



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Va'etchanan 5771

By Jimmy Taber

August 13, 2011

We know the price of an air-conditioned hotel and a plane... [Short-term overseas volunteer trips to the developing world are] an act of affluent tourism masquerading as community service."

—Senior executive, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers¹

Like this wary university administrator, I have harbored suspicions toward service-learning programs to the Global South. Beyond the concern about privileged individuals vacationing under the guise of service, I also understood this kind of travel to facilitate a form of voyeurism in which the traveler develops a false identification with a local community with the net result being that that the "helper" feels good about himself or herself and those being "helped" remain in the same situation.

This is the perspective I had in mind when, in June, I embarked on American Jewish World Service's Rabbinical Students' Delegation to volunteer with Tostan, an AJWS grantee in Theis, Senegal. Despite my reservations, I decided to participate due to my growing respect for AJWS's approach to international development and a desire to find a way to meaningfully respond to global poverty.

As I walked through the streets of Theis on the evening of our arrival, I could not drive the thought from my mind that the experience was fundamentally about me and not about Tostan or the local community. What could the purpose of our presence be beyond a self-serving imposition?

Parshat Va'etchanan offers a profound insight into the potential value of this type of first-hand experience. The text instructs us to "take utmost care and watch yourself scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live."² By seeing something with our own eyes, we create memories that we can continually and regularly return to for strength and inspiration.

Abraham Joshua Heschel reads this verse in the context of the Jewish experience of the Divine. He writes: "The essence of Jewish religious thinking does not lie in entertaining a concept of God but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination by His presence. Israel is not a people of definers but a people of witnesses."³ In other words, the memories of what we, as a people, have seen impact and shape our continually evolving relationship with God. This "seeing" repeats every year on the holidays, as we re-experience the Exodus from Egypt, our sojourn in the desert and the giving of Torah. These are all direct experiences with God that our people witnessed and to which we return to in order to make our intellectual understanding of God tangible enough to build an ongoing connection.

¹ Alina Tugend, "The Benefits of Volunteerism, if the Service is Real," *The New York Times*, 30 July 2010.

² Deuteronomy 4:9.

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955), 140.

Similarly, in order to make issues of global justice concrete enough to inspire action, we must develop an experience-based connection. When issues like poverty remain in the intellectual realm, it is difficult to feel the urgency to act. Creating moments of “seeing with one’s own eyes” can pierce the veil of the theoretical and create lasting memories that sustain us in our activism into the future.

My experience in Senegal did just that. It provided me with an opportunity to observe an issue that I had previously only understood in the abstract: the devastating impact of liberal economic policies like free trade on developing countries. In Theis, I saw a market flooded with foreign onions and rice—locally-grown crops that were nevertheless being imported and sold at bargain prices due to lower production costs in Europe and Asia. More and more local farmers were being forced to abandon their livelihoods because they simply could not compete.

The moment that stays with me occurred when a group of farmers, proudly standing next to a mountain of onions, explained that they had to grow varieties that could survive storage until the two-month period each year when the Senegalese government stops importing foreign onions to boost the price of the local crop. Now every time I think about global poverty, my mind returns to the image of those farmers facing insurmountable odds as the globalized free market economy washes over them. By returning to this memory, I re-experience how these broader economic forces affect real people in real communities, and I draw inspiration for my activism.

This does not absolve all the problems with service-learning programs that I raise above. Volunteers must be aware that the experience is not “connection” or “action” itself, but a vehicle to inspire those things. Just as the Jewish people’s relationship with God is perpetually strengthened by remembering the moment when we stood at Sinai, activists can sustain their passion for their work by drawing on first-hand experience in the Global South. It is up to us to use these moments to position ourselves, as Heschel describes, as “a people of witnesses”—never without a memory to motivate us to act.



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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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