



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

The fight for social justice can be rewarding. It can also be a lonely and emotionally draining effort. In his 2011 Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Toldot*, Rabbi David Singer shares his first-hand experience of the fatigue of activism, comparing it to the exhaustion felt by Esau on returning from a long day in his fields. Although Esau's profound exhaustion drove him to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup, David writes that his own drive for social justice was refueled by the nourishment of a single human connection.

Just a few weeks ago in the [Huffington Post](#), we were given a similar opportunity to form a human connection. The article introduced us to Bitiya, a teenage girl affiliated with a local Indian organization that receives support from AJWS. In 2012, Bitiya, who is Dalit—the lowest Indian caste known as “the untouchables”—was raped by four upper-class men. They filmed their crime and threatened to release copies of the video and kill Bitiya's brother if she told anyone about what they had done to her.

Yet, instead of keeping quiet about the rape, Bitiya is fighting to put her attackers behind bars—even after they offered her \$15,000 to drop the case. “I want them in jail,” she told journalist Nicholas Kristof in an interview. “Then everyone watching will know that people can get punished for this.”

At AJWS, stories like Bitiya's energize our work and refuel our passion for bringing human rights closer for all. As Rabbi Singer writes in his piece below, “Human connections ... are the antidote to the doubt and exhaustion we can so easily feel as social justice activists.” Let us feel reinvigorated by connecting with Bitiya through her story—and by reading David's commentary on Toldot below—and use that inspiration to make change.

Parashat Toldot 5776

By Rabbi David Singer

November 14, 2015

(Reprinted from November 26, 2011)

Esau is a character derided by the Jewish tradition. Depicted as a brute, unintelligent and powerful man of the field, Esau is often seen as the opposite of the rabbinic ideal: his twin brother Jacob. Yet *Parashat Toldot* suggests that we not be so quick to dismiss him. Esau's experience, after all, may very well mirror our own.

Before being swindled out of his birthright over a bowl of lentil stew, Esau comes home from working in the field all day. The Torah makes a point of noting that he “was tired.”¹ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains the significance of this verse:

Esau came tired from all his accomplishments and all his conquests. He was exhausted and disappointed. This is just like modern man, who, with all his progress, his innovations and his inventions, is still full of internal doubt, tortured by disappointment, bothered by anxiety, fearing death. Esau came from the field and he was tired...²

Focused solely on physical success, Esau finished his day existentially exhausted: unfulfilled, demoralized and disappointed. Soloveitchik’s commentary pushes us to see the ways in which our own physical accomplishments don’t bring us the fulfillment we might expect them to.

I, too, once came from the field and was tired.

In 2009, I joined 20 fellow rabbinical students from across the denominational spectrum on an AJWS delegation to Thies, Senegal. There, we spent a week working with AJWS grantee Tostan to build latrines in two villages—Darou Mouride and Keur Songo.

On my first day in Darou Mouride I was sent out to work with some of the villagers. We were taken to labor in their “field”—a barren landscape filled with weeds and cracked earth. There was no irrigation to be had; they hardly owned a plow. And yet we worked for hours, moving dirt and burning weeds. Covered in sweat and dust, by the end of this labor I felt like I had accomplished nothing. The poverty around me is overwhelming, I thought. No amount of physical labor can rectify this. I was exhausted, disappointed and anxious.

When Esau came back from the field that day, he literally gave up on his future out of his desperation over the moment. His disappointment at the futility of his labor was so strong that hunger and exhaustion took over, enabling his brother Jacob to swindle him out of his birthright in exchange for a simple bowl of soup. Esau’s disillusionment blinded him to his own self-interest and success.

So had mine. I was so focused on the horror of the poverty I witnessed that, without immediate success, I was left demoralized and disappointed—so tired that I was ready to give up.

As I walked back into the center of the village, I was followed by a small child—no older than five or six. Disheartened by my day’s fruitless labor, I sat down on a chair, and this stranger sat there with me. Suddenly, the silence around me was broken. “Popmusonjop!” he exclaimed. He said it again, and again and again. It was his name. “David!” I offered back. He reached out and held my hand.

¹ Genesis 25:29.

² As quoted in: *Torah Gems*, ed. Aharon Yaakov Greenberg (Brooklyn: Yavneh Publishing House, Ltd., 1998) 204-5.

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We spoke no common language other than the smiles on our faces. And yet, there, in the middle of this village whose name I could hardly pronounce, we played silly games I remembered from elementary school; we kicked around a dilapidated soccer ball, ran around together and laughed and smiled. The companionship I brought to Popmusonjop gave him a fun afternoon; the relief he offered me was redemptive. It refueled my drive to confront the poverty I saw and continue to work toward alleviating it.

Human connections like this one are the antidote to the doubt and exhaustion we can so easily feel as social justice activists. Whether these connections come from those who benefit from our social activism, like Popmusonjop, or from our peers in a community of fellow Jewish activists, they are what nurture us through the great task ahead. Because without them, we are like Esau: so exhausted that we give in to our urge to accept short-term comfort over the more elusive birthright towards which we have been striving.

Healing our world is not a venture for the individual. The task is too large. Without companionship, it's hard to remember why we're doing this hard work in the first place and to know not to give up when progress is slow. But as long as we don't go out there alone, as long as we don't try to work a field all day by ourselves, we can remind each other that the cause is more important than the immediate discomfort and remain ever-optimistic of the possibility of eventual triumph. Working for the future of this planet—securing a birthright dedicated to justice, equality and responsibility—is a tiring task that requires human connection to sustain us along the way.



Rabbi David Singer is the Director of Hillel of San Diego at UCSD. Previously, he was the Founding Director of Makom, a young spiritual community in Dallas, TX. Named by *The Jewish Daily Forward* as one of America's Most Inspiring Rabbis, David is a graduate of Clal, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership's Clergy Leadership Incubator and a member of Rabbis Without Borders. David graduated from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles in 2012. David can be reached at dsinger@hillelsd.org.

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