



**DVAR TZEDEK:**  
*Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice for 30 years*

**AJWS**  
**at 30**

*The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.*

### Introductory Reflection

In her 2011 Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Vayakhel*, author Rachel Farbiarz tells the story of Bezalel, the man specially named by God to lead the Israelites in the construction of the *Mishkan*—the Tabernacle. Bezalel was charged with the monumental task of guiding a nation just out of slavery to become craftsmen; but according to Rachel, it accomplished much more. This effort “fashioned not only altar and laver, menorah and ephod—but dignity. It illuminated for people who were dependent on manna from heaven, water from a rock and protection from a cloud that God, in turn, relied upon them to build the Divine dwelling on earth.”

Just as Bezalel cultivated a sense of dignity in a people who had been downtrodden from years of slavery, AJWS grantee Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (THRP) restores hope and dignity for Liberians who have suffered terrible traumas during the Ebola crisis. Liberia was declared Ebola-free on January 14 but the scars from this devastating epidemic remain. Many survivors returned home after their treatment to find a dozen or more relatives dead and their communities decimated. Instead of offering solace to those who suffered, many former friends and neighbors treated them like pariahs, refusing to welcome them back into communal life for fear they still carried the virus.

In the midst of this grief, fear and mistrust, THRP supports survivors' reintegration back into their communities, the workforce and schools. It helps them navigate a new host of medical maladies brought on by Ebola and heal from psychological trauma. And it also empowers survivors to counsel and help others who experienced similar traumas. Like Bezalel, who “cultivate[d] dignity and transform[ed] lives by imparting a skill, a trade—something of which to be proud,” THRP gives Ebola survivors a purpose that enables them to go on with their lives. Said one survivor helped by THRP, “I'm grateful to be alive and be with my family again. THRP restored my dignity.”

Learn more about [THRP here](#) and read Rachel's piece below.

## Parashat Vayakhel 5776

By Rachel Farbiarz

March 5, 2016

*(Reprinted from February 26, 2011)*

In *Parashat Vayakhel* the Children of Israel built the Tabernacle. The project demanded of Israel formidable helpings of both creative energy and generosity. In the punishing desert, the people were expected to furnish a marvelous

array of gold, silver, bronze, linens, indigo, hides, oils, incense and precious stones.<sup>1</sup> And from these gifts, they were to carve, spin, cut, rivet, embroider, weave and fashion the Sanctuary's sacral architecture and furnishings.

That such an effort could be successfully undertaken in the desert was extraordinary enough. That it be executed by a mass of recently-freed slaves—who, while well-accustomed to hard labor, were untutored in skilled craft—is understood as nothing less than miraculous.<sup>2</sup> This preternatural ingenuity is most plainly embodied in Bezalel, the man specially named by the Almighty to lead the construction efforts. A creative genius, Bezalel was “filled [ ] with a spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in every task.”<sup>3</sup>

The capstone of the Divine spirit that filled the accomplished craftsman was not, however, his mastery of goldsmithing or his way with joinery. It was, instead, his ability to teach others, as the *parashah* informs: God “has given in his heart to instruct [.]”<sup>4</sup> Commentator Robert Alter notes the singular significance of this gift, observing that while Canaanite and Greek myth both venerated a “craftsman god; here, instead the Lord inspires a human being with the skill, or ‘wisdom’ of the craft as well as with the ability to administer the project.”<sup>5</sup>

It fell to Bezalel then to transform his fellow Israelites—these willing, but unable, manual laborers—into master craftsmen. To do so, he was surely endowed with those qualities so palpable in great teachers: He had to convey instruction plainly and engagingly, to demand excellence while exuding patience. And most critically, Bezalel needed to instill in his workmen-pupils a powerful sense of confidence that this awesome project was within their grasp.

Perhaps, then, this is the Tabernacle's ultimate glory—that the process of its construction helped transform a mass of unskilled, uneducated slaves into a people that could make something awesome with its own hands. This was an effort that fashioned not only altar and laver, *menorah* and *ephod*—but dignity. It illuminated for people who were dependent on manna from heaven, water from a rock and protection from a cloud that God, in turn, relied upon *them* to build the Divine dwelling on earth. And it was Bezalel, with his gift of guidance, who shepherded the fledgling nation through this ennobling transformation.

In our times too, we can recognize the precious Bezalels who cultivate dignity and transform lives by imparting a skill, a trade—something of which to be proud. These are the people and organizations who know that teaching a man to fish does more than feed a person for a lifetime: It incubates a dignity that nurtures a different kind of sustenance.

One can see this dynamic unfolding in the work of organizations like Women for Women International (WFWI). WFWI helps women who have survived through conflict and violence to develop skills and resources that will enable them to live stable, self-sufficient lives. The core component of these programs is job training: From canning dates in

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 35: 6-9.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Nachmanides on Exodus 35:21.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 35: 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 35:34.

<sup>5</sup> Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004. p. 517, fn. 34.

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Iraq to tailoring in Rwanda and gem-cutting in Afghanistan, WFWI's efforts embolden marginalized women to become integral and powerful forces in their families, local communities and broader civil societies.<sup>6</sup>

Such a transformation is borne out, for instance, by those participating in WFWI's training programs in Democratic Republic of Congo. While over 80 percent of these women report an improvement in their economic situations, even greater numbers report that they are now actively participating in key household decisions and have gained knowledge of their legal rights. Ninety percent of participants go on to train and mentor other community women using the skills they have acquired. In the words of Lucienne, a single mother of three who spent months as a sex-slave to rebel soldiers: "Joining the program has been a salvation...my life has changed and my children are healthy. I recovered confidence through the training."<sup>7</sup>

It takes a special kind of focus, perseverance and patience to cultivate such transformational confidence. It is a role for which not even Moses *Rabbeinu*—"Our Teacher"—his nerves too often stripped by the nation of not-yet-transformed-slaves, seems to have been cut out. Today, God may not call out the names of those extraordinary people who labor and thrive in this challenging work as the Divine did for Bezalel.<sup>8</sup> It is, instead, our duty to single them out for our admiration, and most of all, our support.



**Rachel Farbiarz** is an artist who works in drawing, collage and installation. Prior to working as an artist, Rachel practiced law focusing on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners. Rachel lives with her family in Washington, D.C., where she is represented by the gallery G Fine Art. Rachel can be reached through her website [www.rachelfarbiarz.com](http://www.rachelfarbiarz.com).

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<sup>6</sup> WFWI, "What We Do." [www.womenforwomen.org/programs-supporting-women/programs-for-helping-women.php](http://www.womenforwomen.org/programs-supporting-women/programs-for-helping-women.php)

<sup>7</sup> WFWI, "Taking a Stand Against Violence: The Women of DR Congo." [www.womenforwomen.org/global-initiatives-helping-women/help-women-congo.php](http://www.womenforwomen.org/global-initiatives-helping-women/help-women-congo.php)

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 35:30.

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