



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Dvarim 5773

By Rabbi Guy Izhak Austrian

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Last January, like many Americans, I spent some time immersed in the controversy over Arizona's new immigration law, which allows police to stop those they suspect of being illegal immigrants and to detain them if they are not carrying documentation.

A fierce national debate broke out: What kind of country were we becoming? I heard the debate as a competition between two internal narratives: either we are a nation of immigrants, and immigration is a healthy process ongoing in our day; or we are a nation of American-born citizens whose culture is repeatedly threatened by new waves of outsiders. Either way, many Americans saw the situation from a U.S. perspective and debated its impact solely on the United States. We were telling stories by, for, and about ourselves.

My perspective shifted when I saw some photos that a friend in Ecuador had posted of herself on Facebook, depicting a demonstration she had attended in the capital, Quito. Hundreds of people, living thousands of miles away, had organized themselves in anger and fear over an American state law! It turns out that what had sounded to me like an internal U.S. debate was viewed by those outside our borders as a critical issue that affected their lives.

When reading *Parashat Dvarim*, I thought of my surprise at being reminded that characters in my own story might have a story of their own. Here, in the opening chapters of the last book of the Torah, Moses weaves a powerful narrative, retelling the story of Israel's travels from Mt. Sinai through the wilderness over the past 40 years. Yet the narrative of Israel is interrupted by two odd, parenthetical passages in which Moses stops to explain the history of the lands of the Moabites, Edomites, Ammonites and Caphtorim—peoples who lived outside the Land of Israel and encountered the Israelite camp as it passed through the wilderness on its travels toward Canaan.

Moses says about the lands of Moab:

It was formerly inhabited by the Emim, a people great and numerous, and as tall as the Anakites. Like the Anakites, they are accounted as Rephaim; but the Moabites call them Emim. Similarly, Seir was formerly inhabited by the Horites; but the descendants of Esau dispossessed them, wiping them out and settling in their place, just as Israel did in the land they were to possess, which the Lord had given to them.¹

This passage does have a use in Moses's narrative: it aims to calm the Israelites' fears of conquering the tall, strong inhabitants of Canaan by asserting that other local nations had also conquered their lands from the indigenous peoples. It nevertheless sticks out from the smooth storytelling around it. Traditionally, the Torah is viewed as using

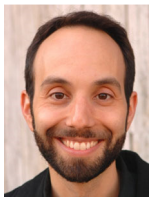
¹ Deuteronomy 2:10-12. "Seir" refers to the land of the Edomites. See also vv. 20-23, which addresses the Ammonites and Caphtorim.

language sparingly, yet the text seems to digress here, spending extra words to clarify the origins of names and peoples.

Some critical scholars of the Bible suggest that an ancient editor of Deuteronomy added this passage about the land's inhabitants to explain and contextualize the story for later readers.² This urge to add layers of information, to speculate and footnote, has only increased over the centuries. Medieval commentators such as Ramban went to great lengths to sort out and elaborate upon the identities of the peoples mentioned in these and other verses.³ Modern historians and archaeologists have continued this trend, filling libraries with research and speculation on the history, culture and religion of the ancient Near East.⁴

From this process of inquiry we can learn the value and the inevitability of curiosity about other people and their stories. Our own communal narratives are powerful and necessary: they help us to understand who we are and what we do in this complex, confusing world. But we should listen to our own stories with sensitivity—even skepticism—for an unexpected reference to a foreign place; a strange name; an odd digression. When other people appear in our stories, we can and should try to access the way *they* tell them; their perspectives can give us a new understanding of our own.

I was lucky to have a friend in Ecuador who clued me in to the way that the supporting characters in the U.S. narrative were, of course, the focus of their own story. My subsequent search of Ecuadorian newspaper articles revealed a flood of reactions there to the Arizona immigration law.⁵ I learned that our domestic issue of immigration is also an international issue affecting individuals and communities whose lives and decisions are transformed by trends in economic development, mass migration and globalization—which in turn affect our domestic politics. I found that it's not so easy to draw a line between "domestic issues" and "international issues." After all, stories cross borders even when the people who tell them cannot.



Guy Izhak Austrian is a community organizer and 2nd-year rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He first saw an integrated model of community, spirituality and social justice while working at a Latino immigrant workers' center, as part of his 10-plus years of experience in social change movements. Hoping to develop such a model with Jews, he worked at the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago and Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City and decided to pursue the rabbinate. This year, he is studying in Jerusalem, where he lives with his life partner, Rabbi Jill Jacobs, and their daughter Lior. Guy can be reached at guyaustrian@gmail.com.

² Tigay, Jeffrey H. *JPS Bible Commentary, Deuteronomy*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1996, xxv and 2:10-12. These critics are guided by a linguistic oddity. The passage's last sentence refers to Israel's conquest of Canaan in the past tense, but from the perspective of Moses, the narrator, the conquest hasn't happened yet.

³ See, for example, the very lengthy excurses of Ramban (13th c., Spanish) on both 2:10 and 2:20.

⁴ See, for example, Van Zyl, A. H. *The Moabites, Pretoria Oriental Series 3*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1960. Van Zyl notes that Biblical expositions about Moab "merely reflected the Israelite point of view." p. 1.

⁵ "Senami convoca a marcha contra Ley de Arizona," *Diario Hoy* (Quito, Ecuador), 11 May 2010. <http://www.hoy.com.ec/noticias-ecuador/senami-convoca-a-marcha-contra-ley-de-arizona-407358.html>

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