



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Naso 5775

By Joshua Rabin

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Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head by a member of the Taliban in 2012 for committing a “monstrous crime”—standing up for girls’ right to go to school.¹ When the Taliban banned girls from attending school in her village in Pakistan, Yousafzai started a blog for the BBC called “[Diary of a Pakistani Schoolgirl](#).” There, she chronicled life under the Taliban, her relentless desire to get an education and her commitment to ensure that all girls can do the same.² Malala’s work inspired people around the world and even led to her nomination for the International Children’s Peace Prize in 2011.³ But her rising fame as an activist nearly cost her her life.

When I think about Malala’s story, I think about my two-year-old daughter. This past year, she began attending school, and I take it for granted that the society in which she lives will uphold her access to education through adulthood. However, the sad fact is that girls’ education is far from a guaranteed right around the world.

The World Bank reported in 2012 that major gaps continue to exist between the number of boys versus girls who complete secondary education, and over 31 million girls are unable to attend school at all.⁴ In some cases, girls must drop out because their education is not a high priority for their families or their communities. In the case of Malala Yousafzai, “Education went from being a right to being a crime,”⁵ and Malala was forced to reckon with those people who turned her desire to receive an education into an affront to their interpretation of God’s law.

Although these interpreters of the Koran may abhor Malala’s desire for learning, it is clear to me that her activism is perfectly in line with the values of our own tradition, and is a heroic example of a lesson that can be learned in this week’s *parashah*.

Parashat Naso contains the priestly blessing, known as *birkat kohanim*—one of the most famous passages in Jewish liturgy. The *parasha* states: “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons,

¹ Mishal Husain, “Malala: The Girl Who Was Shot for Going to School,” *BBC News*, 7 October 2013, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24379018>> (Accessed 14 April 2015).

² Malala Yousafzai, “Diary of a Pakistani Schoolgirl,” 6 March 2009, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7928752.stm>> (Accessed 14 April 2015).

³ See Footnote 1. Malala was ultimately awarded the International Children’s Peace Prize in 2013.

⁴ “Girls Education,” *World Bank*, 3 December 2014, <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/girls-education>> (Accessed 15 April 2015).

⁵ Malala Yousafzai, “Nobel Lecture,” 10 December 2014, *Nobel Prize*, <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2014/yousafzai-lecture_en.html> (Accessed 14 April 2015).

saying: You shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them: May the Lord bless you, and keep you; May the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious unto You; May the Lord lift up His face upon You, and give You peace."⁶

While it is tempting to read this blessing as an unequivocal statement of God's favor for the Israelites and God's promise of a life of blessing, several commentators believe the blessing comes with a contingency: Arnold Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, argues that this blessing actually makes clear that "God's favor is neither automatic nor exclusive."⁷ Rather, God's blessing "depends on what its recipients do with it,"⁸ how the Israelites will put that blessing into positive, transformative action.

Our commentators recognize that the realization of Divine blessing depends on human action, and the more difficult the challenge, the more essential it is that we give all that we can give. Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, otherwise known as the *Sefat Emet*, states that God wants "to lift up His face" (i.e. show favor) to us so that we might reaffirm our commitment to act on God's blessing for all of humanity. He states:

"...when one is doing God's will, what need is there for God to "lift His Face"? The point is that the blessed Holy One accepts our little bit of service as though it were much... Just as the person rejoices in a good deed and is glad to have done God's will, whether great or small, so does the Creator accept this offering with a smile."⁹

No matter the size of the deed, no matter the scope of the challenge, we are obligated to serve God's mission for the world, and actualize God's vision for humanity. In Malala's case, there is no question that her heroic efforts amidst great danger were an example of living out God's blessing for all of humanity. Yet just as Chancellor Eisen argues that the onus of realizing the higher purpose of God's blessing is on the person being blessed, we too must follow God's divine example, and Malala's human example, and recognize that we are blessed, and with a great blessing comes great responsibility.

Today, too many girls in Pakistan and around the world still cannot go to school, yet that does not mean that Malala's efforts were in vain. In 2014, Malala Yousafzai was honored for her courageous work by being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁰ In her acceptance speech, she said that "Education is one of the blessings of life—and

⁶ Bemidbar 6:22-27. In contemporary Jewish practice, this blessing is included in the traditional Jewish prayerbook during the hazzan's repetition of the Amidah, and forms the main body of the parents blessing for children traditionally recited at Shabbat dinner.

⁷ Arnold M. Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 113.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Arthur Green ed., *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 226.

¹⁰ See Footnote 4.

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one of its necessities.”¹¹ More educated women tend to be healthier, in more stable families, earn more money, and provide better health and education for their own children, thereby helping break the cycle of poverty that exists in so many communities.¹² Malala’s commitment to realizing the blessing of education for herself and other girls is an example to us all.

Parashat Naso reminds us that humanity has the capacity to elevate and help to realize God’s blessings. It is our responsibility to ensure that the blessing of education is an unalienable right for all, and maximized as a universal good for humanity.



Rabbi Joshua Rabin is the Director of Kehilla Enrichment at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. He received his Rabbinic Ordination and an MA in Jewish Education from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2011, where he served two terms as student president of the Rabbinical School. Josh is an alumnus of the AJWS Rabbinical Students’ Delegation in Muchucuxcah, Mexico in 2011, served as a District Coordinator for AJWS’s Reverse Hunger Campaign and ran on AJWS’s first New York Marathon Team. Josh lives on the Upper West Side with his wife, Yael, and their daughter, Hannah. You can read more of Josh’s writings at www.joshuarabin.com.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Footnote 3.

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