



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayeshev 5772

By Rabbi Wendi Geffen

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Rectifying pervasive social injustice around our world proves an incredibly daunting and complicated challenge. Each case of injustice is caused by not just the obvious perpetrators, but often myriad unintentional secondary offenders and a seemingly intractable web of social, economic and political systems and power brokers. Given these tangled causes, the average person may feel completely powerless to overcome injustice.

Take, for example, the current global food crisis. The causes of food injustice—and ultimately hunger—are not just obvious offenders, like oppressive governments, corporations that exploit natural resources, and disasters like earthquakes. As several *Divrei Tzedek* have noted, the United States—in its role as the largest donor of international crisis food aid—proves a major contributor to the establishment of a seemingly endless cycle of foreign dependence, local economic upheaval, poverty and hunger.¹ These factors, combined, make for a very complex problem, often leaving the average individual feeling overwhelmed and insignificant relative to the power players in the complicated grid of injustice around our world.

Parshat Vayeshev offers a counter-text to the perceived futility of one “ordinary” person’s efforts. *Vayeshev* kicks off the Joseph story, with its familiar cast of starring and supporting characters. Interestingly enough, however, arguably the most important character in the story doesn’t even have a name.

He appears early on in the narrative, when Jacob sends his favorite son, Joseph, to check up on his brothers tending their flock at Sh’chem. On the way, Joseph encounters an *ish*—a man—who asks him what he is seeking. Joseph explains he is looking for his brothers, and the man tells Joseph that the brothers left Sh’chem and headed to a different location: Dotan.²

As a result of this brief, anonymous exchange, Joseph changes route and his story takes a dramatic turn. (Think about it: had Joseph never bumped into this person, there would have been no encounter with his brothers, no pit and sale into slavery, no rise to power in Egypt, no advance famine-planning, no saving his own family, no enslavement in Egypt, no Moses, no Exodus, no return to the Promised Land—nothing!)

So who was this *ish* whom the commentators perceive as not merely an incidental bystander, but an intermediary for God’s will, enabling Joseph to begin the path through which the entire covenant between the Jewish people and God will ultimately be fulfilled? Some commentators assert that he must have been someone significant; someone with “previous experience” and a resume, if you will. Taking Rashi’s lead, many suggest that the man was none other than the angel Gabriel.³

¹ For more information about U.S. food aid policy and AJWS’s response, visit http://ajws.org/hunger/ghs/materials/2011_ajws-food-aid-fact-sheet.pdf.

² Breishit 37:12-17.

³ Rashi on Breishit 37:15 references Midrash Tanchuma on the same verse, both citing Daniel 9:21—“*v’ha’ish Gavriel*” and the man Gabriel—as a proof-text for transposing the angel Gabriel where our verse reads “*ha’ish*/the man.”

But not every commentator agrees that the *ish* had to be a “somebody.” In contrast to Rashi, Nachmanides identifies the *ish* as a “chance passer-by” sent as an unwitting guide to send Joseph to his brothers.⁴ For Nachmanides, God’s will and the covenant’s fulfillment are not the sole reserve of major players, but can be actualized by seemingly unimportant people as well.

If the “nobody” facilitating God’s will in the Torah was just an average person imbued with potential to fulfill a Divine purpose, then we each have this very same potential. Like the *ish*, our suitability for carrying out our own Divine purpose might not have anything to do with our pedigree, experience or relative power.

This knowledge can transform our pursuit of global social justice. Though we are not major powers in global affairs, the tipping point for change can come from ordinary people, the minor players whose power is underestimated. Like the *ish* who changed the direction of another person and, in doing so, altered the course of history, so too can each of us serve to change the minds and hearts of others, thus helping to overcome enormous problems, even global hunger.

We may not be able to personally unravel the web of food injustice in its entirety, but we might be the ones to start the chain reaction that does. We can start by [signing the Jewish Petition for a Just Farm Bill](#), and urging others to do so, so that U.S. food aid policy can do more to help the people it’s intended to support. Other tools for change are all around us: post information about global food justice or the Farm Bill petition on your [Facebook page](#); [tweet about it](#); e-mail information to your contact list; talk about the issue with your colleagues, friends and family.

What each one of us says and does matters. If one brief encounter with a nameless stranger ultimately assured the future of the Jewish faith, what then, could any of our actions—both large and small—set into motion? The possibilities are limitless.



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⁴ Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Breishit* (Jerusalem: Hemed Press, 1981), 397. See Nachmanides on Breishit 37:15.

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