



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei 5772

By Sigal Samuel
March 17, 2012

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 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.

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>

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. A 2005 charity appeal designed by the Irish aid agency Trocaire to raise funds for Niger provides a good example: while other Irish agencies used a picture of an emaciated child, Trocaire showed a family against a backdrop of land that had turned to desert.⁵ This image avoided stereotypes while illustrating the particular challenge facing the family. Perhaps an even better image would have been one that depicted the specific ways in which they were working, fighting and strategizing in order to survive. Pushing this idea even further, we could consider using an image generated by the family itself—which would truly allow these individuals 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.



Sigal Samuel is a freelance writer currently based in Vancouver, Canada. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Walrus* and *The Jerusalem Post*. She is a graduate of McGill University, where she studied philosophy, and has spent time studying at Hebrew University, Midreshet Ein HaNativ, Northwoods Kollel and Yeshivat Hadar. When she is not writing about Jewish texts, feminism, education and mental health, Sigal volunteers for the Vancouver School Board and the Vancouver Queer Film Festival. She is currently working on her first novel. Sigal can be reached at sigal.ajws@gmail.com.

⁴ Exodus 35:5.

⁵ Ruth Gidley, "Aid workers lament rise of 'development pornography,'" *AlertNet* 14 Sep. 2005. <http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/aid-workers-lament-rise-of-development-pornography/>

©2012 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.