



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

Natural disasters are devastating, no matter where they happen. In her 2012 Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Vayetze*, Rachel Travis shares her personal experience during Hurricane Sandy. In the comfort of her New York apartment, which was left unaffected by the storm, Rachel felt both removed from the disaster and deeply moved by the loss felt by others just miles away. Although she could have stayed in her warm, safe surroundings, Rachel decided to go out into the mess wrought by the storm and help with relief efforts—choosing, like Jacob did in this *parashah*, to root herself in the mortal world rather than taking refuge in Heaven (read her Dvar Tzedek, below to learn about this fascinating text).

Recognizing the difficulty of responding to disasters that are farther away, Rachel writes on the importance of “financially supporting development work and inspiring and motivating others to do the same.” This is AJWS’s model. After disasters around the world, we provide immediate humanitarian relief and then stay the course with long-term support for recovery, prioritizing funding for people whose needs are most often ignored. For instance, after the earthquake in Nepal in April of this year, AJWS helped an organization called BBP-Pariwar organize rescue efforts and rebuild houses for the Dalits—Nepal’s “untouchable” caste. Until BBP-Pariwar arrived, no other rescue efforts had helped these devastated and vulnerable villages.

As Rachel concludes her piece, “Each of us has the potential to be a source of blessings and to have a meaningful impact; but actualizing our potential requires that we, like Jacob, actively engage in the critical work of the world.” [Read more about AJWS's critical work in Nepal here](#), and read Rachel’s moving piece below.

Parashat Vayetze 5776

By Rachel Travis

November 21, 2015

(Reprinted from November 24, 2012)

In the wake of hurricane Sandy I felt immensely blessed. My home was warm, light and entirely unscathed. When I ventured downtown two days later to volunteer on New York’s Lower East Side, however, it was as if I had crossed into another dimension, one in which people lugged buckets of water up a dozen flights of stairs and huddled shivering in their dark apartments. I had known what to expect from days of insatiable news consumption, but the storm’s devastation was not fully real to me until I actually encountered those suffering its consequences.

I thought about this experience as I read this week's *parashah*. *Vayetze* opens with one of the most famous spiritual encounters of the Torah: Jacob's vision of angels climbing and descending a ladder stretching from earth to the heavens. According to a *midrash*,¹ God actually offers Jacob the opportunity to climb the ladder himself. In the *midrash's* telling, Jacob declines, terrified that an ascent to heaven will be followed by a frightening fall. Even after God promises that he will never descend, Jacob is too afraid to climb the ladder, and instead remains ensconced in the mortal world.

And indeed, following this ethereal revelation, the rest of the *parashah* is grounded in entirely human encounters—stories of love, betrayal, jealousy, and the building and splintering of family bonds. Jacob falls in love, unwittingly marries Leah and then knowingly Rachel, toils for a duplicitous father-in-law, and struggles with marital tensions and with earning a livelihood. These dramas are incredibly human and often heartrending—begging the question: wouldn't it have been better for Jacob to have climbed the ladder to heaven, sparing himself the pain and trials of his earthly life? It's easy for us to pity Jacob, frozen by fear, for having made the "wrong" choice that led to a lifetime of avoidable human challenges.

Yet, I'd propose that Jacob's decision to decline God's offer to ascend to heaven was not driven by fear at all, but rather by a bold determination to stay rooted in the matters of the world. Perhaps he understood what would be later articulated in the Talmud: that the Torah exists not in heaven but on earth.² In other words, Jacob realized that he could only have a true impact by acting in this world, not by ascending to the heavens.

We are often exhorted not to bury our collective heads in the sand to avoid awareness of distressing world issues. Jacob teaches us that it is just as important not to hide in the heavens—aware of the problems in the world, but removed from the action. His choice to remain on earth meant a messier and more difficult existence, but it also promised an authentic and meaningful journey—and gave him the ability to affect its outcome. We, too, often have to choose whether to remain observers (even informed ones) or to fully tangle with the world's problems.

I experienced this on a micro level following the hurricane. From the safety of my comfortable home I could watch the news, discuss the impact of the storm and debate the effectiveness of the rescue efforts and administrative decisions. But watching the events unfold from my distant perch, my talk was empty unless I took action to help. It wasn't until I went downtown to distribute water and flashlights that I was able to make an impact myself.

Those of us who try to do global development work from afar—espousing well-intentioned theories and ideas yet avoiding real engagement—often experience this same state of removal from the reality on the ground. While it isn't impossible to make a difference from a distance, we must find ways to contribute that have a tangible and quantifiable impact. That means making sure our voices are being heard and our hands are being utilized in meaningful ways—whether by engaging in the political process and lobbying on important policy decisions, or financially supporting development work and inspiring and motivating others to do the same.

¹ Vayikra Rabbah 29:2.

² Talmud Bavli Baba Mesi'a 59B.

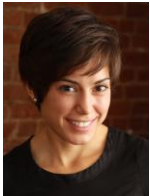
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When God appears to Jacob in the *parashah's* opening sequence, God promises that “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your offspring.”³ Jacob, it seems, understood that in order to bring blessings to himself and others, he had to be fully engaged with the world around him. Each of us has the potential to be a source of blessings and to have a meaningful impact; but actualizing our potential requires that we, like Jacob, actively engage in the critical work of the world.



Rachel Travis is a consultant in PwC's Public Sector Practice. After earning a master's in Jewish Art and Visual Culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rachel has worked at a number of museums and Jewish institutions, exercising her belief that art can serve as a vehicle for social change. Born in Manhattan and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, she currently lives with her husband and son in New York City where they enjoy biking, baking and urban farming. Rachel can be reached at racheltravis@gmail.com.

³ Genesis 28:14.

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