



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Toldot 5775

By Sam Feinsmith

November 22, 2014

How do we respond to human suffering?

I have been involved in social justice work in a variety of settings for over a decade. Yet when confronted with the naked truth of human suffering and systemic injustice, I often have the impulse to avoid or hide, rather than to act.

Why do I do this? Why do we do this? Confronting the suffering of others often elicits uneasy feelings—a desire not to see, lest we become overwhelmed by our own sadness about this injustice and our fear that we are too vulnerable and powerless to make change. These uncomfortable feelings often cause us to don the protective armor of denial and distraction. Rather than reaching out and opening our hearts, it is all too easy—and so very human—to let out an indignant yet resigned sigh about the horrific condition of our world and then go back to our daily lives as if nothing happened. This human inclination toward avoidance often hinders our capacity to feel genuine compassion and to act to help others.

Perhaps that's why the Torah makes a point this week of offering us a counter-example. When Rivkah suffered because she could not conceive, Yitzchak did not flee; instead, we read that:

“Now Yitzchak prayed to God before his wife, for she was barren. And God accepted his prayer, and Rivkah...became pregnant.”

Rather than look the other way or leave, Yitzchak wanted to be present—indeed, right there *before* his wife—during her time of need. He empathized with her pain without covering, confronted his own sadness and powerlessness without allowing it to overwhelm him, and responded with open-hearted compassion. And, perhaps in part because of Yitzchak's willingness to stand with Rivka and pray with her, God listened.

We can and should follow Yitzchak's example and work at meeting the suffering in the world with genuine compassion and meaningful action. The first step is by offering, like Yitzchak, the gift of our presence. This presence may be manifest in a willingness to abide with the sick, to march in solidarity beside the oppressed or to stand with those whose condition might overwhelm us. The practice of

standing with those who are suffering opens our hearts and motivates us to respond to suffering and injustice with courageous and loving empathy.

I had an opportunity to practice this compassionate solidarity during the fall of 2010, when I was privileged to work at the Khmer Youth Association—a youth development organization in Cambodia—as a member of the AJWS Volunteer Corps. Working in the same office as Cambodians who had suffered the ravages of genocide and confronting first-hand the painful truths of a society gripped with violence, systemic corruption, child trafficking and extreme poverty, tested my ability to be present with my own anguish without retreating into habitual patterns of avoidance. Choosing to go into the office every day enabled me to practice working with the unpleasant contours of my own limitations and vulnerabilities so that I could respond more effectively to the needs of those I was trying to help.

The social and political realities that colluded to promote a host of injustices in Cambodia—a society traumatized by prolonged violence—is overwhelming, and the work of addressing these systemic issues is difficult and ongoing. These painful realizations notwithstanding, the simple act of being present with my Cambodian co-workers each day—of listening compassionately and bearing witness to the painful truth of their experience; of noting my own impulse to flee and choosing instead to be present—allowed me to be a modest yet effective agent of compassion and social change.

Learning how to overcome our own discomfort with oppression and human suffering may not bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice. But it will enable us to be more present and act with those who suffer at the hands of oppression and systemic injustice without retreating or resorting to denial. And that is a very good place to start.



Rabbi Sam Feinsmith teaches mindfulness meditation in a Jewish context at the Center for Jewish Mindfulness, Chicago. He holds Rabbinic Ordination from YCT Rabbinical School and an MA from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Passionate about holistic Jewish education and a variety of contemplative practices, he currently consults nationally on integrating mindfulness practice into Jewish education, and recently co-founded Orot: Center for New Jewish Learning in Chicago. As a social justice ambassador, he served as an AJWS Kol Tzedek Fellow and volunteered in Asia as a member of the AJWS Volunteer Corps and in Central America as a member of the inaugural Rabbinical Students' Delegation. Sam can be reached at samowich@gmail.com.

©2014 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

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.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org
