



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Vayera 5771

By Jimmy Taber

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This week, in *Parshat Vayera*, Avimelech, king of Gerar, faces a grave threat to himself and his household. Avraham enters the town and repeats his prior ill-fated decision to present Sarah as his sister instead of his wife upon arriving in a foreign land. Unaware that Sarah is married, Avimelech takes her for himself. To Avimelech's great surprise, God confronts him in a dream, threatening to kill him unless he returns Sarah to Avraham. Following an animated exchange Avimelech concedes, but only after God once again threatens death and this time extends the potential sentence to "all that is yours." Avimelech returns Sarah to Avraham and he and the women of his household are healed from the infertility that had been inflicted upon them as punishment for seizing Sarah.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Torah's narrative presents a direct dialogue between Avimelech and God, the midrash reveals a difficult decision-making process in which Avimelech finds himself caught between competing voices:

In the morning, when the king awoke, in agony and terror, he called all his servants and told his dream in their ears. One of their number said: "O lord and king! Restore this woman unto the man, for he is her husband . . ." There were some among his servants who spake: "Be not afraid of dreams! What dreams make known to man is but falsehood."<sup>2</sup>

The response of the group of servants implies that dreams were not a universally accepted medium for communicating with the Divine. Thus Avimelech is faced with a difficult choice. He can listen to the lone voice encouraging him to believe that his dream was, in fact, a communication from God and take action by returning Sarah. Or he can listen to the near consensus of his servants who dismiss the validity of his dream and choose to preserve the status quo, avoiding action by maintaining willful ignorance. Ultimately, Avimelech heeds God's warning and restores Sarah to Avraham, thus alleviating the suffering of the women in his household.<sup>3</sup>

Avimelech's struggle parallels one of the most difficult challenges we face today in the pursuit of global social justice. How do we identify which voices are speaking the truth—and how do we respond when those truths implicate our own actions? What responsibility do we take on when, like Avimelech, we hear the dissenting voice of truth urging us to change the decisions we've made?

Every day we make personal choices that have global consequences. What food do we buy? What clothes do we wear? These choices are guided by many factors, including convenience, style and price. Yet how many of us think deeply about the impact our consumption has on those at the point of production? We may be familiar with the profound negative impacts free trade has on developing nations, but how great of an effort do we make to buy locally grown foods? We may have heard of the sweatshops across the globe that feed the Global North's demand

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 20: 1–18.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews: Volume 1* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1911), 258–259.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 20:17–18 and Ginzberg, 261.

for cheap goods, but does this knowledge influence us to purchase fair trade products? How closely do we listen to the voices that inform us of the full impact of our decisions? And to what extent do we choose to incorporate positive changes into our own lives?

It is easy to feel that the power to make an impact in these areas is held solely by larger forces far beyond our control. Governments and international institutions like the World Bank and United Nations create environmental regulations and determine trade policy. Large corporations are responsible for much of the direct exploitation of workers worldwide and dominate the conversation in our country surrounding consumption. But the truth is these actors do not hold all the power. As citizens of a democracy, our political voices can affect the policies of our own government, and as consumers our decisions about what we buy can influence the way in which goods are produced. In fact, we have a moral obligation to pursue change through ethical consumption and advocacy for just trade policies. Change must take place within our personal sphere before it can extend to our greater community.

The story of Avimelech can provide us with inspiration to listen to unpopular voices that oppose the status quo in our own lives. Even when the dominant voices try to invalidate those who speak truth to power, we have a responsibility to listen to the voices of truth and act accordingly. Only through courageous action can we transform the way our personal consumption impacts those beyond our immediate sphere. We are not powerless. We have the ability and the responsibility to change the way we live, and thus create a more just world for everyone.



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