliness so overwhelms the people that Moses is forced to put on a veil.²

Given that the Israelites’ relationship to visual representation of God is beset with both yearning and anxiety, it’s no wonder that the visual spectacle of the *mishkan*—a much safer receptacle for their desire—inspires such fervor in them. The sanctuary is an elegant solution: it offers a view of Divinity tempered by the material world, allowing them to see God clearly—but not too clearly—in their midst.

The ancient Israelites’ ambivalence toward representing God resembles our contemporary struggle to represent the realities of the developing world. While the Israelites yearned for but were wary of an image too awe-inspiring to behold, we are fascinated with but repelled by images too *awful* to behold. Understanding the magnetism of raw images of suffering, Western media and charity fundraising campaigns often use photographs of naked, fly-covered, emaciated children to draw attention to poverty and injustice. Proponents say that these portrayals, which tug most powerfully at the heartstrings, are the ones that bring in the most cash. Since a ballooning NGO sector means competition for donations is fiercer than ever, organizations feel that they must use the graphic images that best appeal to donors.

Yet this phenomenon has sparked debate in development circles, where images that inspire pity and reinforce debasing stereotypes are deemed “development pornography.”³ According to critics, such portrayals perpetuate the colonialist idea that poor people are helpless and passive. They encourage paternalistic sentiments on the part of

¹ Exodus 33:18-23.

² Exodus 34:29-35.

³ To learn more about development pornography, see Rotimi Sankore, “Behind the image: Poverty and ‘development pornography,’” *Pambazuka News* 21 Apr. 2005. <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/27815>

Western viewers and imply that only our knowledge and our dollars can save the day. Instead of inviting us to empower and stand in solidarity with people in the developing world, these images demean and infantilize them. Given these conflicting perspectives, it is difficult to know how to navigate the tricky minefield of visual representation. Like the ancient Israelites, we hunger for images, but are wary of the risks inherent in them. Can we find an elegant solution that allows us to harness the power of visual representation without incurring harm?

This week's Torah portion may provide some clues to this complex problem. If the *mishkan* enabled the Israelites to navigate their ambivalence toward visual representation of God, it was not merely because it invited them to clothe the Divine in human garb and house the spiritual world in a material edifice. Instead, the *mishkan* required something beyond mere physicality: it required the Israelites to "take *from yourselves* an offering to God."⁴ This edict was not simply a command for generosity; after all, the golden calf also required the people to contribute their possessions. Instead, it required generosity of the self; that is, each person was asked to contribute his or her own unique gifts, skills, experiences, history and wisdom. By embodying these attributes, the *mishkan* tempered and humanized the image of God.

Bearing this in mind, we might ask what it would mean for images of people in the developing world to embody their particular humanity and not just their pain and poverty. Next time you get an email or appeal from AJWS or another organization seeking to help people overcome such challenges, notice the images they use: do they evoke pity or highlight the people's strengths? Rather than depicting emaciated children, do they show youth empowered to pursue a different future? Rather than highlighting suffering, do they show the specific ways in which communities are working, fighting and strategizing in order to survive? Reflecting on AJWS's own imagery, I have been gratified to see images of strength, resilience and dedication. Occasionally the photographs come directly from the communities AJWS supports—which allows these individuals and organizations to "take from themselves" rather than having their likeness taken from them.

Unlike the Israelites in *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, we do not have a Divinely sanctioned way to represent things either too awe-inspiring or too awful to behold. While we may never fully conquer our ambivalence toward images of poverty and injustice, we can take the first step by raising awareness about the risks involved, and by challenging image-makers in our society to capture their subjects' particular struggles and strengths.



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⁴ Exodus 35:5.

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