



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Tzav 5774

By Rabbi Adam Frank

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This week's Torah reading, *Tzav*, discusses the sacrificial system that is prescribed for the Israelites, but its title teaches us an important lesson with implications beyond the sacrificial rites. The portion's opening lines read: "And God spoke to Moses saying, "Command Aaron and his sons as follows..."¹

Tzav is the imperative word form "command," coming from the same Hebrew root as *mitzvah*—commandment, duty, responsibility. The concept of obligation is an unequivocal and essential element of Jewish practice, and the title of this week's reading comes to remind and emphasize its role in Jewish tradition.

In traditionally observant Jewish communities, people feel a clear sense of obligation to perform ritual observance and behavior—Shabbat, the kosher dietary laws, requirements of *tefilah* (prayer), blessings before and after food, modest attire. But not everyone recognizes the same sense of commandedness in the ethical imperatives of our Torah: guarding the stranger; caring for the widow, orphan and the poor; resisting corrupting forces; feeding the hungry—even though these *mitzvot* carry the same obligations as do the ritual laws. When they do, the responsibility is usually interpreted as an obligation to help exclusively the Jewish poor and hungry. This tendency has historical roots, as the status of the Jewish People in the world as an often-persecuted nation did not lend itself to Jews engaging in the pursuit of justice beyond their own communities. To this day, in most traditionally observant communities, fervent social justice activities occur only within the confines of the Jewish community as manifest in Jewish day school education for every child, commodity distribution centers for the Jewish needy, soup kitchens and *tzedakah* funds for the Jewish poor.

In contrast to traditionally observant Jewish communities, the majority of Jews today no longer feel a sense of obligation or commandedness in relation to ritual observance. But there is a growing population among that Jewish majority for whom a sense of imperative and obligation to the Torah's ethical instructions is being manifest. For this population, social justice has taken on an urgency and importance similar to that felt about ritual *mitzvot* in the observant Jewish world.

Still, there are many Jews today who eschew the idea of being commanded altogether. They believe that acting out of a sense of volition, of personal free choice, is actually a higher level of ethical goodness than acting out of obligation. A student of mine recently expressed this idea succinctly, asking, "Isn't it better to give *tzedakah* because you believe it is the right thing to do than to give because you have to?"

In response, I shared the sad reality that a commandment seems to be necessary to counter a powerful truth of human nature. If everyone in the world gave *tzedakah*, there would be enough resources to end poverty and hunger and to provide the necessary medicines to reduce avoidable human suffering. But sadly, when left to our

¹ Leviticus 6:1-2.

own devices, most people are not moved to give generously—if at all. Judaism so well understands the complications of human nature that it does not rely on us to decide to do the right thing; rather, the tradition obligates us to act justly in recognition of the immediacy of human needs.

Perhaps one reason the Torah needs to command us to pursue justice is that many good-hearted, caring and concerned people remain inert in the face of injustices, believing that some matters are beyond the scope of our personal abilities to change. Jewish tradition confronts such an approach by pointing to a *midrashic* teaching² that only once was God's opinion changed to one of greater severity towards people:

In the Book of Ezekiel, we learn of terrible atrocities occurring in Jerusalem. God instructs that the angel Gabriel punish those engaging in the injustices. A second angel argues before God that the righteous in Jerusalem deserve the same punishment because they remained silent in the face of the injustices. God responds that even if the good people had interceded, the wicked would not have listened to them. The angel replies that only God could know the wicked would not have listened, but the good people did not know that interceding would have been for naught! God's opinion is changed and God tells Gabriel to punish the wicked for their actions and the righteous for their inaction, as well. In short, we must always believe that we have the ability to fight wickedness and injustice. Inaction is not a Jewish option.

Jewish tradition takes seriously the exhortational *Tzav*—indeed, obligation is not only a code that honors our relationship with God, it is God's code to have us honor our relationship with the rest of humanity.



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² Midrash Tanhuma Tazria 9 and Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 55a.

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