



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Terumah 5775

By David Jaffe

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Sitting in the dusty courtyard of Challenging Heights, in Sangor, Ghana, surrounded by children rescued from slavery, I realized I was not truly present. It was 2012, and I was on an AJWS rabbinical delegation intended to inspire American clergy to deepen our commitment to global justice by connecting with people in the Global South whom we seek to help.

Moments earlier, our facilitator asked us if we were feeling pity, sympathy, empathy or solidarity in our relationship with our Ghanaian hosts. In the AJWS framework, these were a continuum of ways of relating to people living with poverty and injustice that ascended from paternalism to the ideals of partnership and empowerment. As I thought about this question, my honest answer was that I was nowhere near solidarity. Despite hearing the founder, himself a child slave, describe his heroic efforts to save children from slavery and give them an education; and despite exerting my body carrying cement and cinder blocks to build housing at the school, I related to them, at best, with sympathy for their poverty.

Instead of forging a deep connection with my hosts, my mind was occupied by the interpersonal and Jewish identity dynamics of our diverse rabbinic group from the U.S. The Ghanaians around us were a fascinating backdrop and context to this Jewish journey. The facilitator's question startled me and forced me to reflect on this: How could I be here, but not connect deeply with the people in front of me?

Through rich symbolism, Parashat Terumah describes the ideal of being truly present for one another and hints at how to achieve this presence. Terumah introduces us to the Mishkan, the Tabernacle the Israelites built at the beginning of their journey in the desert that would be the meeting place between them and God. The centerpiece of the Mishkan is the *aron*, the container of the tablets of the Torah, covered by a gold statue of two winged cherubs. The cherubs' wings spread over their heads and almost touch at the top. From the space between the wings, as God says to Moses, "I will be known to you there and will speak with you..." (Exodus 25:22). A place of knowing and being truly known stands at the center of this structure, considered by Jewish tradition to be a microcosm of all creation.

This container is the centerpiece of the Mishkan and central to achieving a connection with the Divine. The tablets of the Torah rest at the bottom, but God does not speak from the tablets. God speaks from above the cherubs, who face each other in a gesture of genuine relationship. The Sages teach that the cherubs faced each other when the Israelites behaved well and turned away from each other when idolatry and oppression reigned. Lying in between the tablets and the cherubs is a narrow, ornamental strip of gold called the *Zer*, which Rashi calls a "crown for the Torah." The *zer* seems to have no functional purpose but is a crucially important symbol.

Zer, as written in the Torah scroll without vowels, is also the word for "stranger"—*zar*. Medieval commentator Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra¹ notes that the word for cruel, *akzar*, is based on the Hebrew root for stranger (*zar*)—implying that

¹ As quoted in Essays on Elul, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, p.1

cruelty grows when we make each other into strangers. The turned face of the cherubs is a graphic image of this estrangement and distance. When the cherubs face each other the *zer* is a crown, but when they turn away, it evokes alienation and cruelty.

The message of the *zer/zar* is that something as small as one vowel distinguishes between human and Divine communion or estrangement and cruelty. This idea has powerful implications for our relationships with people, as well. The small gesture of turning toward one another can be the difference between inviting a relationship to form or dismissing someone cruelly as a stranger.

Applying this idea to my experience in Ghana, I realized that a very small shift in my own thoughts or behavior could open the way to a more ideal relationship of solidarity with our Ghanaian hosts. I realized that a feeling of familiarity with my rabbinic colleagues made our group seem much more interesting to me than the Ghanaian men and women who dedicated their lives to educating these young former slaves. I needed to reduce the space the group dynamic was taking and give space in my mind to the real purpose of our visit, accompanying and supporting the life-saving work of Challenging Heights.

To do this required turning in, like the cherubs. I approached one of the young teachers and began asking questions about his life. I recognized myself in his story of his desire to help his people. This was the beginning of empathy. My curiosity grew as we embarked on a cycle of questions and deeper connection. Each question I asked stoked a genuine desire to listen, and metaphorically turned my face toward our hosts and helped me begin to develop a real relationship. While I still had distance to travel, I was now on the path towards the kind of solidarity that evokes Divine presence here in this world.



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