



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Yitro 5771

By Shira Fischer

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One year ago last week, on January 12, 2010, the Caribbean country of Haiti, already the poorest country in the Americas,¹ experienced a devastating earthquake, the worst to hit the region in nearly two hundred years. The quake not only took hundreds of thousands of lives, but it also destroyed the country's already limited infrastructure and left millions displaced or homeless.

Guided by good intentions, supplies and assistance flooded the country, but they rarely reached those in need, as the government essentially disbanded after the earthquake, leaving governmental organizations unmoored and without central coordination for distribution.

Local non-governmental organizations rose to face the challenge. Groups like AJWS recipient Groundswell International and its Haitian counterpart Partenariat pour le Développement Local (PLD) worked with local Haitian communities to address the crisis. Groundswell explains its grassroots approach, saying that "experience has shown that people learn better from their neighbors who have achieved successes while facing similar circumstances, as opposed to from external experts promoting technological packages that may not be accessible or sustainable over the long term."²

Groundswell and PLD work with local Haitian community-based organizations, investing in the strength and promise of rural communities through training, resource sharing and enabling local villages and groups to collaborate. Soon after the earthquake, Groundswell representatives visited nine local peasant organizations that they partner with in rural areas. Cantave Jean-Baptiste, Director of PLD and AJWS's country representative in Haiti, indicated in an interview that PLD was "the first organization—and in many cases...the only organization—to provide assistance to these communities and the displaced people that arrived."³ Groundswell and PLD helped the communities assess their own needs, discuss the peasants' priorities and share resources as needed. In this way, the locus of the control remained in the hands of the people, who were able to make decisions that would benefit as many as possible in their communities.

The importance of the decentralization of power and empowerment of individuals is echoed in this week's Torah portion. Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, taught him about the limitations of taking on too much himself, thus impeding his ability to make the best decisions for all members of the community.

Before Yitro intervened, Moshe sat from morning until night hearing and adjudicating cases. He had little time to do anything else, and the effect, Yitro saw, would ultimately damage both Moshe and the people: "You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."⁴ Instead, Yitro recommended a decentralized system wherein numerous local judges would rule on smaller issues, with judges overseeing communities of decreasingly large sizes: "Rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers

¹United Nations Development Programme. "2010 Human Development Report." 4 Nov. 2010. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Complete.pdf>.

²Groundswell International. "Where we work." 10 Jan. 2011. <<http://groundswellinternational.org/where-we-work/haiti/>>.

³Groundswell International. "Six months after the Haiti earthquake." 10 Jan. 2011. <<http://groundswellinternational.org/where-we-work/haiti/six-months-after-the-haiti-earthquake-an-interview-with-cantave-jean-baptiste-director-of-partnership-for-local-development/>>.

⁴Exodus 18:18.

of tens.”⁵ Moshe would serve as a resource for large matters, but by delegating responsibility to others who knew their local issues better, Moshe would be able to bear his task, and the system would lead ultimately to more peaceful and empowered communities.⁶

Yitro’s insight is the same wisdom that leads to Groundswell’s success: instead of trying to run operations in a top-down manner, Groundswell supports local communities in making their own decisions, enabling effective and sustainable change. While central coordination is still critical—Moshe still handled the toughest cases, and in Haiti, there must be some coordination for distribution of emergency resources—overall, empowered communities lead to long-term change.

Though we cannot prevent natural disasters like the earthquake in Haiti, by empowering local communities, we can help them create strong foundations that can withstand stress when disaster does strike. By engaging and empowering people at every level—from the leaders of thousands to the leaders of tens—communities can wage a more effective response to disasters and strengthen themselves for other challenges that lie ahead. The *midrash* expresses an understanding of the importance of bottom-up leadership when it explains that community leaders (the “elders” referred to in the Book of Numbers) must be “approved by the people... a person should not be considered for office until people sing his or her praise.”⁷ The best and most sustainable leadership structure comes when the people’s voices are heard.



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⁵Exodus 18:21.

⁶Exodus 18:23.

⁷Sifrei Numbers 92.

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