



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayera 5770

By Rachel Farbiarz

November 7, 2009

The landscape of global hunger can be efficiently surveyed through its statistical contours. Every day, hunger-related causes kill 25,000 people around the world. In 2007, the number of undernourished people increased by 75 million and in 2008 by 40 million—pushing today’s global tally past the one billion mark.¹

Obscured in this numerical vista, however, is hunger’s human impact—how deprivation can insinuate itself into relationships, dull the senses and fray a society’s fabric. *Parshat Vayera*, with its story of Hagar and Ishmael, lays bare this crushing impact.

At Sarah’s behest, Hagar and her son Ishmael were cast off, alone, into the wilderness. After their provisions ran out and mother and son were left without water or food in the hot expanse, the boy Ishmael rapidly wasted away. Hagar, recognizing that her son’s death was at hand, “flung the child under one of the bushes and went off and sat down at a distance...for she thought, ‘Let me not see when the child dies.’”²

The tale ends happily enough after an angel of God revealed to Hagar a spring at which to revive the boy. But the story lingers uncomfortably. It is that painful word “flung”—an inescapable mark of something very wrong. Here is Hagar, a mother with a dying son she does not comfort. Hagar does not seek to prolong the moments she has with her only child, to quiet his wailing, to ease his suffering. Instead, she *flings* the boy and scurries a good distance away.

Hagar’s behavior is not recognizable as cruelty. Indeed, even as she casts Ishmael aside, we feel not scorn, but great pathos for her. Undoubtedly depleted herself, Hagar seems discombobulated by her desperation, and her actions, a manic surrender to it. Hunger and thirst seem to have undone the woman; and her life’s fabric, woven together by the most precious of relationships, has been rent.

While Hagar’s tale grows out of days—at most weeks—of want, such privation and the surrender that follows is a near-permanent global reality today, looming over the millions of mothers and fathers who watch their own children weakened by chronic hunger and undernutrition. In addition to stunting growth and hindering fetal development, chronic hunger attacks the spirit. It saps energy, slows thinking, steals motivation and depresses productivity. It impedes one’s ability to learn and corrodes one’s sense of well-being.³ In its presence, hopelessness proliferates, prompting world leaders from former Secretary of State Kissinger to Brazil’s President Lula da Silva to cast hunger and hope as antipodes.⁴

¹ “Hunger Stats.” *World Food Program*. <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>

² Genesis 16:1-4; 21:9-21; 21:15-16 (“flung the child...”); Robert Alter, transl. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004. p. 104.

³ “Hunger Information: Hunger Facts.” *Freedom from Hunger*. <http://www.freedomfromhunger.org/info>; “World Hunger Series 2006: Hunger & Learning.” *UN World Food Program*, 2006. http://wfp.org/policies/introduction/other/documents/pdf/World_Hunger_Series_2006_En.pdf; “The Hunger Trap.” *UN World Food Program*, 1998. <http://wfp.org/policies/introduction/other/documents/pdf/hungertap.pdf>

⁴ Henry Kissinger, quoted by Josette Sheeran. “The Silent Tsunami—the Globalization of the Hunger Challenge.” Speech delivered at the Peterson Institute for International Economics (Washington, D.C.: 6 May 2008). <http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/paper.cfm?ResearchID=942>; President Lula da

It is this hopelessness that is, in many ways, most alarming. If Hagar's surrender is a snag in humanity's fabric, a society mired in hunger's hopelessness will tug until the stitching unravels throughout. Thus, when the world's hungry reached one billion people this past summer, UN and G8 leaders stressed the emerging threat of societal instability.⁵ This is the scenario UN World Food Program Director Josette Sheeran invokes when she references the grim adage that "there are only seven meals between civilization and anarchy[.]"⁶

It is worth lingering over those seven meals. While hunger may propel desperate surrender, adequate sustenance does more than hold anarchy at bay: It nurtures civilization and incubates human enrichment.

Indeed, deprivation is not the Torah's last word for Ishmael and Hagar. After the angel nourished Ishmael in the wilderness, we learn that "God was with the boy" as he grew.⁷ In his long life, Ishmael bore 12 sons, who became "twelve chieftains of as many tribes"—satisfying God's promise to Hagar that from her withered son would issue a "great nation."⁸ Indeed, in traditional lore, Ishmael is understood as the ancestor of the Arab peoples; and, in Muslim tradition, he is revered as an important prophet and forefather of Muhammad. Storied civilizations and one of the world's foundational religions are thus the legacy of Ishmael's nourishment.

We should expect—and demand—thriving on such a scale for today's one billion hungry. For countries with high undernourishment rates, it is estimated that economic output would have risen 45 percent had their people been adequately fed over the last 30 years.⁹ And because enhanced learning is a dividend of sustenance, a well-nourished society further begets intellectual, spiritual and artistic enrichment.¹⁰

We cannot rely on an angel of God to provide for our world's hungry. Let us, instead, take on the responsibility of sustenance, and thereby be privileged to witness the human flourishing that burgeons from it.



Rachel Farbiarz is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, as well as of an Orthodox yeshivah high school. After clerking for a federal appellate judge in San Francisco, Rachel practiced law focusing on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners. In this role, she helped to improve the basic living conditions on California's death row at San Quentin. Rachel currently lives with her husband in Washington, D.C., where she works on her own writing and art. This is the second year that Rachel has penned *Divrei Tzedek* for AJWS. Rachel can be reached at rachel.ajws@gmail.com.

Silva, quoted by Josette Sheeran, "Confronting the Challenge of the Global Food Crisis in the Americas." Speech delivered at the Organization of American States (Washington, D.C.: 29 Jul. 2008). <http://www.oas.org/speeches/speech.asp?sCodigo=08-0075>

⁵ Blas, Javier. "G8 Warns of Hunger Threat to Stability," *Financial Times*, 6 April 2009. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/164de0fa-22e1-11de-9c99-00144feabdc0.html>; Rizzo, Alessandra. "UN: World Hunger Reaches 1 Billion Mark." *Associated Press*, 20 June 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/8568010>

⁶ Sheeran. "Silent Tsunami." See *ibid.* at note 4.

⁷ Genesis 21:20.

⁸ Genesis 25:12-17; 21:18.

⁹ Bell, Bob et al. "Hunger: Facing the Facts." *America.gov*, 11 June 2008. (Reprinted from *eJournal USA*, September 2007).

<http://www.america.gov/st/health-english/2008/June/20080615232420xjyrrep0.8201105.html>

¹⁰ See "Hunger & Learning," *ibid.* at note 3.

©2009 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org