



# DVAR TZEDEK

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## Parashat Vayechi 5775

By Meredith Levick

January 3, 2015

In *Parashat Vayechi* Jacob blesses his children and grandchildren, conferring on them the covenantal promises of past generations and sharing visions for their futures. The farewell scene between Jacob and his children is touching, but one of his children is missing: Jacob's daughter, Dinah. It is unclear why she was omitted from this opportunity to receive a blessing; but what is clear, is that Dinah is not invited to inherit the legacy of her forefathers, nor the promises for the future offered to her brothers at this powerful moment.

Just as Dinah was not invited into this generational and communal legacy, countless girls and young women in various corners of the world do not receive the same inheritance of the blessings and opportunities that their male counterparts do. Like Dinah, the aspirations and dreams of many of these girls are left unacknowledged.

To rectify this wrong, many of American Jewish World Service's grantees in the developing world are working to challenge the cultural norms where these discrepancies persist and to empower girls to be agents of their own life stories. One such organization is Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh, or MASUM<sup>1</sup>—a rural women's organization in Maharashtra, India. MASUM is committed to altering the patriarchal structures within communities to empower girls to make their own life choices. The organization is currently exploring the systemic reasons for early and child marriage and other practices that hold young people back.

Using the funds it receives from AJWS, MASUM aims to empower Indian girls and youth to prevent child marriage and advocate for their rights in all areas of life, including those that stretch beyond traditional gendered expectations. The goal is to rethink the deeply rooted social and cultural frameworks that contribute to early marriage and other violations of the rights of girls.

Manisha Gupte, Co-Convenor of MASUM, recently traveled throughout the U.S. with AJWS to engage supporters to understand the root causes of early or forced marriage and the importance of empowering girls and boys to make the choice to delay. This is an effort which, at its foundation, aspires to elevate all human beings, especially girls and young women, to the high quality of life they deserve. Gupte's work holds promise for a future in which girls are the inheritors of the richest aspects of culture and education, a blessing they will be able to confer upon their sons and daughters when and if they choose to marry and have children. In a recent article published in *Cosmopolitan*, Gupte commented, "It's important to understand the complexities that surround early marriage, and not to demonize the parents and the cultures. The act is not entirely cultural. Conflict of riots or war or military occupation precipitate early marriage. The moment you see your children are unsafe, then you see safety in marriage. Those can be very dangerous marriages — they can be intergenerational marriages, because someone has lost a wife but he has access

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.masum-india.org.in/>

to a younger woman. We need to realize there are no quick and dirty answers — and if the answers are quick, they will be dirty.”<sup>2</sup>

As AJWS grantee partners like MASUM focus on shifting the local and global perception of how best to support girls and young women, I think of Dinah and wonder what it would have looked like if she had received a blessing from Jacob. In these excerpts from a midrashic poem written by Sue Levi Elwell titled, “Jacob Blesses Dinah,” the author imagines what Jacob may have wanted for his daughter:

Like your mother,  
you walk among the people with head  
unbowed.

May that strength and clarity of vision  
continue in the generations to come.

To you, my daughter, belong the blessings  
of the breast and the womb,  
blessings of justice and care.  
Your offspring will learn many tongues  
and practice healing arts.  
They will build cities of righteousness  
and none will make them afraid.<sup>3</sup>

May we, too, bless our children with this vision of justice and righteousness. May we look to the future with the understanding that we are empowered to create change. May we bless the girls and young women of the world to inherit their future and to forge ahead with a sense of empowerment and possibility.



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<sup>2</sup> Filipovic, Jill. “Why This Woman Is Crusading Against Child Marriage.” *Cosmopolitan*. 12 December 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/news/a34178/manisha-gupte-india-child-marriage/>

<sup>3</sup> Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn and Andrea L. Weiss. *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. New York: URJ Press, 2008, p. 301.

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