



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Nitzavim 5775

By Jimmy Taber

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When I was eighteen, my grandfather enlisted me in a signature-gathering campaign. We advocated for the addition of an amendment to Oregon's state constitution that would declare health care a fundamental right. Working alongside him, I found myself captivated by his tireless insistence that we each have the responsibility to care for the vulnerable. "We all know someone who lacks affordable and accessible healthcare," he repeated over and over. "These are our family, friends and neighbors who are suffering." This message became all the more real to me when, in the midst of the campaign, my grandfather was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. However, instead of slowing down and focusing on his health, he continued campaigning between chemotherapy treatments, bringing along his medical bills—totaling tens of thousands of dollars—as evidence of the injustice of the system. He would ask people how we, as a community, could expect someone without insurance to survive such financial hardship. I was deeply affected by the personalization of the issue, and felt a new and very real urgency for the need to help protect the vulnerable.

College and graduate school enriched my developing activism with theory as I sought to understand structures of inequality through the lenses of race, gender and sexuality. In combination with practical courses on nonprofit management skills, I believed that through mastering abstract ideas I would be able to persuade others to care about issues of social justice. Yet, I found my world polarized between those who "got it"—insiders in the social justice world who spoke the language—and those who did not. My message only seemed to resonate with those who were already versed in the jargon. Ironically, my education seemed to create a barrier to communicating my beliefs in terms that would inspire others. For even as it empowered me personally, it created a rift between me— as a professional—and the greater lay community that I sought to mobilize to effect change.

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech speaks directly to this type of tension in communication that can exist between complex intellectual ideas and people on the ground. Anticipating that the Israelites might view the lofty words of the Torah as irrelevant to their everyday experiences, Moshe cautions: "Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens... neither is it beyond the sea."¹ On the contrary, "the thing is very close to you in your mouth and in your heart."² In other words, while processing things intellectually is important, we must also trust our hearts. The capacity to connect is found within us.

As social activists, this passage reminds us that when seeking to inspire others, we must remember first and foremost to communicate our message directly to people's hearts. While it is both natural and useful to reach a deeper level of

¹ Deuteronomy 30:11-13.

² Deuteronomy 30:14.

understanding, for the uninitiated, abstract theories can seem as foreign as if they came from “the heavens” or “beyond the sea.”

The key for inspiring people to pursue social change is to remember that the capacity for compassion, as Moshe articulates in the *parshah*, lies in the heart of each individual. We must remember how our own hearts were opened to social justice, and use that experience to guide how we connect with and inspire others. Before I was educated in international policy issues and considered myself an activist, I was simply an individual who felt inspired because of a grandfather with health problems who believed he could change the system. Instead of communicating on a purely intellectual level, I must use those experiences that are “close to my mouth and in my heart” to create moments of personal connections for others, tapping into the capacity for compassion that lies in each one of us.



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