



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 light of [last month's passing of Elie Wiesel \(z'l\)](#), who was a founding board member of AJWS, we would like to share Jimmy Taber's Dvar Tzedek from 2014, where Taber reflects on the meaning of the phrase "never again" in light of *Parashat Matot-Masei*. Numbers 30:3 states, "If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips."¹ As Taber points out in his piece, the Talmudic rabbis went on to discourage the taking of vows, out of their concern for our very human tendency to break even some of the most resolute promises we make to ourselves.

In the face of the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, many of us cannot help but vow to eradicate all hate and oppression from the world. And yet, in the face of the enormity of that task, we may simply throw up our hands.

Reflecting on his experience at the Save Darfur rally on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in 2006, where both Elie Wiesel (z'l) and Ruth Messinger were featured speakers, Taber assesses the real difficulty in maintaining this commitment. He promotes the value of "incrementalist" approaches to social change that enable us to see the value of small steps forward, even if we cannot quickly achieve the final goal. For example, as Taber explains, although the goal of ending all violence against women and girls is audaciously large, we can pass legislation like the International Violence Against Women Act to help change how American aid and diplomacy is used to address the problem.

With the passing of the most well-known Holocaust survivor, we are left with the legacy of his call, and the daily work of putting it into practice. Read reflections on Elie Wiesel (z'l) from [AJWS co-founder Laurence Simon](#), [AJWS Board Member Monte Dube](#), and [AJWS President and CEO Robert Bank](#). And see below for Jimmy Taber's meditation on the challenge of maintaining our moral commitments given the magnitude of the challenges we seek to overcome.

Parashat Matot-Masei 5776

By Jimmy Taber

August 6, 2016

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As a Jewish social justice activist, the collective trauma of the Holocaust has deeply impacted my approach to social change. Every injustice throughout the world that resembles, in some fashion, European Jewry's persecution during World War II takes on a deeply personal character. There is no issue in which this is more salient than genocide. In 2006, I took on the Jewish community's call of "never again" in response to the ongoing genocide in Darfur as a personal vow.

Yet, as the crowds dispersed from the Rally to Stop Genocide and press coverage dwindled, my devotion began to flag. Time passed and the genocide continued, forcing me to confront the possibility that I wouldn't be able to fulfill my promise of "never again." To me, it felt like all or nothing: despite my initial full-hearted commitment to stopping this atrocity, the absence of immediate, radical change as a result of that commitment led me to abandon my vow and move on to other issues.

Parashat Matot anticipates my experience as it delves into the question of vows: "If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips."¹ While the Torah's formula appears relatively straightforward (commit to something and follow through on that commitment), later rabbinic sources strongly discourage taking on these types of obligations, even if one ultimately fulfills one's pledges. Such warnings include: "He who vows, even if he fulfills his vow, is called a sinner,"² and "It is not right for a man to swear an oath even for the truth."³ It seems odd that the Rabbis would condemn even those who keep their vows; what is wrong with promising to do something and then doing it?

A Talmudic statement reveals that the Rabbis prohibited all vows in the recognition that there is a powerful human tendency to break them: "The sages taught: Do not ever get into the habit of making vows, for you will end up violating even oaths."⁴ The Rabbis recognize that, while we may have the best of intentions to fulfill our promises, we are likely to fail to complete the obligations we impose on ourselves and therefore should not be in the habit of making these commitments at all.

My vow of "never again" followed a similar trajectory. When I realized that I would never be able to fulfill this self-imposed obligation, I felt frustrated at my inability to keep my promise and compelled to relieve myself of the responsibility altogether. The feeling of futility that I experienced after having vowed to fight injustice and then absolving myself of the obligation when the problems became overwhelming and intractable—made me question my approach to social change work altogether. The idea of "never again" imposes the expectation that we must stop an injustice completely for our work to be valuable.

But might there be a middle ground? Is it possible to forgo the vow to radically and completely alter the status quo and instead utilize incremental strategies to effect change on the ground?

I discovered an answer to this question when I learned more about American Jewish World Service's strategy to respond to the genocide in Darfur. Since AJWS helped mobilize over 50,000 people for the Save Darfur Rally in 2006, the organization has engaged in political advocacy related to Sudan and situates the genocide in Darfur in the context of larger political issues in Sudan and South Sudan. While lacking the immediate and radical transformation that "never again" demands, AJWS's work in Sudan offers an alternative that is both capable of changing lives and

¹ Numbers 30:3. While similar, the rabbis distinguish between vows and oaths with oaths carrying slightly more negative weight.

² Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 77b. From *Book of Legends*, eds. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky (New York: Schocken Books, 1992) 702.

³ Tanhuma Vayikra 7. From *Book of Legends*, 702.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 20a. From *Book of Legends*, 702.

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amenable to sustained investment by activists. By participating in these efforts, I have discovered that I can meaningfully contribute to change in Darfur without the ultimately unbearable weight of “never again” hanging over my head. Free from my vow, I am able to finally contribute in a healthy, sustainable way.

I have also experienced the power of this approach in AJWS’s *We Believe* campaign. At first glance, to take on the goals of the campaign—end violence against women and girls, stop hate crimes against LGBT people and empower girls to end child marriage—would appear as vow-like as “never again.” Yet the campaign focuses on realistic, yet transformative, targets—such as advocating for the passage of the International Violence Against Women Act, which will compel “the U.S. government to put the full weight of its foreign aid and international diplomacy behind global efforts to end violence against women and girls.” AJWS thus offers a meaningful way to move beyond the all-or-nothing expectations that vow-like social justice commitments can induce. By joining these efforts, I have found a way to contribute to a struggle that previously felt too daunting to join.

While vows and grand pronouncements of sweeping change are tempting, it is clear that they do not represent a healthy approach to activism. As the well-worn adage from Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot aptly observes, “It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”⁵ It is up to each of us to find a way to contribute to social change without allowing the magnitude of our commitment to paralyze us. The sustained, incremental work of AJWS allows me to move beyond this paradigm and join a community of activists working together to positively impact those affected by injustice around the world.



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⁵ Pirkei Avot 2:16.

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