



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 his touching Dvar Tzedek from 2008, Rabbi Elliot Kukla writes about *Parashat Eikev*: "In this portion, Moses speaks to the people and reminds them of all the suffering that they experienced on their journey out of Egypt and the way that their relationship with the Divine was shattered over and over again." Rabbi Kukla asks, "Why is Moses reminding them of this history?" He explains, "If we don't first grieve over our losses and acknowledge our broken relations, we cannot begin to heal. The people could only start anew in the Promised Land after naming the pain that brought them there, they could only rebuild their connection with the Divine after recognizing the damage that had been done in that relationship along the way."

Relating this message to the impact of a cyclone that wrought profound trauma in Burma, Rabbi Kukla explains, "This ... natural disaster reminds us that the impact of disasters is not just about nature. It is deeply entrenched in inequality and broken relationships—violence, war, global racism and an imbalance of wealth—that lay the foundations for tragedy and disaster."

As some have argued, [there is no such thing as a natural disaster](#). When a disaster of any scale strikes, the pain or grief held by survivors is, of course, deep and real. But the scope of that disaster—how many people were harmed, how much infrastructure collapsed, and how long it will take to rebuild—is determined, in large part, by the strength—or weakness—of the relationships that Rabbi Kukla describes. Societies that are already rife with poverty, inequality and injustice are typically harder hit by disasters and take much longer to recover.

This is why when AJWS responds to disasters, like the earthquake in Nepal, we fund the most vulnerable groups—[like residents of remote regions, women, youth, LGBT people, refugees, people with disabilities and the Dalit or "untouchable" members of the caste system](#). These communities are most likely to suffer extensive damage and to be excluded from immediate relief efforts in the aftermath. AJWS-backed groups have counseled survivors grappling with trauma, rebuilt houses and public buildings, helped communities prepare for future disasters, and helped survivors advocate for their rights during reconstruction.

As Rabbi Kukla concludes, "This week, as we read *Parashat Eikev*, may we publicly name all the brokenness of our world in our holiest places—in our homes, our synagogues and our streets—so that our tears can begin to bring healing and the true wholeness of a broken heart."

[Read more about AJWS's work in Nepal following the earthquake of 2015 here](#), and continue to explore Rabbi Kukla's poignant reflection on mending broken relationships and our broken world in his Dvar Tzedek below.

Parashat Eikev 5776

By Rabbi Elliot Kukla
August 27, 2016

(Reprinted from August 23, 2008)

I recently had the honor of serving as a chaplain to a woman named Maggie in the last weeks of her life. In those long, painful days in the hospital, Maggie was constantly surrounded by her three childhood best friends. One day I asked what it was that has kept them so connected. "Well," sighed one of her friends, "we are so close now because she broke our hearts many years ago."

The friends had been inseparable since grade school. In their last year of high school, Maggie had become pregnant and shortly thereafter suffered a painful miscarriage. Paralyzed by shame and sadness, Maggie was unable to share her grief with her friends. Instead, she withdrew completely. The friends were deeply hurt, but they refused to let her go. They kept calling, kept wanting a relationship. Slowly Maggie began to share her pain with them and they rebuilt their shattered friendship.

"There is nothing as whole as a broken heart," said the Kotsker Rebbe. It was in healing the brokenness of their relationship that made the friends so close. And it was clinging to the heart-break within Maggie that allowed them to build a relationship so strong that it could last a lifetime. This healing of past hurts is the process of *tshuva*, continually moving closer to one another and to the world by living by our values.

This Shabbat is one of the special weeks of *nechemta*, comfort, that follow Tisha b'Av, the primary day of communal Jewish mourning. Tisha b'Av marks some of the most profound moments of loss in Jewish history, such as the destruction of the Temples in ancient Jerusalem and the subsequent violent displacement of our people.

It would be tempting to forget the pain and grief that Tisha b'Av marks and obscure the moments of shattering within our Jewish past, just as Maggie, as a young woman, was drawn to hide her brokenness. Yet, it is in the creation of holy spaces, where we can share and name our grief, that the possibility of healing begins. These weeks of *nechemta* following Tisha b'Av lead directly to the High Holidays when we draw nearer to one another through *tshuva*. The healing of the High Holidays is most possible when we first allow our hearts to break in grief on Tisha b'Av.

This week we read *Parashat Eikev*. In this portion, Moses speaks to the people and reminds them of all the suffering that they experienced on their journey out of Egypt and the way that their relationship with the Divine was shattered over and over again. We read: "Remember, don't forget, how you brought on the Eternal One's anger in the wilderness. From the day you left Egypt until you came to this place you have been fighting against the Eternal One."

Why is Moses reminding them of this history? It seems like on the eve of entering the Promised Land it would be tempting to try to forget. However, as I learned from Maggie, if we don't first grieve over our losses and acknowledge our broken relations, we cannot begin to heal. The people could only start anew in the Promised Land after naming the pain that brought them there, they could only rebuild their connection with the Divine after recognizing the damage that had been done in that relationship along the way.

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Today's planet has also been shaped by a history of suffering and by damaged relationships. In early May a cyclone hit Burma leaving nearly 150,000 people dead or missing and one million homeless. This latest natural disaster reminds us that the impact of disasters is not just about nature. It is deeply entrenched in inequality and broken relationships—violence, war, global racism and an imbalance of wealth – that lay the foundations for tragedy and disaster. Professor Martin Espada said in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, "We tend to think of natural disasters as somehow evenhanded, as somehow random. Yet it has always been thus: Poor people are in danger. It is dangerous to be poor. It is dangerous to be black. It is dangerous to be Latino."

It feels overwhelming to discuss this reality, all the more so to allow ourselves to grieve over the state of the world. But *tshuva*, true repair, begins only when we acknowledge the impact of shattered human relations on the life of this planet. This week, as we read *Parashat Eikev*, may we publicly name all the brokenness of our world in our holiest places—in our homes, our synagogues and our streets—so that our tears can begin to bring healing and the true wholeness of a broken heart.



Rabbi Elliot Kukla is a rabbi at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco providing spiritual care to those struggling with illness, grieving or dying where he also co-directs the Healing Center's Kol HaNeshama: Jewish End of Life Care volunteer hospice program. His articles are published in numerous magazines and anthologized widely. Elliot has lectured on Jewish perspectives on healing, end of life care and diversity across the US and Canada and his liturgy for new life cycles appear in numerous prayer books. He also has served as adjunct faculty in pastoral care at Starr King School for the Ministry (a part of the Graduate Theological Seminary of UC Berkeley). Elliot was ordained by Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles in 2006 and trained in chaplaincy at UCSF Medical Center in 2007. Elliot can be reached at ekukla@bajhc.org.

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