



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Chukkat 5772

By Rabbi David Singer

June 30, 2012

The pursuit of global justice can often feel like a desert trek, with no oasis or end in sight. We work tirelessly toward our goals without certainty that we will reach them in our lifetimes. Sometimes, the never-ending struggle without reward overwhelms us. We may express anger, lash out or attempt to give up. Yet the Torah provides us with an inspiring role model who experiences the frustration of an elusive goal—but perseveres as if success were in his hands.

In *Parashat Chukkat*, the Israelites are surrounded by wilderness and lack water. God instructs Moses to bring forth water by speaking to a rock. Disobeying these specific instructions, Moses strikes the rock twice with his staff. For this sin, he is banned from ever entering the Land of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Moses has worked so hard to bring the Israelites into the Promised Land, and yet, despite all his work, he will never see the fruits of his labor realized. One might imagine the devastation this news must have wrought on the prophet.

And yet, Moses still works until the day of his death to bring the people closer to their ultimate goal. He raises a disciple to lead the people after him and works toward their goal as if he, himself, would be entering the land along with them.

Most crucially, in the immediate aftermath of his punishment, Moses does not wallow in his loss. Rather, he focuses steadfastly on the task at hand. Just one verse after God's punishment, Moses sends messengers forward to the King of Edom to secure passage for the Israelites through his territory.<sup>2</sup> He does not dwell on what he will not achieve; rather, his attention is keenly focused on the next action necessary for achieving the ultimate goal—however distant it may be.

Many of us laboring for global justice can relate to Moses's disappointment at knowing he would never reach the Promised Land. For us, the knowledge that an ultimate triumph over the perils of poverty may not happen in our lifetimes can be disheartening. So, how can we remain inspired to continue fighting even if we know that progress will be slow and long in coming—and that we may never realize the fruits of our labor ourselves? Here we must learn from Moses's perseverance and remember that we join in this labor of love altruistically, and not out of an egotistical desire to see our efforts immediately realized.

Of course, maintaining this perspective when the work is so hard and the setbacks so deep is not easy. But Moses's example instructs us to focus on the short-term steps of the larger struggle, and all the small triumphs along the way. The road between today's painful reality and complete justice for all is paved with stones of possibility—the possibility of improved life for one community at a time, and the possibility of greater justice and equality, eventually, for millions throughout the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 20:2-13.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 20:14.

Friends of Lake Turkana (FoLT), an AJWS grantee in Kenya, found its stones of possibility in the fight against a dam. The proposed Gibe 3 Dam would cut off the local water supply and threaten the livelihood of the incredibly diverse 200,000 inhabitants down-river. While the organization has not yet attained its goal of ending the threat of environmental degradation in eastern Africa overall, it has succeeded in empowering indigenous communities throughout Ethiopia to speak with a unified voice against this dam. Thanks to their efforts, several major banks have withdrawn their financing for the project and Ikal Angelei, FoLT's founder and driving force, was recently awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize.<sup>3</sup> This is a major success to be celebrated even if it isn't a complete realization of the ultimate goal—environmental restoration, prosperity and justice in the region. The excitement of this honor should inspire us to continue pursuing our stones of possibility that pave our road toward greater achievements ahead.

There are no shortcuts in life's greatest tasks—neither for Moses in his leadership of the Israelites nor for us as we labor to bring justice to the far corners of the Earth. The desert is vast, and the Promised Land far away. But the journey provides ample opportunities for celebration of incremental successes and triumphs. By focusing on these small stones, rather than on the entire journey, we can gain the strength to persevere. As long as we do so, those who will cross the desert in future generations will have a well-laid path on which to tread.



**Rabbi David Singer** is Associate Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in Dallas, Texas. A graduate of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, David is the recipient of the 2011 Whizin Prize in Jewish Ethics. A California native, he graduated with honors from University of California, Berkeley, and has spent two years living and studying in Israel, most recently at Jerusalem's Conservative Yeshiva. David can be reached at [DavidAJWS@gmail.com](mailto:DavidAJWS@gmail.com).

---

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see [http://ajws.org/who\\_we\\_are/news/archives/press\\_releases/ajwss\\_kenyan\\_grantee\\_wins\\_goldman\\_prize.html](http://ajws.org/who_we_are/news/archives/press_releases/ajwss_kenyan_grantee_wins_goldman_prize.html).

©2012 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit [www.ajws.org/dvartzedek](http://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.