



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 this week's *parashah*, *Bechukotai*, God vows to enact a series of blessings and curses for the Israelites—blessings if they observe the commandments, and curses if they do not. In her 2011 *Dvar Tzedek*, author Lisa Exler explains that the blessings are “curiously framed” by the image of walking. The last line of the *parashah* states: “I am Adonai your God who took you out from the land of Egypt, from being their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.” Lisa explains that through this line, and the walking imagery throughout the *parashah*, God reminds the Israelites “that they are no longer oppressed slaves living in fear; but rather, dignified people who can stand tall and walk proudly and are free to choose their own paths.”

There are many people around the world today who are “walking”—sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively—in search of blessings like those promised to the Israelites. Many face significant obstacles on these paths. As a child growing up in rural Nepal, Bishnu Pariyar would walk to school every morning with three other children from her village. When they would stop at a neighbor's house for a drink during these two hour-long treks, Bishnu's companions refused to let her drink from the cup of water they were given because she was a Dalit, the lowest Hindu caste—an untouchable.

Despite this humiliation on her long paths to school, Bishnu persevered in her education. When she grew up, she found a way to walk with dignity—and to empower other Dalit women to do the same. In 1996, while pursuing her college degree, Bishni launched a project that would eventually lead to the founding of the Association for Dalit Women's Advancement of Nepal (ADWAN). This grassroots group—now an AJWS grantee—empowers Dalit and other marginalized women to overcome the challenges they face. Today, ADWAN works in seven of Nepal's 75 districts. It has supported 74 women's groups, helped send 13,000 children to school and provided 97 adolescents with college scholarships. In 2015, ADWAN also began providing disaster relief to Dalit communities after two earthquakes devastated Nepal.

“As we seek to support people around the globe who are walking amidst all kinds of challenges,” Lisa writes, “we should be guided by the lesson of *Parashat Bechukotai*, that the ability to walk upright and unafraid is a precondition for attaining life's blessings.” Let us continue to work for human rights for all people.

Read more about Bishnu and ADWAN [here](#), and read Lisa's beautiful piece below.

Parashat Bechukotai 5776

By Lisa Exler

June 4, 2016

(Reprinted from May 21, 2011)

Walking—putting one foot after the other—is, for many of us, our most basic vehicle for navigating the world. Yet we probably don't put much thought into it. We're more concerned with where we're going than how we're getting there; and unless we're on a hike, we rarely think of walking as an end in itself, or count it among our blessings.

But walking takes on new meaning in *Parashat Bechukotai*, which is perhaps best known for its list of blessings and curses that God vows for the Israelites—blessings if they observe the commandments, and curses if they fail to do so. The blessings are curiously framed by the image of walking. The passage opens with God stating the condition for receiving these blessings: “*Im bechukotai teileichu*—If you walk in accordance with My laws and observe and do My commandments.” And the section concludes with God's promise to walk, in return: “*V'hithalachti b'tochechem*—And I will walk in your midst, and I will be your God and you will be My people.”¹

The section of blessings could have ended there, with the final inspiring blessing being one of reciprocal relationship and intimacy between God and the Israelites. But it doesn't. Instead, it ends with the following verse, a seemingly superfluous description of God's role in the Exodus, which, significantly, also includes the image of walking: “I am Adonai your God who took you out from the land of Egypt, from being their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright—*va'olech etchem komemiyut*.”²

A *midrash* explains that the word *komemiyut*, upright—which appears only this once in Torah, means “with a straight spine and unafraid of any creature.”³ In other words, God reminds the Israelites that they are no longer oppressed slaves living in fear; but rather, dignified people who can stand tall and walk proudly and are free to choose their own paths. The Israelites' ability to walk upright, which they attained through their experience of the Exodus, was the necessary precondition for the other “walkings” described previously in the text—walking in accordance with God's laws and God's reciprocal walking among the people, bestowing upon them the blessings of rain, food, peace and fertility.

These biblical “walkings” are clearly metaphors for dignity and the covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites; but around the world today, there are many who are literally walking—to school; to fetch water and firewood; to escape conflict, persecution or natural disaster—in search of blessings like those God promised to the Israelites. Unfortunately, many of those who go on foot in the world face significant obstacles. Not yet liberated from their own Egypts—poverty, marginalization and oppression—they struggle to walk “upright.” In South Africa, many children walk over 30 minutes each way to school, often encountering violent crime and unsafe roads and pedestrian paths.⁴ More than a year after Haiti's devastating earthquake, over one million people still live in camps for internally displaced persons, where women and girls are regularly attacked while walking along unlit paths to latrines at night.⁵ In Darfur, women face similar dangers as they walk long distances to procure water and firewood for their families. In the words of a resident of Kuma Garadayat village in North Darfur, “For years we have

¹ Leviticus 26:3 and 26:12.

² Leviticus 26:13.

³ Sifra Bechukotai 1:7.

⁴ UNICEF and The Presidency, Republic of South Africa. *Situation Analysis of Children in South Africa*, April 2009. p. 69. http://www.unicef.org/sitan/files/SitAn_South_Africa_2009.pdf

⁵ Amnesty International. *Aftershocks: Women Speak Out Against Sexual Violence in Haiti's Camps*, 2011.

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been afraid of being attacked while fetching water and collecting firewood; it is not always possible to move in groups and we are often escorted by men or UNAMID peacekeepers.”⁶

Despite these challenges, people are finding ways to walk with dignity. In Haiti, for example, AJWS partners Earthspark International and KONPAY have distributed thousands of solar flashlights to women in IDP camps. The women have used them to light the paths to latrines and other vulnerable areas, thus reducing the incidence of violence and rape in the camps. The flashlights have also led to community organizing, as the women have initiated safety patrols and peer-counseling programs and are teaching each other income-generating activities.⁷

As we seek to support people around the globe who are walking amidst all kinds of challenges, we should be guided by the lesson of *Parashat Bechukotai*, that the ability to walk upright and unafraid is a precondition for attaining life’s blessings. As Peter Uvin, Professor of International Humanitarian Studies at Tufts University, explains: “When people are deprived of their freedom, live in constant fear, cannot move or work as they wish, and are cut off from the communities and the lands they care about, development has emphatically *not* taken place.”⁸

Let us work to secure the human rights of all, honoring the Divine image in which each person was created. In this way we will truly achieve the final blessing promised to the Israelites—God will walk among us.



Lisa Exler is Director of the Curriculum Project, a joint initiative of Mechon Hadar and Beit Rabban Day School, where she is the Director of Jewish Studies. Previously, Lisa served as a senior program officer in the experiential education department at American Jewish World Service, where she developed and managed a range of educational materials to promote the values of global citizenship in the American Jewish community. Lisa has a B.A. and an M.A. in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University. She lives in Washington Heights, NY, with her husband, Elie, and children, Maytal, Amalya and Yaniv.

⁶ “North Darfur Water Project Helps Protect Women From Sexual Violence.” *IRIN*, 27 April 2011.

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportID=92597>

⁷ Haiti One Year Later: Grassroots Response to Tragedy. AJWS.

Also see: “Gender-Based Violence Against Haitian Women and Girls in Internal Displacement Camps.” MADRE, 7 April 2011.

⁸ Uvin, Peter. *Human Rights and Development*. Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2004. p. 123.

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