



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Naso 5771

By Jimmy Taber

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The conversations at the *seder* table tend to stay with me long after the proclamations of “Next year in Jerusalem” have stopped echoing in my ears, as I draw new inspiration every year from the Israelites’ bondage-to-freedom narrative. This year, I found myself confronted with an issue that dug deeper than usual.

Helping us relate our people’s experience of slavery in Egypt to examples of modern-day oppression, a relative brought up the plight of orange harvesters in Florida who are exploited by commercial producers who sell to many of the most well-known orange juice companies. Initially, the story did not make a huge impression on me. I added orange juice to the growing list of unethical products of which I am aware, unsure of whether or not I would feel compelled to pay a few extra dollars for a more responsibly produced juice on my next trip to the supermarket.

My fiancée, however, had a much stronger reaction to learning of the workers’ experience than I did, and directly challenged me. “Why shouldn’t this knowledge determine our actions?” she asked, “How can we ignore what is taking place?”

Her perspective, that changing personal behavior was the responsible response to this type of information, is consistent with my own values, but a part of me was still reluctant to accept that an act as seemingly insignificant as choosing a different brand of juice would directly improve the situation of exploited farm workers. Their plight was caused by issues well beyond my control—the drive of corporations to maximize profits, inadequate legal protection for migrant workers, the poverty created in developing nations as a result of free trade legislation, and on and on. But the question nagged at me. If I truly believe, as I often argue, that each individual’s actions have consequences in the context of larger systems, then I clearly have a responsibility to make the choice to ethically consume, even when it seems that I can’t change the underlying problems.

This internal conflict remained in the back of my mind until this week’s *parshah* presented a clue as to how to resolve my discomfort. *Parshat Naso* reads: “When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong that he has done.”<sup>1</sup> In the original Hebrew, the phrase “he shall confess” appears in the reflexive form “*hitvadu*,” suggesting that the individual at fault must confess to himself or herself as opposed to an outside authority.

Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century German rabbi, wrote that the reflexive form of confess “signifies, an ‘admission to oneself,’ which in one’s innermost self silences every extenuating, excusing defense.”<sup>2</sup> Truly taking responsibility requires that we conquer our tendency to locate blame externally and accept our own agency and the negative impact that we occasionally have on others. A confession can only affect future behavior if it is made to oneself, and succeeds in uprooting the internal feelings and beliefs that led to the transgression in the first place.

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 5:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch quoted in “Torah Sparks,” *The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism*. [http://www.uscj.org/Aharey\\_Mot\\_57687576.html](http://www.uscj.org/Aharey_Mot_57687576.html)

For those of us seeking to live by our values in a world full of injustice, the *parshah* is a reminder that change must begin with the acceptance that responsibility cannot be placed on someone else. We must not be overcome by our feelings of helplessness in the face of large structural challenges nor use these feelings as an excuse to absolve ourselves from our own role in these problems. When we accept that our individual actions have an impact, we can understand the tendency to place blame elsewhere as an excuse to shirk responsibility.

This realization, according to Hirsch, can only emerge from honesty with one's self. As Hirsch writes:

Every true self-judgment includes self-knowledge, not only that we should have behaved otherwise, but that we could have behaved otherwise, and by such recognition of our moral freedom of will rejects any excuse for present or future failings.<sup>3</sup>

Every year, the Passover story recounts our own national journey from slavery to freedom, and the Torah repeatedly reminds us that we must remember the oppressed, because we “were slaves in Egypt.” *Parshat Naso* teaches us that this task is not just to help those experiencing injustice, but to recognize that we play a role in the existence of injustice. With this self-understanding comes the responsibility to act and live out our belief that each individual can have an impact.



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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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