



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Ki Tavo 5775

By Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh

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Parashat Ki Tavo includes a dramatic scene on two mountain tops. Moses tells the people that after they have traveled across the Jordan River, into the land of Israel, they are to divide themselves into two groups on the nearby peaks: On Mount Gerizim six tribes will stand as a list of blessings is recited. On Mount Ebal another six tribes will stand and hear a list of curses. Presumably, these blessings are incentives to follow the *mitzvot*, and the curses are a warning to those who don't follow the commandments.¹

I was struck by an odd blessing that appears in this list: "Adonai will make you the head and not the tail."² What does it mean to be blessed to be the "head" today? Does this blessing imply being a leader? A visionary? A wealthy person? Someone on the cover of *The New York Times* or a guest on the Daily Show? Is it about being a part of the privileged class of educated adults? Having a safe home or adequate food and clothing? Or does it simply mean that you are in charge of your own body and destiny?

And then I thought: what did the Torah mean to be the "tail"? Does it imply poverty or oppression or lack of opportunities? While I wouldn't use this term today, we can recognize people who live their lives without control over their own destinies, or who experience the kind of pain and fear the Torah must have intended.

There are 15,000 children just this year who had to escape from the violence and poverty of South America or Mexico toward relative safety across the American border. There are 14.2 million girls who are forced into child marriages every year.³ And in 2015 it is shameful that there are approximately 27 million slaves in the world today.⁴ Imagining our own lives in their shoes helps make these problems more tangible: What would your life look like if you were a 16-year-old in rural Mexico, inner city Detroit, or the fields of Cambodia?

When I visited Oaxaca, Mexico with AJWS in November 2013, I was deeply saddened by the lack of education for children over 6th grade. Many of them didn't have the opportunity to continue learning, simply because there was no local secondary school nearby. A child couldn't pursue a high school or college degree because she had no way of getting there by foot or because his family depended on him for farm labor. My heart sank when I visited a woman's health clinic and we learned that many women would not get free pap-spears because their husbands wouldn't let a man examine them. I was outraged when I learned that in rural Oaxaca, women were not given the right to vote in their villages.

I'm convinced that individuals don't become what the Torah would call a "tail" because we deserve it or because we aren't smart enough. Being a "tail" is a matter of bad luck, accident of birth, or circumstance. However, reversing one's life course is possible. I visited many AJWS grantees who believed that everyone is a "head" and deserves the

¹ Deut. 27:11-14

² Deut. 28:13

³ UNFPA, 2012, *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*. New York: United Nations Population Fund

⁴ slaveryfootprint.org

blessings of dignity and self-determination. I spoke with the Executive Director of a Catholic Woman's organization in Mexico City that helped women learn about birth control and their right to abortions. I visited a Women's Safe House in Oaxaca that counseled women about their rights to be free from physical or sexual abuse. I laughed with delight while watching a LGBT theatre troop that teaches teens through performances about healthy relationships.

Around the world, individuals born into circumstances where they lack control over their own destinies are claiming their rights to regain that control. A garment worker in Cambodia isn't content with earning less than \$2 per day, so she organizes her peers to protest for better wages. An indigenous Oaxacan farmer doesn't stay silent when the government wants to give away his land to a mining company; instead, he rallies other local farmers to defend the homes their ancestors have lived on for generations.

My visit to Mexico with AJWS reminds me that I am blessed with the privilege of being born into circumstances where being the "head" comes naturally. It also inspires me to work to overcome poverty, prejudice and other injustices that cause millions around the world to struggle mightily to achieve the same freedoms.

As we read *Parashat Ki Tavo*, let us pray that all people have the opportunity to thrive as the head and not the tail; that all can live the blessings of self-determination, equality and opportunity.



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