



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Tetzaveh 5771

By Jimmy Taber

February 12, 2011

On the surface, the international community's response to the devastation wrought by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti appears to have been exceedingly successful. Americans donated over \$1 billion to organizations that quickly funneled food, water and other basic necessities into the affected areas.<sup>1</sup> According to a survey by *Charity Navigator*, the majority of donors approved of the way their money was spent in Haiti: sixty percent of respondents said that they were either "very confident" or "somewhat confident" in how charities spent the funds.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the satisfaction from those offering assistance, a divide has developed between the providers of aid and the recipients. A recent *Washington Post* article reported:

"As U.S. officials, donor nations and international aid contractors applaud their efforts—all the latrines, tents and immunizations—the recipients of this unprecedented assistance are weary at the lack of visible progress and doubtful that the billions of dollars promised will make their lives better."<sup>3</sup>

How can the perception of success diverge so significantly between donors and recipients? What is the source of this disconnect between aims and outcomes?

In the heart of *Parshat Tetzaveh*, amidst the instructions for preparing the priestly vestments and the consecration of Aaron and his sons, a ritual is described that sheds light on this common gap between the pursuit and achievement of justice. The Torah instructs Moses to "slaughter the ram, and take some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear and on the ridges of his sons' right ears, and on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet."<sup>4</sup>

To Philo, an Alexandrian commentator from the first century CE, this portion of the ritual takes on a purely symbolic meaning. He writes: "The fully consecrated must be pure in words and actions and in life; for words are judged by hearing, the hand is the symbol of action, and the foot of the pilgrimage of life."<sup>5</sup> According to Philo, the ritual of placing blood on the ear, hand and foot represents a unification of different types of leadership. A high priest must engage his words, actions and life in the service of the community. Though each is ostensibly positive in isolation, in order for one to lead effectively, these components must be enacted in unison.

<sup>1</sup> "Haiti Earthquake: One Year Later – Donor Survey Results." *Charity Navigator*. <http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=1188>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Booth, William. "After Massive Aid, Haitians Feel Stuck in Poverty." *The Washington Post*, 11 January 2011. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/10/AR2011011006654.html>

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 29:20.

<sup>5</sup> Yonge, C.D. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 1993. p. 630.

Philo's interpretation of the consecration ritual offers insight into the root causes of the international aid organizations' failures in Haiti. While some components of effective aid were achieved, others were neglected, and the absence of an integrated approach prevented the realization of a full positive impact.

Analogous to the blood placed on priests' hands—Philo's symbol of action—donors and organizations acted with admirable speed and dedication to raise financial support. But they failed to engage their ears and their feet—hearing and life: aid organizations have imposed solutions rather than listening to feedback from Haiti's citizens, local organizations or the Haitian government, the people whose lives were directly affected by the disaster. As a result, despite the best intentions of those aiming to assist, a sustainable solution for rebuilding Haiti has not been achieved.

In addition to its relevance in disaster-relief efforts, Philo's understanding of the consecration ritual can also serve as a useful guide for our individual activism. Like Aaron and his sons, we are required to unify all of our faculties in the service of our global community and to pursue a multivariate approach to social justice. By engaging with our ears, hands and feet, we can truly emulate their leadership, in order to find solutions to the complex problems facing our world.



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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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