



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Va'etchanan 5774

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Wasteland, jungle, impoverished, malnourished, unhygienic, militant and crowded. Those were some of the words I had associated with Africa before I visited for the first time. The images were etched in my mind from the media, from documentaries and from the atrocities that we all read about daily in the newspaper.

In a recent opinion piece, *New York Times* op-ed columnist David Brooks shared a description of Africa as satirically portrayed by the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, which echoes many of the stereotypes I imagined I would encounter on my travels:

Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these... The people in said book should be depicted as hungry, suffering, simple or dead. The children should have distended bellies and flies on their faces. End with a quote from Nelson Mandela involving rainbows. Because you care.¹

It's hard to read Wainaina's biting sarcasm and not acknowledge that many of our preconceptions about Africa border on the ridiculous. And yet, given the images and stories shared in our media, it's easy to see Africa one-dimensionally—as the site of the genocide in Darfur that began more than a decade ago or the kidnapping of nearly 300 young girls in Nigeria by Boko Haram earlier this year. As Brooks writes, "It's great that the kidnappings and the massacres are finally arousing the world's indignation. But sometimes the implication of the conversation has been this: Africa is this dark and lawless place where monstrous things are bound to happen. Those poor people need our help."²

Parashat Va'etchanan, with its description of the much anticipated moment of theophany—the encounter with God through the act of revelation—reminded me of the importance of learning to see beyond our stereotypes. Shortly after receiving the laws given at Sinai, we learn the grand aspiration of these commandments: "You shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord."³ Rabbi Marc Angel, founder and director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, which strives to promote intellectual vibrancy, compassion and inclusivity within Orthodox Judaism, suggests that this verse, as understood by our vast corpus of rabbinic tradition, means that:

We are required not merely to follow the letter of the law (that which is right), but to be compassionate beyond what the exact law demands (that which is good). If we can conduct ourselves on this level of righteousness, we can live better lives for ourselves and can impact on the improvement of society.⁴

¹ David Brooks, "The Real Africa," *New York Times*, 8 May 2014. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/opinion/brooks-the-real-africa.html>. See also "How to Write about Africa," Binyavanga Wainaina, *Granta*, Winter 2005. Available at <http://www.granta.com/Archive/92/How-to-Write-about-Africa/Page-1>.

² Ibid.

³ Deuteronomy 6:18.

⁴ Rabbi Marc Angel, "Parashat Va'etchanan," *Angel for Shabbat: Thoughts on the Weekly Torah Portion, Volume II*, (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2013) p. 192.

Rabbi Angel explains that the Torah is imploring us to look beyond the surface level of what its text tells us to do ('that which is right'), and to use it as a prompt to pursue lives of goodness. What he is describing is, I think, one of the powerful aspects of the revelation of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, or in this case, continuous revelation throughout all time—that we have been given the ability to see things in ways we never expected.

And that was my experience when I visited Ghana. I looked beyond the stereotypes and witnessed firsthand how the Hohoe, a rural tribe, were building a community center using the limited resources and people power at their disposal. They were educating their children, gathering to pray and sing beautiful music, living off of the land, and supporting one another through the blessings of community. I witnessed my fellow brothers and sisters, created in the Divine Image just like me, exhibiting the greatest pride and dignity even amidst their struggles to overcome the challenges and adversities that come with living in a poor rural village in Ghana. They were genuine fighters, motivated to create a better life for themselves and their communities. When I looked beneath the surface of the stereotype and labels, I saw fellow human beings created in God's image who were courageously and skillfully transforming their own community.

In Ghana, a profound truth was revealed to me. I looked beyond descriptions I had read and discovered deeper realities. But how could I translate my revelation into action? Here, too, Rabbi Angel's insights are instructive:

If we energize ourselves and engage in joint action with others, we can achieve important progress. We should not become overwhelmed by the vastness of the problems that confront us, but should focus on the particular area(s) where we can best succeed in fostering positive change. A lot of individual decisions can result in remarkable change for the good.⁵

It is natural to be overwhelmed by the problems that exist in the world, especially when they are the stories and images spread by the media. Yet, in joining together, as Rabbi Angel suggests, we can overcome the stereotypes and identify where we can begin making positive change in our world. *V'asita hayashar v'hatov*—let us do what is right and what is good,⁶ experiencing our own revelation in which we not only connect with the Divine presence but also see the dignity and Godliness in each individual. Let us stand in solidarity with one another, as equals, to reveal what's really possible.



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⁵ Angel *ibid.*

⁶ Deuteronomy 6:18.

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