



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Tetzaveh 5768

By Rabbi Dorothy A. Richman

February 16, 2008

I've been wearing two green plastic bracelets for months. Modeled after Lance Armstrong's yellow "Livestrong" bracelets,<sup>1</sup> my wristbands are supposed to call attention to the ongoing genocide in Darfur. But how well do they accomplish that goal? Bracelet enthusiasts argue that the bracelets raise awareness about the genocide.<sup>2</sup> Cynics point to the superficial nature of the gesture: Can social activism take place at the Save Darfur Store?

Given the proliferation of colored issue bracelets, there is little knowledge of what cause each color represents. A *Slate Magazine* columnist complains, "Purple, for instance, now signifies support for Alzheimer patients, abused animals, battered women, epileptics, children in foster care, or people with irritable bowel syndrome, among other things...With so much to be aware of, awareness bracelets have reverted to signifying nothing more than color itself. Idealism has devolved into fashion."<sup>3</sup>

A garment mentioned in this week's Torah portion offers a path to reclaim issue bracelets. In *Parshat Tetzaveh*, Aaron, the High Priest of the Israelites, is commanded to wear two jewel-encrusted bands on his shoulders, engraved with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. Careful attention is paid to their purpose. They are to be worn "as stones for remembrance of the Israelite people, whose names Aaron shall carry...for remembrance before God."<sup>4</sup>

Describing the aim of the High Priest's bands, the word "remembrance" is emphasized through its repetition. But what is Aaron meant to remember? One commentator suggests Aaron wears the names to remember those for whom he is spiritually responsible.<sup>5</sup> The visible names heighten Aaron's awareness of those he represents. This awareness may be visceral, evoking Eduardo Galeano's definition of remembrance from his native Spanish: "*Recordar*: To remember; from the Latin *re-cordis*, to pass back through the heart."<sup>6</sup> Wearing the names and emotionally connecting to the people they represent, Aaron's own awareness of personal responsibility is heightened.

Here, there is a difference in purpose between the Torah's remembrance bands and the assumed purpose of the contemporary issue bracelet. The High Priest wears his engraved bands as a pre-requisite to *his* service to the people before God. He wears them to effect his own awareness—not to raise the awareness of others.

But it wasn't enough for Aaron to just remember. The Torah describes the priests' preparations for their duties with the expression *limalei yad*—to fill the hand. Aaron sees the people's names, passes them through his heart and then performs sacrifices with his hands. The act of heart-filled remembrance leads directly and immediately to concrete action, the filling of the hand.

<sup>1</sup> The wristbands are worn in support of Americans with cancer. For more information, see <http://www.store-laf.org/wristbands.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Save Darfur Store, <http://yhst-88482264721289.stores.yahoo.net/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.slate.com/id/2113014>

<sup>4</sup> Shmot 28:12 (NJPS translation)

<sup>5</sup> Gersonides, Michael Carasik, *The Commentator's Bible*, JPS: Philadelphia, 2005, pp. 245-6

<sup>6</sup> Galeano, Eduardo, *Book of Embraces*, W.W. Norton and Company: New York, 1991, epigraph

Following the example of the High Priest's bands, issue bracelets can raise awareness—the awareness of their wearer. They succeed when they motivate personal and specific action.

A short time ago, I discovered that my pension investments might be helping to fund the genocide that I wear plastic jewelry to protest.<sup>7</sup> Using on-line tools to search my portfolio, I identified Fidelity mutual funds containing companies targeted for divestment.<sup>8</sup>

Wearing the green bracelets over these weeks has thus taken on new poignancy. Along with AJWS, the Union for Reform Judaism, the state of California and many others, I plan to divest from targeted companies funding the genocide in Sudan.<sup>9</sup> The bracelets remind me of the concrete actions my hands have yet to perform.

The Latin verb, *vestire*, to clothe, carries the sense of dressing someone in the garments of a specific office or power. The garments are symbols of the individual's ability to fulfill an ordained purpose. This certainly applies to Aaron's holy vestments. By wearing them, he becomes capable of performing duties of communal responsibility.

What would it mean to feel that awareness bracelets could do the same? Can they be worn as reminders of our power to concretely act and create change?

I will wear my green bracelets until my targeted funds have been transferred. After that, I think I'll remove them from my wrists and hang them on my computer monitor. There, I hope they will remind me to protest the genocide through continued donations, letters, petitions and self-education. Like the garments of the High Priest, issue bracelets can connect what our eyes see with what fills the heart and hands.



**Rabbi Dorothy A. Richman** is the Rabbi Martin Ballonoff Memorial Rabbi-in-Residence at Berkeley Hillel. Dorothy was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary and her first job after rabbinical school was as an AJWS group leader in Honduras. Dorothy continued to lead groups to the developing world with AJWS as she served congregations Beth Shalom and Shaar Zahav in San Francisco. She is also a Regional Council member for the Progressive Jewish Alliance. Dorothy is married to Dr. Mike Steinman and is Ema (Mom) to two boys. Dorothy can be reached at [dritchman@berkeleyhillel.org](mailto:dritchman@berkeleyhillel.org).

---

<sup>7</sup> For information on targeted divestment from Sudan, see <http://www.sudandivestment.org/home.asp> and <http://investorsagainstgenocide.googlepages.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sudandivestment.org/screener.asp>

<sup>9</sup> For a list of prominent individuals, organizations and states that have divested, see <http://investorsagainstgenocide.googlepages.com/page1004>. For the URJ's statement on its divestment, see [http://urj.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=13761&pge\\_prg\\_id=42922&pge\\_id=1625](http://urj.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=13761&pge_prg_id=42922&pge_id=1625).

©2008 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit [www.ajws.org/parshah](http://www.ajws.org/parshah).

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the inaugural recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

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. The AJWS Torah Commentary series is made possible in part by funds granted by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.