



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Pinchas 5773

By Rabbi David Schuck

June 29, 2013

As I stood in the magnificent Magen Avot synagogue in Alibag, India, I felt the sweat trickle down the side of my face. Though it was hot, the sweat was born out of nervousness and intense regret, not the sweltering heat. The High Holidays were around the corner and I was at the synagogue teaching about *Tefillat Geshem*, a prayer in which we ask God to provide us with rain because of the merit of our ancestors. I contrasted this prayer to a line in the daily *Shema* that suggests that God sends us rain only if *we* merit it for being faithful to God's laws: "If you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day...I will grant the rain for your land in season...you shall gather in your new grain."<sup>1</sup>

An elderly man in the class, who appeared anxious about something I said, remarked: "Since the monsoon season was light this year and many of our crops died, you are teaching us that we are sinners, undeserving of rain."

The beads of sweat appeared almost immediately. It startled me how insensitive I was: who was I to teach a village of farmers about the relationship between rain, farming and human behavior? After all, I had never even planted a vegetable, let alone an entire season's crop. I fidgeted and said something unconvincing about the prayer being a metaphor, but the damage was done. At that moment I realized that my life was out of touch with the overwhelming majority of people on this earth as well as with the sacred texts that shaped Judaism.

I often return to this experience when I encounter parts of our Torah that deal with agricultural life, such as the catalogue of festival sacrifices that is tucked away at the end of *Parashat Pinchas*. It is no accident that these holidays take place around the most nerve-wracking agricultural periods: the times for planting and harvesting.

To us, a holiday celebrating the harvest of our first fruits sounds, at best, quaint and oddly romantic. But if we want our sacred texts to come alive we ought to conjure up the feelings of profound anxiety that must have swept over our ancestors during planting and harvesting seasons. A drought meant that family members might starve to death. Too much rain led to disastrous environmental devastation and flooded crops. Confronting that type of vulnerability cultivates a deep humility that is lost on many of us in the West today. But the vast majority of human beings on this planet today, like the ancient farmers described in the Torah, are utterly dependent on the unpredictable patterns of nature in order to live.

The Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chayim Ben Attar), an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Moroccan rabbi and commentator, weaves this notion into a gorgeous theological musing. God demands that we offer at the Temple "*et korboni lachmi l'ishai*,"<sup>2</sup> which literally means "*My offering, My food, My fire offerings.*" The Or Hachayim explains this repetition:

In each of these instances, God uses the suffix "My" to indicate that all of them are God's and remain within God's domain as proclaimed by David in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds..." Israel should remember that whatever they offer to God as a sacrifice is really God's in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 11:13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 28:2.

<sup>3</sup> Or Hachayim, Parashat Pinchas, 28:2.

The Or Hachayim's teaching is an elegant argument for radical humility: the Israelites must give away the first fruits that they harvest, despite having planted, weeded and endlessly tended to them with their own hands from land irrigated by their sweat and hopes. After months of anxiety around the health and yield of the crop, imagine the overwhelming challenge of then giving away the first fruits. How could one part with that precious produce, especially not knowing if the remainder would be enough to feed the family until the next harvest?

If such a message—that all that we harvest and reap actually belongs to God—was necessary for Israelite farmers, who well understood their vulnerability and dependence on God, it is all the more important for us. Millions of people don't have enough food to eat—and this problem could be solved if only our government had the humility to remember that it is just an accident that we live in abundance while others live in hunger. If we kept that in mind, we would do everything in our power to balance the scales.

If this lesson really hit home, it might convince our government to reform the way it administers its food aid system. Currently, the U.S. ships food overseas and it takes weeks or even months to reach hungry people, with more than half of every dollar going toward shipping costs. With some key changes, Americans could use our food aid dollars to support local farmers in developing countries so that instead of receiving free U.S. food they could grow more themselves. With these changes, we could feed over 17 million more people with lifesaving food aid.

Imagine the possibilities in ending hunger if we could convince American voters and politicians that using food aid to increase the profits of our shipping companies rather than bolstering local economies is unjust, as the "earth belongs to God," not to us. Thankfully, there is a bi-partisan effort taking place right now to do just that. Read about AJWS's [Reverse Hunger campaign](#) to learn about action steps that you can take, today, to advocate for food aid reform.

When I find myself speeding through the list of festival sacrifices in *Parashat Pinchas*, I stop and try to imagine the overwhelming apprehension that must have textured each day in the life of my farming ancestors. Each day they had to confront their extreme vulnerability to the whims of nature. And then, after surviving such anxious times, in a sublime act requiring tremendous discipline and humility, they forced themselves to part with the first fruits of their sleepless nights and endless days of working the land. As I read these verses, I find myself back in that great synagogue in Alibag, reminding myself that reading the Bible as metaphor is a luxury for us, as the vast majority of the world lives and dies according to the rainfall that year. The tragedy, of course, is that with a few small changes on our part, their lives need not hang in the balance.



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