



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Dvarim 5768

By Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels

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The Book of *Dvarim* is the beginning of a transition in the lives of the people of Israel. About to cross over the Jordan to the Promised Land, Moses recounts the laws and life of the Israelites in their wandering in the desert. Moses recalls that the people have been carried by God through the wilderness, fought for by God, shown where to camp and when to move, fed with manna and provided for in every way.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the transition from Moses to Joshua and from wandering in the wilderness to entering the Land, there is a sudden shift in tone. No longer catered to, the people must begin to fend for themselves.

What is the nature and cause of this transition and what changes does it produce in the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Land? The wanderings of Israel in the wilderness have hardly been a resounding success. As Moses spends the majority of the first chapter recalling, it was due to the sin of the spies that Israel was forced to wander for 40 years.<sup>2</sup> Along the way, the people continued to disobey and complain, and indeed their years in the desert are marked by grumbling and stiff-neckedness.

Perhaps the cause of this shift in responsibility can be found in the ultimate leadership of God. The Israelites are taken care of by God at every step of the journey through the desert. Though this protection is no doubt welcomed on the one hand, and is perhaps necessary in the first crisis-like weeks, months, and even years after their exodus from Egypt, during the 40 years in the desert the children of Israel are quite literally disempowered. Never made masters of their own destiny, never allowed to truly take responsibility for themselves and never truly listened to by God, it is perhaps no wonder that their wandering through the desert is a series of disasters.

Indeed God, it seems, has difficulty making the transition from disaster relief to development, from the immediate aid that was necessary and appropriate in the initial crisis-mode post exodus to the mutual development work necessary to produce long-term sustainable success. Rather, throughout the 40-year journey, God leads paternalistically, giving the people no control of their destiny, setting them up for the fear, anxiety and helplessness that leads to their repeated failure.

As the next story unfolds and the people prepare to enter the land, God seems to have learned from the desert years. Upon entering the land, the people are forced to take responsibility for their needs and defense in a much more direct way. Here they must find their own food and water in the normal human way, rather than rely on divine manna. Though God helps, the Israelites are not carried anymore, but rather must “be strong and of good courage to make their way to the Promised Land.”<sup>3</sup> These attributes of strength and courage are essential here. Perhaps the reason the generation of the wilderness had to die out is that they were crippled by paternalism, whether oppressive while slaves in Egypt or well-meaning as God’s wanderers in the desert.

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<sup>1</sup> Dvarim 1:29-33

<sup>2</sup> Dvarim 1:22-45

<sup>3</sup> Yehoshua 1:18

If God can learn from the experiences of the past, certainly western intervention in the developing world can learn to do better as well. We must ask ourselves when we pursue global justice, whether we are doing it in a way that empowers or cripples. Like the people of Israel, the people of the Global South have experienced the explicitly exploitative-abusive paternalism of colonialism (Egypt) and the softer paternalism of the well-intentioned by deeply misguided model of top-down global aid (the desert). Effective aid, which means cooperating in the global fight for justice, requires a shift from the failed paternalism of our *parshah* to the mutual cooperation of the Israelites in the Land.

To aid effectively we must partner, as AJWS does, with local organizations who know themselves and their needs best. To aid effectively we must acknowledge and be open to the mutual ways in which each partner in this endeavor affects the other, and the wisdom and resources each one has to offer. To aid effectively we must acknowledge the joint responsibility of all parties in this struggle.

We are a people who thrive in a culture of cooperation, interaction and ownership, who are empowered to take the Divine word and do our best, with our own judgment, independence and responsibility, to bring that word and the vision it pursues to life. To be effective in the fight against global injustice, we must prize that culture of cooperation and enter the battle together with our partners in the Global South, for collectively we can be like Joshua and the children of Israel, "strong and of good courage."



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