



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

In her 2011 Dvar Tzedek on Parashat Yitro, author Shira Fischer uses lessons from the *parashah* to underscore the importance of empowering local communities to participate in creating and implementing solutions to critical human rights challenges. Writing just a year after the earthquake that decimated Haiti, she reflects on Yitro's message to Moses about the importance of divvying up power in order "to make the best decisions for all members of the community." She describes Haitian grassroots organizations supported by AJWS who, like Moses, delegated decisions to members of their communities after the earthquake in order to create a fair and efficient distribution of relief aid. "In this way," she says, "the locus of the control remained in the hands of the peasants, who were able to make decisions that would benefit as many as possible in their communities."

Although the approach demonstrated by Yitro, Moses and AJWS's grantees shows an ideal distribution of power and funding, this ideal has not been implemented in practice across the board in Haiti. Six years after the earthquake, issues of corruption and power plague Haiti and its ability to recover. Billions of dollars in foreign aid and reconstruction projects have flooded into Haiti since the earthquake, but the process for deciding how the money will be spent has not been transparent and has largely excluded local people.

For example, U.S. government funds have sometimes been directed toward building upscale hotels instead of housing for Haitians who have remained homeless since the disaster. AJWS grantee Ayiti Kale Je (AKJ) believes people should be asking questions about these kinds of decisions; but the Haitian government is often corrupt—and the local media often fails to investigate dishonest deeds. In response, AKJ has formed an investigative news network to keep a closer watch on Haiti's reconstruction process—and to make sure Haitian communities have a say in how foreign aid gets spent. Their goal is to give average citizens the information they need to demand a fair distribution of relief funds and to hold Haiti's leaders accountable for their actions. AJWS furthered this important cause in 2013 by helping draft and ensure the passage of the Assessing Progress in Haiti Act, a law that now ensures better transparency—and hopefully fairer distribution—for U.S. earthquake relief.

Learn more about AJWS's work in [Haiti](#) here, and read Shira's piece below.

Parashat Yitro 5776

By Shira Fischer
January 30, 2016
(Reprinted from *January 22, 2011*)

One year ago last week, on January 12, 2010, the Caribbean country of Haiti, already the poorest country in the Americas, experienced a devastating earthquake, the worst to hit the region in nearly two hundred years. The quake not only took hundreds of thousands of lives, but it also destroyed the country's already limited infrastructure and left millions displaced or homeless.

Guided by good intentions, supplies and assistance flooded the country, but they rarely reached those in need, as the government essentially disbanded after the earthquake, leaving governmental organizations unmoored and without central coordination for distribution.

Local non-governmental organizations rose to face the challenge. Groups like AJWS recipient Groundswell International and its Haitian counterpart Partenariat pour le Développement Local (PLD) worked with local Haitian communities to address the crisis. Groundswell explains its grassroots approach, saying that “experience has shown that people learn better from their neighbors who have achieved successes while facing similar circumstances, as opposed to from external experts promoting technological packages that may not be accessible or sustainable over the long term.”¹

Groundswell and PLD work with local Haitian community-based organizations, investing in the strength and promise of rural communities through training, resource sharing and enabling local villages and groups to collaborate. Soon after the earthquake, Groundswell representatives visited nine local peasant organizations that they partner with in rural areas. Cantave Jean-Baptiste, Director of PLD and AJWS’s country representative in Haiti, indicated in an interview that PLD was “the first organization—and in many cases... the only organization—to provide assistance to these communities and the displaced people that arrived.”² Groundswell and PLD helped the communities assess their own needs, discuss the peasants’ priorities and share resources as needed. In this way, the locus of the control remained in the hands of the people, who were able to make decisions that would benefit as many as possible in their communities.

The importance of the decentralization of power and empowerment of individuals is echoed in this week’s Torah portion. Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, taught him about the limitations of taking on too much himself, thus impeding his ability to make the best decisions for all members of the community.

Before Yitro intervened, Moshe sat from morning until night hearing and adjudicating cases. He had little time to do anything else, and the effect, Yitro saw, would ultimately damage both Moshe and the people: “You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.”³ Instead, Yitro recommended a decentralized system wherein numerous local judges would rule on smaller issues, with judges overseeing communities of decreasingly large sizes: “Rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.”⁴ Moshe would serve as a resource for large matters, but by delegating responsibility to others who knew their local issues better, Moshe would be able to bear his task, and the system would lead ultimately to more peaceful and empowered communities.⁵

Yitro’s insight is the same wisdom that leads to Groundswell’s success: instead of trying to run operations in a top-down manner, Groundswell supports local communities in making their own decisions, enabling effective and sustainable change. While central coordination is still critical—Moshe still handled the toughest cases, and in Haiti, there must be some coordination for distribution of emergency resources—overall, empowered communities lead to long-term change.

¹Groundswell International. “Where we work.” 10 Jan. 2011. <<http://groundswellinternational.org/where-we-work/haiti/>>.

²Groundswell International. “Six months after the Haiti earthquake.” 10 Jan. 2011.

³Exodus 18:18.

⁴Exodus 18:21.

⁵Exodus 18:23.

©2015 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org

Though we cannot prevent natural disasters like the earthquake in Haiti, by empowering local communities, we can help them create strong foundations that can withstand stress when disaster does strike. By engaging and empowering people at every level—from the leaders of thousands to the leaders of tens—communities can wage a more effective response to disasters and strengthen themselves for other challenges that lie ahead. The *midrash* expresses an understanding of the importance of bottom-up leadership when it explains that community leaders (the “elders” referred to in the Book of Numbers) must be “approved by the people... a person should not be considered for office until people sing his or her praise.”⁶ The best and most sustainable leadership structure comes when the people’s voices are heard.



Shira Fischer is an MD/PhD candidate in epidemiology at the University of Massachusetts and holds a BA in biochemistry from Harvard College. She is an alumna of the Dorot Fellowship, through which she spent a year post-college studying Talmud and working at the Academy for Hebrew Language in Jerusalem. She subsequently worked on health policy in Washington, D.C., and served on the Massachusetts Medical Society’s Committee for Public Health. Shira enjoys teaching Jewish studies and reading Torah for several local communities in Brookline, Massachusetts. Shira can be reached at ajws@shirafischer.com.

⁶Sifrei Numbers 92.

©2015 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org