



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayikra 5772

By David Singer

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The book of Leviticus begins with a call. The first word of this section of Torah, from which it gets its Hebrew name—*vayikra*—describes God calling out to Moses, inviting the prophet to enter in to the Tent of Meeting, the space in which Moses is able to communicate with God and exercise his role as leader of Israel.

Why, the Rabbis ask, does Moses, of all people, await God's invitation before entering this holy space? After all, Moses has spoken face-to-face with God already, seen God's back and witnessed revelation directly.¹ By way of a parable, the Rabbis point to a king's servant, so exercised in his servitude that he comes and goes from the king's throne room without hesitation.² Surely, Moses had no obligation to await God's call before entering this holy space to embark on his important work.

Furthermore, Moses's hesitation seems a bit impractical in practice. What if God had never called out for him? Was not Moses already acutely aware of the need for his service to the Divine? In waiting for an explicit call, might he have delayed important work or undermined his own significance as a religious leader with the tools and skills necessary for addressing the needs of his people?

To make sense of his odd behavior, the Rabbis argue that this was a display of Moses's extreme humility: despite his knowledge that he was needed and welcome in the Tent of Meeting, he still was not so brazen as to just walk in without an invitation. Great is the person, the Rabbis say, who is so restrained in his ego that he stands ready to serve, but does not begin the work before being asked.³

We have much to learn from Moses's humility. If the single prophet with *carte blanche* to enter God's holy space as he pleased hesitated before intruding, how much more so should we, in our lives, pause before assuming that our presence or input is welcome in someone else's business? How often do we jump in and offer solutions to others' problems before being asked?

This was especially on my mind in 2009, when I participated in AJWS's Rabbinical Students' Delegation to Thies, Senegal. Prior to my trip, I stood outside the "door" to the Global South, just like Moses did at the opening of the Tent of Meeting, waiting for the call. My colleagues and I wanted to offer our help to a community living in poverty, but it was clear that there was no invitation coming. Senegalese men and women certainly needed aid, but the help they needed was that of financial grants and training; they weren't calling out for short-term service volunteers.

And my experience was not unique. Every year, thousands upon thousands of people, young and old, face this same quandary as they seek to volunteer their time in the Global South, wanting to help solve the problems that

¹ See, for example, Exodus 33:17-23 and Exodus 20:15.

² Midrash HaGadol on Vayikra 1:1.

³ Ibid.

communities face. In most cases, there is no explicit call for our help. Yet we go anyway, entering the “tent” and hoping that we will be useful. Given this reality, it may seem prudent to question the value of service-learning trips. Instead, I suggest a new paradigm for understanding these experiences and their worth: we are not going to solve problems; we are going to learn, listen and connect.

Jo Ann Van Engen, who runs Calvin College’s Semester in Honduras program, articulates the value of service-learning programs in this way. She writes:

I suggest we stop thinking about short-term missions as a service to perform, and start thinking of them as a responsibility to learn. Let’s raise money to send representatives to find out what our brothers and sisters are facing, what we can do to help, and how we can build long-term relationships.⁴

The lack of direct invitation from the Global South does not mean that we, following Moses’ example, should wait forever before signing up to volunteer. Rather, we can and should enter the Global South, but we must do so with humility. In engaging in service-learning opportunities, we must recognize that our role there is not that of problem-solver, but of guests in the holy space of others. Thus humbled, we listen carefully to our host’s needs while we’re in their midst, and remain cognizant that we are there in order to learn, develop relationships and to build ever-growing global commitments to the pursuit of peace.



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⁴ Jo Ann Van Engen, “The Cost of Short-term Missions,” *The Other Side*, January/February 2000, pp. 20-23. Available at <http://ajs-us.org/joannsarticle.pdf>.

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