



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Dvarim 5775

By Rabbi Miriyam Glazer

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The universe is made of stories, not atoms.

Muriel Rukeyser

As the book of *Dvarim*, meaning “Words,” opens, Moses launches his farewell oration to “all Israel,” gathered together in the wilderness of the *Aravah*, outside the borders of the Promised Land. But who is the “all Israel” to whom he is speaking?

Not those who were liberated from slavery in Egypt, nearly 40 years before.

Nor those who witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and experienced the ecstasy of salvation as they crossed to safety on the other side, when Pharaoh’s chariots pursued them.

And not those who, having experienced those miracles, nevertheless “sulked in their tents”¹ frightened, stripped of faith, once they learned that the people whom they’d have to conquer to enter the Land were “tall and strong.”

Indeed, when Moses begins his oration, he describes experiences that only three people present there had endured: Moses himself, along with Joshua and Caleb—leader of the tribe of Judah.² Nevertheless, he speaks as if the generation born in the wilderness had been present from the outset. That is because it is their *story* he is telling, rather than their individual histories.

The very opening of the book of “Words” thus teaches us a vivid lesson about the power of storytelling. It is one the ancient rabbis, too, regarded as vital. They taught that no matter where we live, when we live or how we live—on Passover, each of us must state that the story of Slavery, Freedom, and Redemption is *our* story, our personal story. *We ourselves* were slaves in Egypt and *we ourselves* were liberated from slavery. Thus, we learn the great lesson of Story itself, which, in the words of Marshall Ganz, teaches “our hearts how to live as choiceful human beings, capable of embracing hope over fear, self-worth and self-love over self-doubt, and love over isolation and alienation.”³

Those of us who participated in AJWS’s inaugural Global Jewish Fellowship in 2013 experienced a remarkable example of this power of story when we joined the women of Naaxwin, an AJWS grantee, in the remote

¹ Deut 1:27

² Num 14:29, 32:11; Deut 1:36

³ Marshall Ganz, “Why Stories Matter,” *Sojourner’s Magazine*, March 2009. <http://sojo.net/magazine/2009/03/why-stories-matter>

mountain village of Matias Romero in southern Mexico. The whole village had gathered in the make-shift plaza—men and women seated separately—to see a marionette show created by the indigenous Naaxwin women, many of whom themselves had been victims of domestic violence.

Through the expressive faces and agile, dramatic bodies of the marionettes, fusing humor and tragedy, truth and exaggeration, the puppeteers told the stories of the lives of people in this community: romantic hope crushed by too young-marriage, domestic abuse, poverty, drunkenness, social injustice. But then the action shifted to a new way of thinking, a possibility of change, a reason to hope. After this “happy ending,” the actors and women who had created the show replicated it in practice: they invited the women of the village to come and talk and explore how they, too, could achieve this redemption. Thus the women of Naaxwin used storytelling to help the villagers take steps that could change their lives, that could free them to become “choiceful human beings.” They knew how to turn what Ganz calls the “story of *self*” into the “story of *us*.”

The next story, in Ganz’s words, is the “story of now—the fierce urgency of now.” Around the globe, that story of now is one in which human beings are still in the wilderness, still blocked—by injustice, endemic poverty, gender discrimination, the absence of basic human rights—from entering a Promised Land; from having a happy ending of their own. What the rabbis and the opening of “Words”—this fifth and final book of the Torah—teach us, is that whether we ourselves were born into slavery or born into freedom, whether we have directly known this suffering or not, this “story of now” is our story as well, and we have to do our part.



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