



# DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

## Parashat Matot-Masei 5773

July 6, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Discuss it at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Please take two minutes to share your thoughts on this piece by completing this [feedback form](#).

### Introduction

*Parashat Matot* opens with a list of the laws governing vows—in particular, vows made by women. The basic principle that underlies these laws is that if a woman makes a vow, her husband or father can nullify the vow. However, if her husband or father is aware of the vow and voices no objection, his silence signals his consent and her vow stands. While the power dynamics with regard to gender are certainly troubling, the principle expressed in these laws—that silence means assent—suggests a powerful lesson about using our voices as we work to build communities committed to the pursuit of justice.<sup>1</sup>

The Torah summarizes the legal principles that govern a woman's vow as follows:

<p><b>Numbers 30:14-16</b></p> <p>Every vow and every sworn obligation of self-denial may be upheld by her husband or annulled by her husband. If her husband offers no objection from that day to the next, he has upheld all the vows or obligations she has assumed: he has upheld them by offering no objection on the day he found out. But if he annuls them after [the day] he finds out, he shall bear her guilt.</p>	<p><b>במדבר ל: יד-טז</b></p> <p>כִּלְיִנְדָר וְכִלְשִׁבְעַת אֶסֶר לְעִנְתִּי נָפֶשׁ אִישָׁה      יְקִימְנָו וְאִישָׁה יִפְרְנוּ: וְאִם־הִחְרַשׁ יַחְרִישׁ      לָהּ אִישָׁה מִיּוֹם אֲלִיּוֹם וְהַקִּים      אֶת־כִּלְיִנְדָרֶיהָ אוֹ אֶת־כִּלְשִׁבְעֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ      הַקִּים אֶתֶם כִּי־הִחְרַשׁ לָהּ בְּיוֹם שְׁמֻעוֹ:      וְאִם־הִפְרָ יִפְרָ אֶתֶם אַחֲרַי שְׁמֻעוֹ וְנָשָׂא      אֶת־עוֹנָהּ:</p>
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### Guiding Questions:

- After learning of his wife's vow, how much time does a husband have to annul it before it goes into effect? Why do you think the time frame is so short?
- In the last verse, the text states that if the husband delays his objection, his wife's vow stands and *he* bears her guilt. Why do you think the guilt is borne by the husband and not the woman who made the vow?
- Although this text is specifically about annulling vows, the principles articulated in this text could be applied to speaking out against injustice. What lessons can you draw about when and how to object to injustice? What lessons can you draw about who bears responsibility for injustice?

<sup>1</sup> This Dvar Tzedek was inspired by "No Neutrality: Silence Is Assent" by Rabbi Bradley Artson. Available at [http://myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly\\_Torah\\_Portion/mattot\\_artson5762.shtml?p=1](http://myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly_Torah_Portion/mattot_artson5762.shtml?p=1).

Several verses from the book of Proverbs explicitly demand that we speak out against injustice:

<b>Proverbs 31:8-9</b> Speak up for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy.	<b>משלי לא:ח-ט</b> פְּתַח פִּיךָ לְאֵלִים אֲלֵ דִין כָּל בְּנֵי חַלּוּף: פְּתַח פִּיךָ שֹׁפֵט צָדֵק וְדִין עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן:
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Guiding Questions:

- According to this text, for whose rights and needs are we required to speak up? In what ways do you speak up for the rights and needs of these groups of people? If you don't, what holds you back?
- How do you understand the command to speak up "for" others? What is the difference between speaking up "for" others and "with" them? Do you usually speak up "for" or "with"? Why?

Speaking up when injustice occurs can be a risky proposition—one that requires moral courage, or the willingness to act on our convictions regardless of the consequences. Writer Salman Rushdie articulates the importance of cultivating and supporting this kind of courage:

#### Salman Rushdie, "Whither Moral Courage?"<sup>2</sup>

It's a vexing time for those of us who believe in the right of artists, intellectuals and ordinary, affronted citizens to push boundaries and take risks and so, at times, to change the way we see the world. There's nothing to be done but to go on restating the importance of this kind of courage, and to try to make sure that these oppressed individuals . . . are seen for what they are: men and women standing on the front line of liberty. How to do this? Sign the petitions against their treatment, join the protests. Speak up. Every little bit counts.

Guiding Questions:

- What contemporary examples, either in your own life or in the public sphere, can you think of in which people exercising moral courage have faced harsh consequences? How have you responded to those incidents?
- In what ways can you nurture your ability to exercise moral courage and speak up when you learn about or encounter injustice?

#### Conclusion

*Parashat Matot* reminds us of the dangers of silence and also of the power of words. The very institution of vows, described at the beginning of the *parashah*, underscores that our words matter and have concrete consequences. As we read this *parashah* and contemplate the lesson above from Proverbs, let us commit to exercising the courage to raise our voices to protest injustice. May we also heed the words of activist writer Audre Lorde: "And at last you'll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking."

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<sup>2</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Whither Moral Courage?" *The New York Times*, 27 April 2013. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/opinion/sunday/whither-moral-courage.html?pagewanted=all>.