



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Beshalach 5771

By Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek

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This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek.

Everybody wants *something*. There are very few of us who have reached the level of equanimity that we are happy with what we have; the rest of us want things that are still out of our reach.

For oppressed peoples, the most intense desire is often for the most basic liberties. The ancient Israelites groaned to be released from their bondage in Egypt. More recently, the Maya Achi people of Guatemala wanted to stay on land they had farmed for centuries, land that the Guatemalan government planned to use for the construction of the Chixoy Hydroelectric Dam in the early 1980s.

Both people wanted something basic that, over time, transformed into yearnings of epic proportions. What began as a desire to be free of slavery, or to be free from forcible relocation, became avatars for ultimate desires—connection with the Divine; cultural independence; self determination.

Over time the Israelites began to long not for physical freedom, but for the God who set them free. They crossed the Red Sea singing triumphantly: “The Lord is *my* strength and *my* might; God is *my* deliverance.”¹ Of course, the Divine didn’t and couldn’t belong to them, and this desire remained unfulfilled. Their song describes a longing more accurately than it describes an achievable reality.

So too did the initial desire of the Maya Achi morph into something that bordered on the transcendent. Their initial desire was simply to stay on their land unmolested by the Guatemalan army, which had been sent to forcibly relocate them. But when the army killed 5,000 people who refused to abandon their homes to make way for the dam, the Maya Achi came to desire justice—which has proven, in their lifetime, to be as unattainable as the Divine.

For nearly thirty years the community, led by Jesus Tecu Osorio, has sought justice from the Guatemalan government. They have tried to hold the government accountable for the murders, the loss of lands and livelihoods, and for the violation of national and international laws. In 1998, it seemed briefly as if their longing would be fulfilled, when three former soldiers were convicted of three of the murders and then sentenced to 50 years’ imprisonment. Yet no other soldiers, nor the military officials who planned, ordered or participated in the massacres, have been prosecuted.²

The things we truly desire, the things that define life, can never fully be achieved. The face of God cannot be seen, and the murders of Guatemalans cannot be undone. These are desiderata of a different nature, of a religious nature.

¹ Exodus 15:2.

² Minorities at Risk Project, *Chronology for Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala*, 2004, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/469f3891c.html>.

These are desiderata that are eclipsed by the desires that pursue them. But the desire itself, which can be as strong as the need for air, can give rise to other enduring legacies.

While the Israelites could not quench their thirst for the living God, they built the tabernacle and, ultimately, Judaism—structures in which God can be sought. Similarly, while Jesús Tecú Osorio has tried to bring the murderers of his community to court, he has founded many organizations that advance the rights claims of the Maya Achi, including AJWS grantee Fundacion Nueva Esperanza.³ Since 1997, the foundation has supported the impoverished families who seek a better future for themselves and their communities. The foundation offers high-quality education and provides the next generation with a strong identification with the Maya Achi culture. The architects of the massacres might never be punished, but this foundation will build a vibrant community based on justice, historical truth and participatory democracy.

For both the Maya Achi and the Israelites, the *desire* for the transcendent transforms the world more fully than achieving it ever could; messianism is stronger than the Messiah. The challenge for the Israelites, the Maya Achi and for all of us, is to draw strength, not despair, from the struggle.



Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek is the founding director of the Emek Project, an effort to cultivate deep Jewish life in the Hudson Valley. In recent years, he has served as the Rabbi in Residence at American Jewish World Service and the Marshall T. Meyer Fellow at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York. An experienced leader and creator of Jewish service learning experiences, Rabbi Spodek has taught extensively about spiritual approaches to justice work, Judaism and human rights and other topics in a wide variety of settings. He holds rabbinic ordination and a masters in philosophy from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was the first recipient of the Neubauer Fellowship. Prior to entering the rabbinate, he attended Wesleyan University and worked as a daily journalist in Durham, NC.

³ More information about la Fundacion Nueva Esperanza can be found at <http://www.fne.cosmosmaya.info>.

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