



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

AJWS
at **30**

*We are excited to announce that in the new year AJWS will publish **JustThought**—New Jewish Ideas on Global Justice. This is a brand new format for applying Jewish wisdom to questions concerning human rights and global development. Through monthly essays from scholars, activists and AJWS staff, we will address questions like, “Does Jewish wisdom speak to human rights?” and “How do we understand the suffering in our own lives relative to the suffering of the world?”*

Keep your eye out for this new publication after Simchat Torah in late October.

Introductory Reflection

In *Parashat Ki Tavo*, God blesses and curses the Israelites—giving them a graphic representation of what will happen if they keep the commandments or if they sin—to motivate them to continue to embrace the covenant when they go into the land. In one of those blessings, God proclaims that in reward for honoring the Torah, “the LORD will make you the head, and not the tail; and you shall be above only, and not beneath.”¹

As Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh points out in her 2015 Dvar Tzedek, coming out in the “head” or the “tail” of life today is largely a result of privilege and circumstance, and not the result of whether one does good deeds or not. When a natural disaster strikes, those circumstances can change like the flip of a coin. This sudden change of fate can happen to anyone, but in the developing world—where there is great disparity between prosperity and poverty, happiness and suffering—the impact can be particularly devastating. What was once a sustainable life and livelihood is reduced to ruins.

In the wake of disasters, many people from around the world seek to help, but it is often those closest to the crisis who know best what’s needed to rebuild and recover. Recently, for World Humanitarian Day, AJWS Program Officer Amy Bisno reflected on the circumstances of the [130 million people worldwide who need humanitarian assistance to survive](#). Bisno points out that when disaster strikes, local actors often need to step in because “the official humanitarian system does not have the capacity to meet the many demands that arise from disasters and crises.” She explains, “These local actors... have deep knowledge of their communities and know best how to respond when disaster strikes.” Because of this, at AJWS we prioritize support for local, grassroots groups that work to meet the unique needs of people who are ignored in the wake of disasters, including women, the elderly, ethnic minorities, LGBTI people, and people living with disabilities.

The courageous activists who respond at times of crisis are the true blessings that emerge out of cursed events like disasters. Take a look at [Amy Bisno’s post on the AJWS blog](#), and read Rabbi Missaghieh’s Dvar Tzedek below for more thoughts on these ideas.

Parashat Ki Tavo 5776

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 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

¹ Deut. 27:11-14

² Deut. 28:13

³³ UNFPA, 2012, *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*. New York: United Nations Population Fund

⁴ slaveryfootprint.org

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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.



Michelle Missaghieh is Associate Rabbi at Temple Israel of Hollywood. She serves on the Executive Board of the Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din, the only pluralistic Bet Din (rabbinic court) in the United States and teaches adults and children alike in TIOH's Day School, Nursery School and Religious School. She attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where she graduated with honors in Women's Studies and Judaic Studies, as well as Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Michelle can be reached at rmichelle@tioh.org.

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