



**DVAR TZEDEK:**  
*Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice for 30 years*

**AJWS**  
**at 30**

*The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.*

### Introductory Reflection

This week, in *Parashat Vayigash*, the story of the 12 Tribes takes a dramatic turn. An impassioned testimonial from Judah prompts the vizier Joseph to reveal his true identity to his brothers who, 22 years earlier, sold him into slavery. In her 2009 Dvar Tzedek, Rachel Farbiarz acknowledges the transformative power of personal testimony, serving "as an essential means of mending relationships, families, self—even nations." Personal testimony, she writes, is morally necessary for the rebuilding of our broken world.

AJWS's grantees, similarly, use their personal stories of hardship and oppression to change hearts and minds and bridge the gaps between estranged communities locked in conflict. As a girl during Liberia's brutal civil war, Cecelia Danuweli witnessed her stepfather murdered before her eyes and faced the constant threat of rape and other violence as warring factions vied for power. In 1990, she fled for her life and spent years living in the bush, hiding from the never-ending bloodshed. In 2002, she sought refuge in Liberia's capital, Monrovia, along with thousands of displaced people from around the country. Looking for assistance, she discovered West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), an organization helping war refugees and working to reconcile the warring parties and bring peace to the country.

At WANEP, which AJWS began supporting in 2005, Cecelia helped forge a grassroots women's peace movement. She organized mothers, sisters and grandmothers to stage peaceful protests and speak out to bridge divides and bring opposing parties to the negotiating table. Today, as her country recovers, Cecelia has dedicated her life to ensuring that Liberia will never again be divided by violence. Her story is a powerful example of how personal testimony can mend the fissures of our world today.

*Read Rachel's moving piece below.*

## Parashat Vayigash 5776

By Rachel Farbiarz

December 19, 2015

*(Reprinted from January 3, 2009)*

*Parashat Vayigash* details one of the Torah's most dramatic episodes: After Judah delivers an anguished monologue, the vizier Joseph reveals his identity as the boy whom, 22 years earlier, his brothers had sold into slavery. Judah's words, which have prompted this revelation, are a response to the threat of Benjamin's imprisonment, the final turn in the screw of manipulations to which Joseph has submitted his brothers.

Judah's monologue recounts how the vizier's accusations and demands have tormented his complicated family. With unflinching pathos he sketches the grief that has shaped his father's inequitable love for Benjamin—the beloved remnant of a favored family, and by implication, he concedes his own inability to comfort and satisfy his father. Judah begs the vizier to enslave him in place of “the boy,” whose “soul is bound up” with that of his father's. Above all, he tells of his personal anguish, imploring Joseph to understand *who he is* and why, therefore, he cannot allow Benjamin to remain in Egypt, to bring such suffering to his father.<sup>1</sup>

Commentator Avivah Zornberg recounts what Judah's words have set in motion: “A long silence, the silence of survival, collapses, and Joseph gives his sole testimony to the past: ‘I am Joseph your brother whom you sold to Egypt.’”<sup>2</sup> Judah's monologue breaks the powerful Egyptian who can now—finally—speak as himself, as Joseph.

The power of Judah's words, explains the Hassidic rebbe the *Sefat Emet*, is contained in their deep penetration, reflected in the *parashah's* opening words—*Vayigash elav Yehudah*—“and Judah came close to him.” The *Sefat Emet* relates:

“To him”—to Joseph. But also, “to his own Self—to himself.” And also, “to Him—to God.” For indeed, Judah said nothing new in his speech, had no legal plea to make to Joseph. Nevertheless, since he accessed the reality of his narrative, salvation came to him. . . .<sup>3</sup>

God was drawn in by Judah's testimony. The divine presence, the *Sefat Emet* implies, resides in these acts of raw self-narration, with their power to bring about salvation. What is more, it was Judah's ability to authentically tell his own story that was the transformative catalyst in the confrontation between Joseph and his brothers. Judah's narrative was perfectly pitched to lend voice to the mute Joseph, transforming an impasse of enmity into reunion and healing.

The transformative power of personal testimony endures as an essential means of mending relationships, families, self—even nations. Indeed, our own community's efforts to respond to the Holocaust have underscored how personal testimony is at once psychologically necessary for the survival of the broken person and morally necessary for the rebuilding of the broken world. Both telling and listening—shattering the survivor's silence and piercing the deafness of a guilty world—have been essential to this testimonial process.

Indeed, some survivors are relentlessly driven to tell of themselves. In explaining this need, the narrator of *What is the What*, a novel about the experiences of one of the “lost boys” who walked across Sudan to escape its horrific civil war, recounts:

Whatever I do, however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories...I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. . . . I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run.<sup>4</sup>

There are certainly those who, unwilling to listen, do run. Survivors are thus not always met with either a receptive audience or a safe place to speak. But as those who have insisted on the imperative to narrate, listen

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1 Genesis 44:18-34

2 Avivah Zornberg, “The Exile of the Word,” pps.11-12, quoting Genesis 45:2.

3 Sefat Emet, *VaYigash*, 249; as quoted in Zornberg's essay at 13.

4 David Eggers, *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*, p. 474-75 (McSweeney's: 2006).

to and remember the testimonies of our own community of survivors, we must also insist on hearing the voices of survivors of contemporary global violence.

There is increasing recognition of the importance of providing a forum for such speech and a means of preserving testimonies from survivors of contemporary violence and genocide. Fourteen years after Rwanda's genocide, the organization called Voices of Rwanda has begun recording and preserving survivor testimony from the Rwandan genocide. And similarly, the organization Three Generations is seeking to preserve testimony from survivors of violence in Cambodia and Darfur, as well as Rwanda. These organizations publish individuals' testimonies—in writing or video—on their websites.<sup>5</sup>

*Parashat Vayigash's* account of how Judah's personal testimony initiated the brothers' reconciliation provides us with the opportunity to reflect on the transformative work that such testimony can effect in an anguished life. As we struggle to fashion means of mending a recurrently broken world, we should ensure that the two sides of this powerful process—telling and listening—are an integral part of our efforts.



Rachel Farbiarz is an artist who works in drawing, collage and installation. Previously, Rachel practiced law focusing on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners. She lives with her family in Washington, D.C., where she is represented by the gallery G Fine Art. Rachel can be reached through her website [www.rachelfarbiarz.com](http://www.rachelfarbiarz.com).

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<sup>5</sup> For information on Voices of Rwanda, visit: [www.voicesofrwanda.org](http://www.voicesofrwanda.org). The Aegis Trust, [www.aegistrust.org](http://www.aegistrust.org), is also involved with preserving and honoring the memory of Rwandan survivors.