



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Matot 5774

By Jimmy Taber

July 19, 2014

As a Jewish social justice activist, the collective trauma of the Holocaust has deeply impacted my approach to social change. Every injustice throughout the world that resembles, in some fashion, European Jewry's persecution during World War II takes on a deeply personal character. There is no issue in which this is more salient than genocide. In 2006, I took on the Jewish community's call of "never again" in response to the ongoing genocide in Darfur as a personal vow.

Yet, as the crowds dispersed from the Rally to Stop Genocide and press coverage dwindled, my devotion began to flag. Time passed and the genocide continued, forcing me to confront the possibility that I wouldn't be able to fulfill my promise of "never again." To me, it felt like all or nothing: despite my initial full-hearted commitment to stopping this atrocity, the absence of immediate, radical change as a result of that commitment led me to abandon my vow and move on to other issues.

*Parashat Matot* anticipates my experience as it delves into the question of vows: "If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips."<sup>1</sup> While the Torah's formula appears relatively straightforward (commit to something and follow through on that commitment), later rabbinic sources strongly discourage taking on these types of obligations, even if one ultimately fulfills one's pledges. Such warnings include: "He who vows, even if he fulfills his vow, is called a sinner,"<sup>2</sup> and "It is not right for a man to swear an oath even for the truth."<sup>3</sup> It seems odd that the Rabbis would condemn even those who keep their vows; what is wrong with promising to do something and then doing it?

A Talmudic statement reveals that the Rabbis prohibited all vows in the recognition that there is a powerful human tendency to break them: "The sages taught: Do not ever get into the habit of making vows, for you will end up violating even oaths."<sup>4</sup> The Rabbis recognize that, while we may have the best of intentions to fulfill our promises, we are likely to fail to complete the obligations we impose on ourselves and therefore should not be in the habit of making these commitments at all.

My vow of "never again" followed a similar trajectory. When I realized that I would never be able to fulfill this self-imposed obligation, I felt frustrated at my inability to keep my promise and compelled to relieve myself of the responsibility altogether. The feeling of futility that I experienced after having vowed to fight injustice and then absolving myself of the obligation when the problems became overwhelming and intractable—made me question my approach to social change work altogether. The idea of "never again" imposes the expectation that we must stop an injustice completely for our work to be valuable.

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 30:3. While similar, the rabbis distinguish between vows and oaths with oaths carrying slightly more negative weight.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 77b. From *Book of Legends*, eds. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky (New York: Schocken Books, 1992) 702.

<sup>3</sup> Tanhuma Vayikra 7. From *Book of Legends*, 702.

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 20a. From *Book of Legends*, 702.

But might there be a middle ground? Is it possible to forgo the vow to radically and completely alter the status quo and instead utilize incremental strategies to effect change on the ground?

I discovered an answer to this question when I learned more about American Jewish World Service's strategy to respond to the genocide in Darfur. Since AJWS helped mobilize over 50,000 people for the Save Darfur Rally in 2006, the organization has engaged in political advocacy related to Sudan and situates the genocide in Darfur in the context of larger political issues in Sudan and South Sudan. While lacking the immediate and radical transformation that "never again" demands, AJWS's work in Sudan offers an alternative that is both capable of changing lives and amenable to sustained investment by activists. By participating in these efforts, I have discovered that I can meaningfully contribute to change in Darfur without the ultimately unbearable weight of "never again" hanging over my head. Free from my vow, I am able to finally contribute in a healthy, sustainable way.

I have also experienced the power of this approach in AJWS's *We Believe* campaign. At first glance, to take on the goals of the campaign—end violence against women and girls, stop hate crimes against LGBT people and empower girls to end child marriage—would appear as vow-like as "never again." Yet the campaign focuses on realistic, yet transformative, targets—such as advocating for the passage of the International Violence Against Women Act, which will compel "the U.S. government to put the full weight of its foreign aid and international diplomacy behind global efforts to end violence against women and girls." AJWS thus offers a meaningful way to move beyond the all-or-nothing expectations that vow-like social justice commitments can induce.<sup>5</sup> By joining these efforts, I have found a way to contribute to a struggle that previously felt too daunting to join.

While vows and grand pronouncements of sweeping change are tempting, it is clear that they do not represent a healthy approach to activism. As the well-worn adage from Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot aptly observes, "It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."<sup>6</sup> It is up to each of us to find a way to contribute to social change without allowing the magnitude of our commitment to paralyze us. The sustained, incremental work of AJWS allows me to move beyond this paradigm and join a community of activists working together to positively impact those affected by injustice around the world.



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<sup>5</sup> <https://secure.ajws.org/site/Advocacy?cmd=display&page=UserAction&id=661>.

<sup>6</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:16.

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