



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Terumah 5771

By Guy Izhak Austrian

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This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer, Dvar Tzedek alumnus Guy Austrian.

Whether it's the next neighborhood, another city or a continent away—wherever you find struggles for rights between marginalized populations and people in power, you are likely to find a Jew there in the trenches, working alongside local people in hopes of improving the situation. AJWS is responsible for more than a few such helpers, sending out 360 volunteers to work with grassroots organizations in 2010 alone, and nearly 4,000 in AJWS's history. But how are we to understand the presence of these Jewish do-gooders, who themselves often occupy a social position in between the oppressor and the oppressed? Is our activism in these struggles, on balance, actually a good thing, or not?

Rabbi Robert J. Marx has a name for all this. In his essay, "The People in Between," he calls Jews "interstitial." He writes that beginning in medieval Europe, Jews were:

... located between the parts of the social structure of western societies. Neither a part of the masses nor of the power structure, Jews were uniquely positioned so that they fulfilled certain vital yet dispensable functions ... Interstitiality may be negative, or it may be positive. It may open a path to the gas chamber or it may lead to prophetic heights that enable the Jewish people to rise above parochialism or nationalism.¹

Marx argues that the historical development of Jews in the Diaspora, shaped by minority status and anti-Semitism, has placed us as intermediaries and functionaries in both systems of oppression and movements for liberation. But I want to suggest that sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. Even when Jews seek to play a positive role in support of others' struggles, we can sometimes do more harm than good. For instance, we might end up taking initiative away from grassroots leaders, behaving with insensitivity or arrogantly thinking that we know best.

Parshat Terumah offers a powerful metaphor for thinking through this conundrum. Here, God provides Moses with instructions for building the *mishkan*, or Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary in the wilderness that would bring God's presence to dwell among the people.² A key component is the *adanim*, sockets made of silver and copper, which hold up the various planks, posts and screens that make up the sacred communal structure.³

The Chernobyl Rebbe, a Hasidic commentator, noticed that the Hebrew word for sockets—*adanim*—has the same root as *Adonai*—one of the names for God. In kabbalistic thought, the name *Adonai* is associated with the *shekhinah*, the aspect of God that interfaces between our human world and the Divine realms above. The abundance of Divine blessing flows down from the upper realms, through the *shekhinah/Adonai*, and suffuses our material world. The role of humans, through prayer and other *mitzvot*, is to draw down that blessing and offer it back up in a life-sustaining cycle between the Divine and human realms.

¹ Marx, Rabbi Robert J. "The People in Between." 1968. http://www.jcua.org/site/DocServer/6047The_People_in_Between.pdf?docID=203

² Exodus 25:8.

³ Exodus 26:19, 21, 25, 32, 37; and 27:10-12, 14-18.

The Chernobyler Rebbe made the connection this way:

Like the *adanim* which held the *Mishkan* together, *Adonay* is divinity as it filters down into the physical realm so that we can reunite it with its Source. In every act of worship, whether study, prayer, eating, or drinking, we can bring about this reunification!⁴

The *adanim* in the *mishkan* model the ideal role for Jews doing social change work among non-Jewish communities. Occupying particular niches within and among various constituencies, Jews can help to make the whole work together. Our every action has the potential to enable blessing to flow, creating an interface between the human and Divine realms. Like the *adanim*, which were humble yet precious, unobtrusive yet supportive—Jewish allies working in solidarity with others have a vital but complex task that is difficult to do well.

Exactly how it should be done is a longer conversation! But the *adanim* offer at least one valuable lesson. Yosef Gikatilla, an early Spanish kabbalist, connects the Hebrew word for blessing—*brachah*—with the word *breichah*—a pool or fountain of water. Just as *Adonai* is a pool receiving blessings and a fountain passing them on, so too the *adanim* are both receptive and supportive. In other words, Gikatilla reminds us that a socket is concave, a receptacle, as in the *mishkan*, where the sockets received the planks and posts in order to hold them up.⁵

Our job as participants in the struggles of communities not our own requires us to be receptive—to listen, to learn, to develop sensitivity for the blessings of those communities. Only then, having become a pool of blessing, can we also act as a fountain, nourishing and connecting the other parts of the whole.

If our placement is a good fit, and we know how to be a good socket, then we can help entire efforts, organizations or communities to become a *mishkan*—a place where the Divine dwells and flows in a continuously evolving relationship with humanity. That is the way to make our interstitial role a positive one, and that is how we'll know whether we're succeeding.



Guy Izhak Austrian is a community organizer and third-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. Guy currently serves as the Social Justice Rabbinic Intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York City, where he lives with his life partner Rabbi Jill Jacobs and their daughter Lior. Guy can be reached at guyaustrian@gmail.com.

⁴ Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twersky of Chernobyl, *Sefer Meor Einayyim*. Cit. and trans. in Rabbi Marcia Prager, *The Path of Blessing*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2003. pp. 105-6.

⁵ Rabbi Yosef ben Avraham Gikatilla. *Sha'arei Orah*. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1970. pp. 59-60. I am grateful to Prager (see note 4) for this reference as well.

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AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

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