



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayigash 5771

By Guy Izhak Austrian

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This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer, Dvar Tzedek alumnus Guy Austrian.

Rock by rock, stone by stone, each one passed hand to hand along a human chain of young Jews and indigenous Guatemalans: our energy was high on this beautiful day during our AJWS delegation to rural Guatemala. We cleared a riverbed beneath shady leaves near the local school and later sat side by side, resting on the grassy banks and contemplating the footbridge we would soon build there together.

I chatted with a young woman who worked at the school, trying out my rusty Spanish. She was curious about our group, and I did my best to explain who we were. I was feeling good about the human common ground we were establishing through our work together, until she demanded: “So why don’t the Jews believe in Jesus?” Suddenly I felt all our commonality hit a wall, one that would always divide us.

This irreducible core of identity that separates us from the other peoples of the world gets its fateful start in *Parshat Vayigash*, in which the Jewish people become a collective entity for the first time: “The total people of the household of Jacob who came to Egypt numbered seventy.”¹

Just seventy people—and right away they are set apart for special treatment. While Joseph is busy appropriating the livestock, land and labor of the starving Egyptians, he provides choice land and bread to the House of Israel, which becomes a numerous and prosperous people in Goshen.² Later, the Egyptians will subject Israel to suspicion, oppression and slavery—one of the founding paradigms of Jewish nationhood. Is this perhaps the moment in which the Jews and the other nations were doomed to millennia of separation and hostility?

It seems so. Yet when we probe deeper, we find that the way out of this trap is hidden in the text itself. It’s a weird detail of the story that *seventy* is the number of Jacob’s household who went down to Egypt. Remarkably, this is also the number of nations accounted for in the genealogy of Noah’s descendants.³ Seventy Jews become a nation among seventy nations. This number, seventy, is no ordinary number, but has a symbolic resonance that recurs and develops in both biblical and rabbinic tradition.⁴

The number seventy comes up in especially striking ways that link identity with Torah. A famous *midrash* teaches: “The Torah has seventy *panim* (faces, or facets).”⁵ This is generally taken to mean that every verse, every word of the Torah, can be interpreted in multiple ways—it looks different depending on who’s looking at it. Usually, this text is

¹ Genesis 46:27.

² Genesis 47:11-27.

³ Genesis 10. Some have counted from 70 to 74 nations in the list, though the traditional count is 70. See Daniel Sperber, “Nations, The Seventy,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 15. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. p30-32.

⁴ For example, Moses gathers 70 elders who prophesy in the wilderness (Num. 11:24-25); 70 bulls are sacrificed on Sukkot (Num. 29:12-34); the Sanhedrin had 70 members plus a chief (Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 1:5-6); the Law engraved at Mt. Ebal (Deut 27:8) was written in 70 languages (Mishnah *Sotah* 7:5).

⁵ Bamidbar Rabbah, *Naso* 13:16, and parallel texts elsewhere.

taught to encourage each Jew to access and interpret the Torah in his or her own way. And indeed, perhaps the seventy members of Jacob's household each held his or her own opinion as well—a diverse bunch with more internal differences than the unity forced on them by circumstances!

However, another *midrash* in the Talmud suggests that the seventy in question may refer not just to seventy Jews. This text compares the revelation at Sinai to a hammer striking a rock and sending sparks flying; like the sparks, Torah itself shot forth at the instant of revelation in seventy languages, corresponding to the seventy nations.⁶ Incredibly, at the moment when Israel received the Torah—the essence of Israel's identity as a unique and separate nation—everyone else heard it too, and in their own languages!

Therefore, the seventy *panim* of Torah must also reflect the gaze of the seventy nations. Each nation has a perspective on Torah that is already built into the structure of Torah itself. In other words, we Jews cannot fully understand Torah—that is, how to live an ethical life in response to the Divine intention that pulses through our world—unless we learn not only how each Jew understands it, but also how each nation understands it as well.

So when I was in Guatemala and felt pressured to represent Judaism to my Guatemalan counterpart, I should have been especially clear that I am just one face of my people. I could also have focused my listening on the parallel notion that her people, the Maya Achi, were also a people with insight into God's Torah, and that she herself was, like me, just one unique person with a unique perspective.

She and I belonged to separate groups, a difference that didn't need to be overcome, but valued. At the same time, we were two complex individuals with things in common, who didn't need to be obscured behind our group affiliations. Just so, every rock in that riverbed belonged to one type or another, yet each was unique; conversely, rocks of different types could look very much alike in shape or size. Now I know why it felt like sparks were coming off those rocks as we passed them hand to hand, face to face.



Guy Izhak Austrian is a community organizer and third-year rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He first saw an integrated model of community, spirituality and social justice while working at a Latino immigrant workers' center, as part of his 10-plus years of experience in social change movements. Hoping to develop such a model with Jews, he worked at the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago and Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City and decided to pursue the rabbinate. Guy currently serves as the Social Justice Rabbinic Intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York City, where he lives with his life partner Rabbi Jill Jacobs and their daughter Lior. Guy can be reached at guyaustrian@gmail.com.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 88a. The passage draws the metaphor of the hammer and rock from Jeremiah 23:29. Other *midrashim* teach that although the nations were offered the Torah, they did not accept it; e.g., *Pesikta Rabbati* 30.

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