



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Beha'alotcha 5772

By Guy Izhak Austrian

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This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer, Dvar Tzedek alumnus Guy Izhak Austrian.

Death felt very close as I walked through the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya, with leaders of Binti Pamoja—Daughters United—a girls' leadership development program.¹ Sewage ran through narrow alleys between the endless rows of tin shacks. Shredded plastic bags rattled amid twisted bits of chain link fencing and the occasional muddy weeds on the ground. My head filled with imagined statistics about cholera, HIV, low life expectancies. I wondered whether poverty had snuffed out the life of this place.

But as I got used to the sights and sounds, I began to look and listen more closely. Once I parted the thick façade of poverty, I began to see the community in another light. What looked like empty structures had life within. That shack made of cardboard and scrap lumber? A barber shop. The next one: a bar filled with people playing cards and laughing. A vegetable stand, a family business.

I saw that, despite the physical conditions, Kibera is not dead, but a living, breathing community. And my hosts from Binti Pamoja were not only surviving despite the signs of decay all around; they were trying to do something extraordinary—to transform how young women are seen and treated in their society.

This demand to see life and possibility in the midst of death and suffering also animates *Parshat Beha'alotcha*. As a result of an encounter with a dead body, a group of Israelite men are considered ritually impure—which prohibits them from participating in the first Passover festival since the liberation from Egypt. Pained, the men plead before Moses and Aaron: “Just because we are impure from a corpse, why are we barred from approaching to make an offering to God on this festival with the rest of the Israelites?”²

At first glance, these men are seen only as tainted with death. But the men themselves refuse to be defined by that stigma. Instead, they assert that they, too, are living people with a spiritual need to celebrate life and experience liberation. God responds to their alienation by seeing past their stigma and creating a new holiday—Pesach Sheni, a Second Passover—on which those who are unable to observe Passover at its regular time can celebrate one month later.

Like the Israelites, the residents of Kibera also demand not to be defined by the death that seems to surround them. Once I looked beyond the signs of suffering, I could see how local leaders, such as the girls of Binti Pamoja, are telling a different story—one of hope, vitality and optimism for their community.

It's true, for instance, that young women in the slums are often dependent on boyfriends for money to meet basic needs—making them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and sexually transmitted infections. In response, Binti Pamoja

¹ Binti Pamoja (Daughters United) is a program of Carolina for Kibera, an AJWS grantee from 2002-2011. It was co-founded by my sister, Karen Austrian, whom I visited in Nairobi in 2003.

² Numbers 9:7.

has trained about 1,000 girls in sexual health awareness, leadership skills and financial literacy. Based on the successes of Binti Pamoja, a coalition of local and international NGOs persuaded two Kenyan banks to let the girls open no-fee, no-minimum micro-savings accounts—and today about 400 girls from Binti Pamoja are saving money and becoming more independent.³

This narrative of progress through organizing and education doesn't sound much like the one that ran through my head as I navigated the alleyways of Kibera. But *Parshat Beha'alotcha* reminds us that we must be willing to attune ourselves to both kinds of stories.

A few verses after the description of Pesach Sheni in our *parshah*, God commands Moses to manufacture two silver trumpets.⁴ At times of war and alert, they are to be blown in short, broken blasts: *teruah*. At times of joy and assembly, they are to be blown in long blasts: *tekiah*. Communities like Kibera sound both the *teruah* and the *tekiah*, at different times. But we in the Global North, through our media and our advocacy organizations, tend to hear and amplify the alarms more than the celebrations of progress. Pulitzer Prize-winning articles and campaigns on various issues routinely focus on terrible loss and irredeemable heartache.

Certainly, some countries suffer more than their fair share, and we should hold ourselves responsible for alleviating their pain. But such stories of death and suffering are not the only way, and perhaps not the best way, to attract our engagement with the developing world. When we visit or read about places like Kibera, we must remember to look for and share the stories that show progress and that show people claiming life.

This week, sign up with an online news portal to receive every article about one developing country from many sources. Read for an entire week and listen to what voices emerge.⁵ Do you hear death or do you hear life? Cries of pain or cries of joy? And how will you respond to what you hear?



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³ *The Power of Community: 10 Years of Collaborative Learning and Action, Carolina for Kibera 2011 Annual Report*, pp. 12, 15. <http://cfk.unc.edu/wp-content/reports/CFK-Annual-Report-2011.pdf>

⁴ Numbers 10:2.

⁵ Enter the name of a country on *Yahoo! News Alerts*, *Google Alerts*, or other sites that allow readers to receive a regular feed of articles matching certain search terms.

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