



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Dvarim 5772

By Leah Kaplan Robins

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We are pleased to welcome guest writer, Leah Kaplan Robins, AJWS's senior writer and editor.

Each year when we reach *Parashat Dvarim* I experience a rush of exhilaration when I imagine the scene: the Israelites are gathered high on the steppes of Moab, having finally reached the end of their 40-year ordeal in the desert. As they wait for Moses to deliver his final address, they look out at the expanse below, and see the Promised Land at last. For a few moments, perhaps, their thoughts of the traumas behind them and the battles ahead are eclipsed by the simple joy that home is within their sight.

Unfortunately, my reverie is shattered as soon as the *parashah* begins: “It is 11 days from Horeb to Kadesh-Barnea”¹—the narrator chides—a cruel reminder that the 40-year sojourn could have been just an 11-day trip, if only the Israelite spies hadn’t sinned at Kadesh-Barnea so many years ago. Moses then proceeds to berate the people for that transgression and for every other debacle thereafter in the desert.

This oration stuns me every year. Surely, the people know this history; they have circled aimlessly for 40 years, only to finally arrive roughly at the same spot, and have mourned the loss of the entire previous generation because of it. Why does Moses reiterate these facts when what they probably need at this moment are inspirational words about how far they’ve come in order to motivate them for the battles they’re about to wage? I have always assumed that Moses simply lost control, succumbing to his bitterness that the people will enter Canaan without him.

But I’m seeing Moses’s speech in a new light this week, as my AJWS colleagues—and 49 of our grantees from around the world—are attending the International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C. For the 25,000 activists, scientists, NGO workers and policy makers gathering on their proverbial mountain top, it must be tempting to stoke feelings of relief at how far they’ve come since the first terrifying cases of HIV emerged in 1979. Thanks to the incredible advances in treatment, HIV can now be a chronic, manageable condition rather than a death sentence.

But emphasizing this progress obscures the devastating big picture. Like the Israelites’ desert crossing, the fight against AIDS is taking far too long and has cost more than 30 million lives.² Thirty-three years into the epidemic, an estimated 33 million people are infected. And even though effective antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) have been available since the mid-’90s, only five million people are receiving treatment today.³

Part of the problem is lack of funding. In 2000, world leaders committed to providing “Universal Access” to prevention, treatment and care by 2010,⁴ but they have failed to invest enough money and resources to achieve this goal. As a result, millions of people who could be saved by ARVs are dying waiting in line.⁵ But a more stealthy cause of the pandemic’s longevity has to do with *who* is being affected by HIV today. The majority of cases are in developing countries and among LGBTI people, injecting drug users and sex workers—extremely stigmatized groups that are

¹ Deuteronomy 1:2.

² “[Worldwide HIV & AIDS Statistics](#).” *Advert*, 2010.

³ “[UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic 2010](#).” *UNAIDS*, 2010.

⁴ “[Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases](#).” *United Nations, 2015 Millennium Development Goals*.

⁵ “[Making a Mistake on Treatment – PEPFAR’s New Five-Year AIDS Strategy](#).” *Health Gap*, 5 Feb 2010.

largely excluded from prevention, treatment and funding.⁶ According to a recent study, men engaged in same-sex relations in low and middle-income countries are more than 19 times more likely to be HIV positive than the general population, but only nine percent have access to prevention services.⁷ As long as this pattern of exclusion, complacency and neglect remains unbroken, the AIDS pandemic will continue its interminable onward march.

Looking at Moses's speech through this lens, it suddenly appears to be a shrewd changemaking tool rather than a bitter rant. The Israelites, too, were stuck in a pattern: the lack of belief in God that caused their 40-year punishment persisted despite the heavy losses they incurred. While this generation knew its history, it had not reformed, and Moses understood that before they could establish a covenantal society in the land, they needed a reproach strong enough to truly change them.

The world needs a similar rebuke today—one resonant enough to stop societal stigma and discrimination; powerful enough to remove barriers to prevention and treatment; and inspirational enough to awaken funders to the pandemic's most marginalized victims. The Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS) provides a model: "Fulfilling the UNAIDS vision of zero new infections will require a hard look at the societal structures, beliefs and value systems that present obstacles to effective HIV prevention efforts. Poverty, gender inequity, inequity in health and the education system, discrimination against marginalized people, and unequal resource pathways all affect—and often slow—the HIV response."⁸ Attendees at the AIDS Conference, including AJWS's grantees, are issuing their own rebuke in the form of a protest march ("[We Can End AIDS](#)"), telling the world to rectify the behavior that has kept the response to AIDS trailing so far behind its potential: "We have the science, the treatments and the resources to end the HIV epidemic, but not the political will. This must change."

We, too, should join this call. Rambam, in the Mishneh Torah, understood that the responsibility to correct injustice does not reside among leaders alone, but in each member of the community: "If one observes that another committed a sin or walks in a way that is not good, it is the person's duty to bring the erring one back to the right path... as it is said, "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:17).⁹

While the fight against AIDS is in the spotlight this week, we can follow Moses's and Rambam's examples by signing a "[Declaration to End the AIDS Epidemic](#)" presented by major AIDS organizations in Washington. Only once we succeed in breaking the patterns that have slowed our progress, will the Promised Land finally be within our reach.



Leah Kaplan Robins is senior writer and editor at American Jewish World Service, where she creates publications as tools to promote global justice. Leah graduated from Harvard University in 2002 with a B.A. in Visual and Environmental Studies and spent 2004-2005 as a Dorot Fellow in Israel. Prior to joining AJWS, she worked at the Children's Museum of Manhattan, the Covenant Foundation and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute for Religion. While Leah has edited *Dvar Tzedek* for the past four years, this is her writing debut! She can be reached at lrobins@ajws.org.

⁶ "[The Shifting Global Health Landscape: Implications for HIV/AIDS and Vulnerable Populations.](#)" *AmfAR*, July 2010.

⁷ "[Marginalized Populations around the World Unite, Call for Revised Approach to Global HIV Epidemic.](#)" *PR Newswire*, 17 July 2012.

⁸ "[UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic 2010.](#)" *UNAIDS*, 2010.

⁹ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Deot 6:7 (translation from *Teaching Jewish Virtues* by Susan Freeman).

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