



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Korach 5770

By Guy Izhak Austrian

June 12, 2010

“We will keep the victims and their families in our prayers.” So said President Barack Obama after the devastating earthquake in Haiti last January, before concluding with just such a prayer: “May God bless the people of Haiti and those working on their behalf.”¹ At the same time, the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism distributed a “Prayer for Haiti” by Rabbi Naomi Levy,² and no doubt, many other Americans prayed as well.

Given all of the options for taking action after a crisis in a developing country—donating, organizing and volunteering—why do the President, a rabbi in Los Angeles and ordinary people across the U.S. feel compelled to *pray* for the victims? What impact can these prayers have?

We can find a clue in the *haftarah* for *Parshat Korach*, a passage from the First Book of Samuel.³ There, Samuel bids farewell to the Israelites, and he rebukes the people for insisting on being ruled by a king. Yet Samuel promises that though he is no longer their prophet and judge, he will continue to pray for them: “Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.”⁴

Samuel juxtaposes his own prayerful support of the people with his prophecy, in an earlier passage, of the king’s coming oppression. The king, he says, “*yikach*”—will *take*—your children, vineyards and olive groves, your servants and livestock.⁵ In contrast, Samuel asks rhetorically, “Whose ox have I taken ... from whom have I taken a bribe...?” and the people affirm, “You have not taken anything from anyone.”⁶ Samuel suggests that a righteous leader prays for the people, while an exploitative leader such as a king will only take.

Parshat Korach presents the same contrast by opening with the same term: “*Vayikach Korach*”—“Korach took.”⁷ Korach challenges Moses’s leadership, claiming to advocate for the people; yet this word, *vayikach*, betrays Korach’s true intentions. Korach intended to oppress the people, foreshadowing the king described by Samuel who takes from those who would be his subjects. Likewise, Moses serves as a parallel and precedent to Samuel’s image of generous leadership. He defends himself by pleading that he has taken nothing for himself from the Israelites;⁸ and he demonstrates—after incidents like the sin of the Golden Calf⁹—his willingness to pray for the people.

¹ Obama, Barack. White House Office of the Press Secretary, 13 January 2010. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-rescue-efforts-haiti>

² Levy, Rabbi Naomi. “Prayer for Haiti,” *L.A. Jewish Journal*, 21 January 2010. http://www.jewishjournal.com/haiti/article/a_prayer_for_haiti_shabbat_download_20100121

³ 1 Samuel 11:14-12:22.

⁴ 1 Samuel 12:23, the verse immediately following the *haftarah* portion.

⁵ 1 Samuel 8:11-17. Samuel repeats the word *yikach*, “he will take,” four times in the passage.

⁶ 1 Samuel 12:3-4

⁷ Numbers 16:1

⁸ Numbers 16:15

⁹ Exodus 32:11-13

This contrast between taking and praying is echoed by the 19th-century Ishbitzer Rebbe, who connects Samuel's promise of prayer to a fundamental *mitzvah* in the Torah, "Do not oppress your neighbor."¹⁰

"Any good thing that one can offer one's fellow and does not is called oppressing him—even prayer, in that a person who can pray to God for his fellow, and doesn't pray on his behalf, is called oppressing him. And so we have found with Samuel who said, 'Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.'"¹¹

Not to pray, says the Ishbitzer, is to oppress—that is, as illustrated in our *parshah* and *haftarah*, to take. Perhaps, then, the act of praying is a kind of *giving* to others, a giving of time and attention that may lead us to other kinds of support as well. By keeping people at the forefront of our thoughts through prayer, we can develop empathy and solidarity, which may—and should—lead to action.

Perhaps that is why Rabbi Levy's prayer for Haiti also includes a prayer for ourselves: "Bless us, God, / Work through us. / Remind us that every one of us is filled with the power to heal. / Do not let the passage of time lead us to indifference. / Open our hearts, open our hands." The prayer calls on us to develop awareness and concern that will move us toward action—to donate, organize, volunteer, lobby and more.

All Jews can do this in our own regular prayer practice. For example, when we conclude our *Amidah* with the petition for peace for the congregation and for the Jewish people ("*oseh shalom bimromav...*"), we can use the liturgical innovation that adds "and upon all who dwell on earth (*v'al kol yoshvei tevel*)." When saying these words, we can consciously include the global poor—and those who have suffered recent crises like the earthquake in Haiti—in our intention. Let us keep the people of the Global South on our lips and in our ears, so that poverty can also be addressed by the work of our hands.



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.

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:3

¹¹ Leiner, Rabbi Mordechai Yoseph. 1801-1854, Ishbitza (present-day Poland), *Sefer Mei Hashiloach*, Parshat Kedoshim. I learned of this text from Reb Mimi Feigelson.

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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.

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