



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Ki Tisa 5775

By Wendi Geffen

March 7, 2015

Seeing is believing. Such is the way of our world. With two-thirds of the population dependent upon visual information to learn, it is no surprise that images flashing on a screen or printed on a page determine our understanding of reality.

Not surprisingly, the need to see relates directly to how aware a person is of a particular issue or likely to contribute to a given cause. Research shows that each minute of television coverage on an issue increases donations by 13 percent; and each story in *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* increases donations nearly 20 percent. Unfortunately, as media coverage subsides, so too do charitable contributions. The less people are consistently reminded of a problem, the less likely they are to give it their attention.

We need look no further than Haiti to witness this phenomenon. Within two weeks of the devastating earthquake in 2010, donations to aid organizations totaled over \$520 million. Now, five years later and with scant media coverage, the public has no regular reminder that the direct and indirect effects of the earthquake continue to ravage the country. Nearly 100,000 people still live in tent camps with little or no access to electricity, potable water or health care. Violence against women and girls is common and often goes unpunished, and economic opportunities are scarce. The perceived urgency of need immediately after the earthquake has diminished significantly. Without continued attention and support directed to Haiti, however, addressing these ongoing challenges and supporting the Haitian people in rebuilding their country has become even more difficult. For most of the world, the Haitian people are "out of sight, out of mind."

To deepen the world's compassion toward people in places like Haiti we can find wisdom in the Torah, which sought to deepen our relationship with the Divine. Our tradition understood the human need to see in order to believe and to act. Before they could accept the covenant with God, our ancestors needed *otei brit*—visible signs of God's presence. And likewise, because a covenantal relationship requires action by both parties, God designated three *otot*-signs that the people must demonstrate in order to signal their acceptance of the covenant: *mila* (circumcision), *tefillin* (cube shaped leather boxes worn on the head and arm during prayer) and Shabbat.

Two of the three *otot*, *mila* and *tefillin*, function as concrete, visual symbols. Circumcision serves as a physical symbol on a Jewish male's body, and the mitzvah of *tefillin* requires the wearing of leather boxes and straps that are visible to the wearer and to those around him or her. Shabbat, on the other hand, offers no concrete or visible form.

Parashat Ki Tisa offers insight into how we can be mindful of the presence of that which may be hidden from us. In this *parashah* the Israelites' grow insecure and then panic-stricken while Moses remains on Mt. Sinai for 40 days. To satiate their perceived need for "seeing" Moses as a sign of God's omnipresence, they sin most gravely, building a visible image of God, the form of a gold calf. Needless to say, God punishes them severely.

The Torah then offers an antidote to this reliance on visual signs for our ancestors and for us: the *ot* of Shabbat. The command to observe Shabbat flanks the calf narrative, and sends a powerful counter-message. Unlike the other *otot*, *mita* and *tefillin*, Shabbat is neither written nor visible. The *ot* of Shabbat challenges us to reject reliance on the visible and find God's presence in the unseen; to steer our eyes away from the immediate and obvious, and consider the abstract.

The *ot* of Shabbat instructs us not to rely on what is immediately before us, but to seek out and shine light on the hidden or invisible. This message has profound implications for our global justice work. We must continue to seek out opportunities to act, not only when the needs are obvious and visible; but long after the images of suffering fade from our TV screens and our consciousness.

Furthermore, the *ot* of Shabbat teaches us that we must be persistent in our efforts, for Shabbat observance is not a one-time action, but a regular exercise—an enduring sign of the people's covenant with God for all time. We must invest in long-term solutions not Band-Aid fixes. In the case of Haiti, we should engage in efforts that address the systemic issues underlying the ongoing displacement and suffering of the Haitian people, by providing support for grassroots organizations like those AJWS supports that are striving to stop violence and corruption, increase food production in rural areas, and empower local people and communities to chart a new future for their country.

When we commit ourselves to *tikkun olam* in this ongoing way, we make God's presence manifest, as real partners in restoring hope and promise, illuminating holiness in the otherwise darkened corners of our world. Indeed, seeing is believing.



Rabbi **Wendi Geffen** has served as one of the rabbis at North Shore Congregation Israel in suburban Chicago since 2002. She is passionate about Judaism, Torah and the way these ancient wisdom sources can add meaning to our lives and enable us to better our world still today. Dedicated to social justice and its Jewish textual roots, she regularly works to empower the synagogue and her larger community to act on the Jewish imperative to pursue tzedek. Rabbi Geffen was a participant in last year's AJWS Rabbinic Delegation to Lucknow, India, was a 2011-2012 American Jewish World Service Goldberg Writer's Fellow and a 2012-2013 Rabbis Without Borders Fellow. Wendi can be reached at wgeffen@gmail.com.

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org •

www.ajws.org
