



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vaera 5771

By Jimmy Taber

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“Look, I am holding a ten-dollar bill in my hand. I propose to walk around the Biltmore Hotel, a total of four blocks and try to give it away... My guess is that everyone will back off, look confused, insulted, or fearful, and want to get away from this nut fast.”... I found myself back at the front entrance of the Biltmore Hotel, still holding my ten-dollar bill. My four companions had, then, a clearer understanding of the concept that people react strictly on the basis of their own experience.

- Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*¹

How can this be? Everyone wants to make a few bucks, yet, as Saul Alinsky illustrates, almost no one would accept money offered by a stranger on the street. The key to this apparent contradiction lies in the context of the offer for assistance: Nothing within our experience suggests that someone would give away money for nothing, so we reject the gift, thinking it's probably a scam.

In *Parshat Vaera*, the Children of Israel find themselves presented with an offer that, similarly, contradicts their lived experience. Moshe comes to the people charged by God to deliver God's promise to “redeem you with an outstretched arm.”² The text tells us that the people would not listen to Moshe “because of shortness of breath and hard work.”³ Their experience is limited to the oppression of slavery. Blinded thus, the people cannot imagine that the possibility of redemption could be real, or even begin to identify with the promise of a different life.

According to Alinsky's theory, Moshe has made the most fundamental mistake for a community organizer: he has failed to present his vision for change in terms to which the people can relate. Earlier in *Rules for Radicals* Alinsky writes: “An organizer can communicate only within the areas of experience of his audience; otherwise there is no communication.”⁴ In order to lead the people out of Egypt, Moshe has to bridge the gap between God's implausible promise and the people's lived experience.

The ensuing story of the plagues provides the necessary bridge. By making God's presence felt in their daily lives through direct action,⁵ God provides the people with a new context for hearing the promise of redemption. After the completion of the plagues, Moshe is able to engage the people successfully. In *Parshat Bo*, he commands them to slaughter the Pesach-offering to avoid the fate of the Egyptian first-born sons. This time, equipped with the experience of God's remarkable acts on their behalf, “The Children of Israel went and did as God commanded Moshe

¹ Alinsky, Saul D. *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971. pp. 86-87.

² Exodus 6:6.

³ Exodus 6:9.

⁴ Alinsky, pp. 78-79.

⁵ Exodus 7-12.

and Aaron.”⁶ Now that the message of redemption falls within the context of the Israelites’ experience, the people are willing not only to listen to Moshe’s message, but to take on the responsibility of actively bringing it about.

The transition of the Israelites from expressing pessimism and disbelief to becoming active partners in God’s plan for redemption is instructive for those of us who seek to encourage our own local communities to pursue greater justice in the world. Convincing our communities to adopt a social justice agenda is a gradual process, and can only proceed at the rate that people are prepared to move. Often, people resist addressing issues of social justice because the problems of the world feel remote and complex. They may not have personally experienced success in overcoming challenges and effecting change, and might feel like the problems are too large to be overcome.

Like the Israelites, who needed the plagues to convince them that another reality was possible, many of us need proof of successful change in the world to enable us to see that we can play a role in addressing the seemingly insurmountable problems in developing countries. We can provide this proof—to ourselves and to others—by reading and sharing news about successful advocacy campaigns that result in more just policies; by learning and talking about community-based organizations all over the world that are fighting poverty, hunger and disease; by volunteering and encouraging others to volunteer with these organizations, so as to experience solutions being implemented successfully on the ground. By expanding our lived experiences in these ways, we can introduce into our lived experience the conviction that change is possible. These experiences validate our claims that justice can be achieved, and inspire us to work to achieve it.



Jimmy Taber, is a second-year MA/MBA candidate at Brandeis University’s Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership. After completing his BA in Critical Theory and Social Justice at Occidental College in Los Angeles, Jimmy served as an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow with KOREH L.A., the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles’s literacy program. He has also previously worked at the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Coalition for Service, and Gateways: Access to Jewish Education. Upon completing the Hornstein Program, Jimmy hopes to work in the field of social justice. Jimmy can be reached at jimmy.ajws@gmail.com.

⁶ Exodus 12:28.

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