



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 *Parashat Vayechi*, we learn of the rape of Dinah and the resulting acts of murder and pillage of Shechem by Dinah's brothers. While Dinah's rape was horrific, it did not justify the collective punishment her brothers inflicted on the town. Their father Jacob was outraged.

In her 2009 Dvar Tzedek, Rabbi Alana Alpert compares Jacob's response to our contemporary responses in the face of injustice we see around the world: "we can take action on these issues because we are personally affected, or we can act because we feel morally compelled," she writes. Rabbi Alpert wrote this piece in the midst of the outpouring of support from Jews for the people of Darfur, and hoped that Darfur activists and donors motivated by the Jewish commitment of "Never Again" would expand their activism to include other global justice issues in which they might be less personally invested.

Six years later, we still urge AJWS's supporters to do just that, responding to injustice with a blend of self-interest and solidarity with the global community. For example, today, we ask you to [express your outrage](#) on behalf of people of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic who have been rendered stateless and victimized by xenophobic laws and rhetoric in recent years. This is both personal—because as Jews we understand all-too-well the repercussions of these hateful actions; and principled—because it is happening to someone else but we know it to be unjust.

As Alpert wrote, and as we learn from Jacob, "We must bridge the gap between the personal and the moral; expand ourselves to let the world in."

Please read this compelling piece below.

Parashat Vayechi 5776

By Rabbi Alana Alpert
December 26, 2015
(Reprinted from January 10, 2009)

Over the course of the book of Genesis, we witness Jacob's two different responses to the unjust massacre committed by Simon and Levi against the people of Shechem. After their sister Dinah is raped by the prince of Shechem, the brothers murder and pillage the entire town. While the rape of Dinah is indeed horrific, it does not justify the act of collective punishment her brothers pursue.

When Jacob learns of Simon and Levi's action, he bemoans:

*You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perrizites; my men are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed.*¹

In Parashat Vayechi, Jacob, on his deathbed, gathers his sons around him to hear his last words. When he reflects again on Simon and Levi, he admonishes them:

*Simon and Levi, the brothers---
weapons of outrage their trade. [...]
For in their fury they slaughtered men,
At their pleasure they tore down ramparts.
Cursed be their fury so fierce,
And their wrath so remorseless! [...]*²

Jacob's initial response to this injustice is personal. His concern with the deeds of Simon and Levi is that there will be repercussions for him and his community. Only later does he express anger that they have acted wrongly by killing innocent people.

Just as Jacob's two responses to the same issue are motivated by very different concerns, our activism on social justice issues can also be motivated by different factors. We can take action on these issues because we are personally affected, or we can act because we feel morally compelled. There is often debate in the world of community organizing as to how we should mobilize communities to combat injustice.

On the one hand, engaging people on the personal level on issues where they feel a direct impact, like health care or education, is an effective tactic. Saul Alinsky, the father of community organizing, championed this approach. He argues that strategies that fail to harness self-interest are naïve: "To question the force of self-interest that pervades all areas of political life is to refuse to see man as he is, to see him only as we would like him to be."³ In order to successfully mobilize communities, we need to speak to the ways the issues affect people personally.

On the other hand, it is imperative that communities stand in solidarity and work alongside those who are directly affected. Moving beyond our self-interest is especially important in the realm of organizing for global justice. Issues like debt relief or the AIDS pandemic feel very distant for most in the Global North. We must develop a moral compass that compels us, even if we are not directly involved, to act.

¹ Genesis 34:30.

² Genesis 49:5-7. Translation from: Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004, p. 283-4.

³ Alinsky, Saul. *Rules for Radicals*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989, p. 54.

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Like Jacob's responses to the crime of Simon and Levi, our activism in response to the crisis in Darfur can be motivated by personal interest or moral outrage. On a personal level, Jews can act because this genocide reminds us of the Holocaust and challenges our commitment of "Never Again." This narrative explains the outpouring of support from Jews for the people of Darfur. Indeed, not since the cause of my parents' generation, freeing the Jews in the Soviet Union, have we seen this kind of political engagement in the organized American Jewish community on an issue other than Israel.

Without drawing parallels to the Holocaust, however, we can act for Darfur because our moral compasses direct us to fight injustice, not only in Darfur but wherever it exists. While the recent surge of passion in the Jewish community has been fairly limited to Darfur, this involvement has the potential to open up doors for broader and more sustainable global justice activism. My sister Adina was politicized in her day school around the issue of Darfur, and that initial experience is leading her to travel to El Salvador with AJWS to learn about global justice on a much larger scale. We must ensure that the education and organizing taking place about Darfur includes an analysis that extends to the myriad justice causes around the globe. It must inspire Darfur activists and donors to expand their activism to include other global justice issues in which they might feel less of a personal investment.

Perhaps we can fuse these two strategies, blending our understanding of self-interest and solidarity. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King challenges us to take this step when he says, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."⁴ We must bridge the gap between the personal and the moral; expand ourselves to let the world in.



Alana Alpert is the rabbi of Congregation T'chayah and a community organizer with Detroit Jews for Justice (DJJ), where she organizes the Jewish community in Metro Detroit to participate in movements for racial and economic justice. Rabbi Alpert graduated from UC Santa Cruz with a BA in Community Studies, where she studied "Resistance and Social Movements" and first learned about faith-based community organizing. She is a graduate of AVODAH: the Jewish Service Corps and ACTIVATE! The Community Organizing Fellowship of Social Justice Leadership. Rabbi Alpert has worked as an organizer at NY Jobs with Justice and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. She was ordained at Hebrew College, where she led efforts around feminism, Israel/Palestine, GLBTIQ rights and prison reform. The burnout epidemic, which has led to increasing demand from social change-workers for spiritual counseling, inspired her capstone project "Like a Burning Bush: Jewish Practice for Activists." She can be reached at alana.alpert@gmail.com.

⁴ King, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 1963.