



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Eikev 5771

By Rachel Travis

August 20, 2011

If you ask people why they're involved in community service, few—if any—would include personal reward or accolades on their list of motivations. There seems to be an expectation in our culture that good works should be accompanied by a Mother Theresa-like abdication of personal benefit. Admitting otherwise generally elicits squeamish responses.

And yet, public service often comes with the implicit promise of reward: recognition, potential new friends, resume fodder and international travel—to name a few. Yet, many of us do not want to admit that our decisions to serve our community may be impacted (even in subtle ways) by the allure of personal gain, even though these benefits have legitimate appeal and may in fact impact our choices.

This discomfort is not merely a contemporary struggle. It appears that Rashi, the preeminent medieval scholar, is also strikingly uncomfortable with the notion of doing good for the hope of material benefit. In *Parshat Eikev* Moshe explicitly enumerates the earthly rewards that await those who faithfully observe God's commandments. Speaking in the name of God, Moshe pledges that if "you love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul, then I will provide rain in its proper time... I will provide grass in your field for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied..."¹ Rashi, writing with a seeming distaste for do-gooders seeking benefit, responds to this section by opining that despite these promises we should serve God purely out of love, not for the sake of reward or honor.²

Perhaps the Torah, by delineating rewards and punishments for good actions, is willing to address aspects of human nature that we, and Rashi, would rather ignore. Our *parshah* acknowledges that when confronted with difficult circumstances and life's many temptations, most of us benefit from a small nudge towards the good. We are not saints, nor are we expected to be. The Torah instead demands that each of us, in our own way, should constantly work towards building a better world—and recognizes that incentives can be powerful tools to advance our efforts.

Mo Ibrahim, a Sudanese billionaire and mobile communications entrepreneur, is one person who is not shy about confronting this reality head on. He is an ardent proponent of rewarding good behavior in African Statesmen, and has developed an ambitious—and controversial—plan to reform African leadership and civil society through explicit monetary incentives. In 2006, he inaugurated the Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, which is awarded to a democratically elected former African head-of-state who has demonstrated excellence in service and served his or her term within the limits set by the country's constitution. The prize consists of five million dollars awarded over ten years and \$200,000 annually for life thereafter. The Ibrahim Foundation also considers granting an additional \$200,000 per year, for 10 years, towards public interest projects championed by the winner.³

¹ Devarim 11:13-15

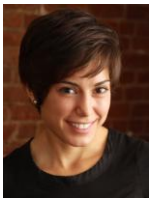
² Rashi on Devarim 11:13

³ <http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org/en/section/the-ibrahim-prize>

Ibrahim explains that unlike American leaders who can expect handsome speaking engagements and book deals after leaving office, former African officials may face a future bereft of any such lucrative opportunities. He seeks to reward those who have developed their countries, counter the temptation to hold office after the limits of one's term, and ensure that Africa doesn't lose the contributions of its best leaders, by enabling them to continue in other public roles.⁴ Some of the prize's detractors, however, liken it to bribery.⁵ They are uncomfortable with the prospect of lavishly rewarding leaders for "merely" doing the right thing.

It will be difficult to measure the success of the prize or its effects on reforming African governance and civil society. Ultimately, however, the question of whether the prize is bribery, merely positive reinforcement, or an important recognition of good leadership might be beside the point. What matters is that there are African leaders who are choosing democracy over tyranny, peace over chaos, and civic development over personal gain. And if the allure of the Ibrahim prize provides an additional incentive to those already inclined to do good (and a counter balance to the myriad temptations to retain power) then it is indeed a useful tool in our chest of social justice practices.

Perhaps in an ideal world we could all live according to Rashi's dictum and act purely altruistically all the time. But in our imperfect reality, we are naturally driven by a complex web of motives. Maybe the healthiest way to approach this tension is to accept that we will at times act out of self-interest and to acknowledge that incentives sometimes have the power to help us achieve our goals—especially when those goals are for the benefit of the greater good. We can learn from the wisdom of the *parshah* and not allow our discomfort with reward for public service to prevent us from using all the strategies at our disposal to harness our individual and collective power to build a more equitable and sustainable world.



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⁴ <http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org/en/section/the-ibrahim-prize>

⁵ Ken Auletta, Annals of Communications, "The Dictator Index," *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2011, p. 45

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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.

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