



# DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

## Parashat Tetzaveh 5773

February 23, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Discuss it at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Please take two minutes to share your thoughts on this piece by completing this [feedback form](#).

### Introduction

One of the most complicated ethical issues in international development relates to the tension between helping and imposing. Most development organizations are outsiders—they enter a community and support its development through money, resources or plans for change. While some organizations solicit input from the communities, others do not, and there is a fine line between doing good and imposing unwanted or unhelpful solutions that undermine the autonomy and dignity of local people. This begs the question: when is international development a responsible expression of our obligation to care for our fellow human beings and when does development become an inappropriate or even ineffective imposition of Western values on other cultures?

In its description of the robe of Aaron, the High Priest, *Parashat Tetzaveh* provides insight into precisely this question of how we balance our enthusiasm for supporting change in developing countries with the appropriate humility and understanding of our role as outsiders. The Torah instructs that the hem of Aaron's robe should be adorned with gold bells, which served to announce Aaron's presence when he entered the holy space of the Sanctuary: "And its sound will be heard when he enters the sanctuary before God and when he leaves—that he may not die."<sup>1</sup>

The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish philosopher and commentator Ramban explains the reason the bells were necessary and how they protected Aaron's very life:

#### Ramban, Exodus 28:35

... In order that its sound be heard in the sanctuary, and he will enter the presence of his Master as if with permission. Because one who enters the dwelling of a king suddenly (without permission) is deserving of death by royal arrangement, as in the case of Achashverosh.

#### רמב"ן שמות כח:לה

... בעבור שישמע קולו בקדש, ויכנס לפני אדוניו כאלו ברשות, כי הבא בהיכל מלך פתאום חייב מיתה בטכסיסי המלכות, כענין אחשורוש.

### Guiding Questions:

- This text suggests that it's important to ask permission before entering someone else's space, especially if you intend to play an active role in that space. What space have you recently entered for which you needed to ask permission? Why did you need permission and how did you ask for it?

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 28:35.

- What do you think is the best way of entering the space of a community in a developing country when we seek to take action in order to alleviate poverty or injustice?
- What are the power dynamics in the text between the priest and God? How do you generally understand the power dynamics between development organizations and the communities they seek to help?
- Ramban points out that the bells serve to announce Aaron’s presence so that he can enter “as if” with permission. In international development, when might it be difficult to obtain permission to enter a community to help? Does this mean we should not enter, or are there ways to enter respectfully, “as if” we have permission? Is announcing our presence—like Aaron’s bells—enough?
- Ramban references King Achashverosh, from the Book of Esther, to demonstrate that people who entered the king’s domain without permission would be put to death. But on Purim, it is precisely Esther’s boldness to enter Achashverosh’s room without an invitation that we celebrate. When, if at all, do you think it is appropriate—or even laudable—to help communities in need *without* permission?

The following text eloquently articulates the dilemma of international development and entering the spaces of others:

**David A. Shuler, “An Ethical Dilemma: The Imposition of Values on Other Cultures”<sup>2</sup>**

Development should be about others, not ourselves; we can participate, where appropriate, in influencing their lives and giving advice when we are invited, but even caution is needed in giving advice, because advice can easily turn to compulsion and manipulation. We must be aware of our impositions, meaning how our cultural values may differ from others we try to help, and how forceful we are, or can be, in influencing their ideas and actions and ultimately their lives. . . . As outsiders, we are influential and often are automatically given a status that we do not deserve. It is wise for us to move slowly and carefully.

Guiding Questions:

- What additional challenges in international development does this text raise? How does it suggest we respond to these challenges?
- What do you think is the appropriate role for development workers and development organizations to play when interacting with local communities and local activists?
- What lessons can you draw from this text for your own life as a volunteer, philanthropist or simply someone who seeks to help others?

**Conclusion**

Balancing our desire to effect change and improve the lives of others with humility and respect for their autonomy and agency is not simple, but it is crucially important. Indeed, as *Parashat Tetzaveh* teaches, entering the sacred Sanctuary was an opportunity to encounter the Divine that came at the risk of death. The bells—which indicated the respectful way in which Aaron entered—made the difference between revelation and death. May we always enter the spaces of communities in developing countries in ways that affirm and sanctify life and enable the encounter with the Divine image that is reflected in all of us.

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<sup>2</sup> David A. Shuler, “An Ethical Dilemma: The Imposition of Values on Other Cultures,” in *Global Mormonism in the 21st Century*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 266–82. Available at <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/global-mormonism-21st-century/18-ethical-dilemma-imposition-values-other-cultures>