



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Chukkat 5773

By Dahlia Rockowitz

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In *Parashat Chukkat*, we read about the Israelites in a moment of desperation. Forty years into their journey through the desert, they once again find themselves in a new place without any water.¹ The people are distraught, but rather than voicing their fears in a calm, rational manner, the Israelites pick a fight. They approach Moses full of hostility:

“Why have you brought Adonai’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!”²

Overwhelmed by the lack of access to basic resources like water, the Israelites go so far as to question being taken out of Egypt. At this moment, even slavery seems better than this fate. The uncertainty around access to water leads to stress—or as the text describes in Moses and Aaron’s case, “fall[ing] on their faces.”³ This stress breeds frustration and anger and, ultimately, these toxic emotions take their toll: when God instructs Moses to speak to a rock to draw water, Moses violently strikes it instead. Even after the Israelites have moved on, the bitterness of this episode endures and the place is immortalized as “*Mei Meribah*,” waters of strife.⁴

For many communities in the Global South this anxiety is something that people know all too well. Maintaining access to and control over natural resources like land and water is vital for these communities to fulfill their basic needs like food and shelter, to maintain their sources of livelihoods and to preserve their cultural heritage and sense of community. But too often, these resources come under threat and a community’s way of life is put at risk. This tremendous stress can lead to disagreement, conflict and even violence—both within the community and between community members and their leaders. Fractured by conflict, the community is no position to effectively advocate for its rights to the land and resources or to manage the changes taking place on its own terms.

When navigating these challenges, communication is key. As we witness among the Israelites in the desert, when communication breaks down, communities break down. But what’s the best way to facilitate an open dialogue before problems emerge?

AJWS’s Kenyan grantee, the Ogiek Peoples Development Program (OPDP), offers a powerful example. OPDP works to protect the culture and constitutional rights of Ogiek people, an indigenous community of forest dwellers who have gathered fruit and nuts, harvested honey and hunted game in Kenya’s Mau forest for generations. In recent years the Ogiek’s means of survival has grown increasingly insecure as the forest has been cleared for

¹ Other instances include: Exodus 15: 22 and Exodus 17: 1.

² Numbers 20: 4-5.

³ Numbers 20: 6.

⁴ Numbers 20:13.

commercial plantations, logging, grazing and other activities. Although these activities are taking place on their ancestral land, the Ogiek are not being consulted or included in decision making on how the land should be used.

But the Ogiek haven't succumbed to internal conflict as their stress has risen. Instead, they have created a way to communicate and work together as a community. They are creating a community protocol (formally known as a "bio-cultural protocol" or "BCP")—essentially a community constitution—for dealing with the changes happening on their land and to their environment. The protocol articulates the community's values, preserves traditional knowledge and lays out the community's development priorities for the future. In other words, the document captures where the community has come from and sets out the goals, rules and procedures for moving forward.

The drafting process in and of itself is a trust-building exercise. The goal is get everyone on the same page, to prevent in-fighting and put the community in a position of strength to collaborate and negotiate with outside actors like governments, land developers or NGOs. The document also draws upon national and international laws to justify and reinforce the community's demands that governments and developers respect their access to resources, give them a say in the management of these resources and guarantee that they can benefit from them in the years to come. Such a document is both a powerful tool for fostering cooperation and buy-in across the community and for advocacy directed at outside actors.

In contrast to this inclusive approach, which is bringing the Ogiek community closer together, the Israelites involved in the conflict at *Mei Meribah* pay a terrible price for their divisive behavior. For hitting the rock, Moses and Aaron are denied entrance into the land of Israel. For provoking Moses, the people must part with their long-time leader when they need him the most.

This Shabbat, when we read of this escalating dispute sparked by lack of access to natural resources, let us recognize that conflicts like this continue today around the world. Contemporary communities like the Ogiek engage in an ongoing struggle to defend their land—and have to work hard to remain united as communities in the process. Let us recommit ourselves to supporting them as they tackle these great challenges with open dialogue and active participation from the entire community.



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