



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 the United States this week we celebrate the founding of our democracy on July 4th, but less than 800 miles from our shore, hundreds of thousands of people are being [stripped of their citizenship, and thus their right to vote](#). Through a series of laws and court rulings, the Dominican Republic has disenfranchised more than 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent. Although they were born on Dominican soil, they are no longer guaranteed civil rights, freedom of movement, the right to due process in any court in the world or access to essential government services, health care or education. Many are also facing deportation or detention and face threats of violence fueled by xenophobia.

As AJWS Global Ambassador Ruth Messinger [recently wrote](#), "Given [our] history, Jewish-Americans must join the outcry and speak out about the horrific treatment of people of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic. We have a unique understanding of the horrible consequences when people remain silent in the face of government actions to strip communities and individuals of their rights."

You can speak out right now. [Sign AJWS's petition urging Secretary Kerry to help end this crisis in the Dominican Republic.](#)

A *midrash* on this week's Torah portion illuminates why taking public action like this is so important. In her Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Korach* from 2012, Rabbi Wendi Geffen posits that at the heart of the disagreement between Moses and Korach is whether we are obligated to act publically on our beliefs. In the *parasha*, Korach challenges Moses's leadership, but the *midrash*, looking to make the text relevant to its 12th century rabbinic audience, styles their disagreement as a legal dispute. Korach cleverly argues that if you have a house full of Torah books, you should not need a mezuzah (which, after all, only contains two small passages from the Torah). Moses counters that no matter how much Torah is *in* your house, you are still obligated to put a mezuzah *on* your doorposts. In other words, public actions matter.

As Rabbi Geffen explains, it isn't enough to have a private room filled with books of Torah—or similarly, to hold a silent belief in human rights or the equal dignity of all people. We must take a public stand for these things to make our values manifest in the world. **Do that now by [signing the AJWS petition here](#).**

You can read more about the crisis in Haiti [here](#), and read Rabbi Wendi Geffen's piece below.

Parashat Korach 5776

By Rabbi Wendi Geffen
July 9, 2016
(Reprinted from June 23, 2012)

When it comes to high drama, it's hard to beat *Parshat Korach*. When Moses's first cousin, Korach, challenges the leader's authority, Moses retorts by suggesting a "spirituality duel" of sorts, charging Korach and his band to return the next morning so each party can present offerings to God. Korach's offerings are rejected, and God renders a final sweeping judgment against the rebels by opening a chasm in the earth that swallows all of Korach's people and their possessions.

Although the Torah does not offer great detail about the encounter between these two leaders and the nature of Korach's complaint, many *midrashim* help to fill in those blanks. One, in particular, from Bamidbar Rabbah,¹ offers us some "behind-the-scenes footage" that not only sheds light on each man's intention, but can have profound implications for how we enact our commitment to global social justice today.

In the *midrash*, Korach challenges Moses's authority on issues of *halachah*—laws of observance. At one point, he asks Moses if a house full of Torah and Scriptural books stills requires a *mezuzah* on the door. Moses answers that, indeed, it does. Korach laughs and, in a mocking tone, questions this logic: the mezuzah contains only two excerpts from Torah,² while a house full of books contains its entirety! The *midrash* implies that for Korach, the spirit of the law (i.e. owning a substantial Jewish library) trumps the letter of the law (i.e., affixing a mezuzah to the door).³

I believe that there is another interpretation of the *midrash* that carries universal truths that are applicable to global justice work today. We can also see the issue as a debate about the importance of the internal versus the external expression of commitment. Korach believes that what is on the inside (the library) outweighs what is on the outside (the mezuzah). Moses, however, finds value in both: he never negates the importance of a home filled with Jewish books; but he asserts that, whatever the internal contents, the home must have a mezuzah on its door to demonstrate the residents' commitment to God to those outside.

Making a parallel to social justice work today, the library represents the steps we take quietly and privately to make a difference in the world. This may involve our personal study of the Jewish values surrounding the pursuit of justice, or actions we take privately—such as giving *tzedakah*, volunteering or signing petitions.

The mezuzah, on the other hand, signifies how we act and engage others about social justice issues in a public, external way. On a practical level, this means discussing human rights and international development issues in conversations with friends to engage them to join us; being open about the causes we support and the *tzedakah* we give to inspire others to do so as well; sharing links to articles or petitions and writing about the issues we support to spread our passion for them; or even wearing emblems like rubber bracelets, pins or clothing to signify that we support global social justice issues. When we pursue justice through the mezuzah approach, we educate others about the injustices in our world and use our own justice-seeking actions as a vehicle to motivate others to do the same.

¹ Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3.

² Dvarim 6:4-9, 11:13-21.

³ The *midrash* presents a preceding argument between Korach and Moses about *tzitit*. Korach asserts that if a whole tallit is made of *t'chelet* (the blue dye used in *tzitit*), then it should not require *tzitit*.

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We may, at first, feel uncomfortable with the latter. We, like Korach, may assert that it is what is on the inside that matters; that putting our righteous acts “on display” is superficial when we are already accomplishing the intended goal of the pursuit of justice. But truth be told, if our actions toward bringing justice prove limited to our individual reach, then the ultimate impact of those actions will be limited as well.

Take, for example, how we give *tzedakah*. Renowned author, ethicist and activist, Peter Singer, addresses this internal/external tension on giving when discussing the goal of ending world poverty. According to Singer:

Research has clearly shown that people are more likely to help others when they know that others are helping. Yet in many cultures, it is considered unseemly to tell others about how much you give... This attitude is understandable, but nevertheless unfortunate, because it means that people don't talk about giving, and those who are thinking of giving may be unaware of how many others give. This makes it less likely that they will give... If large numbers of people pledge to give a modest percentage of their income to people in extreme poverty, that will show everyone that others do give.⁴

We may be inclined not to share information about our *tzedakah* practices for fear of appearing boastful, but, as Singer points out, talking openly about our giving can be a powerful way to motivate others to give generously as well.

The best pursuit of global social justice requires both internal and external action—the library and the *mezuzah*—because real justice will never be achieved unless, and until, each of us—strengthened by our own core convictions and beliefs—turns outward and invites others to act upon these beliefs along with us to build a better world.



Wendi Geffen is the senior rabbi at North Shore Congregation Israel in suburban Chicago. Dedicated to social justice and its Jewish textual roots, she regularly works to empower the synagogue and her larger community to act on the Jewish imperative to pursue *tzedek*. Wendi can be reached at rabbigeffen@nsci.org.

⁴ “Why?” *The Life You Can Save*. <http://www.thelifeyoucansave.com>

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