



DVAR TZEDEK:
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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 AJWS’s series of essays applying Jewish wisdom to *tikkun olam* today. From Jewish history to Torah sources to the latest headlines, we plumb pressing questions about human rights and global justice through monthly essays by noted 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

As Moses prepares to die, God predicts that the children of Israel will go astray and “turn to other gods” once they “eat their fill and grow fat” off the bounty of the Promised Land. As an antidote, God prescribes an epic song-poem to reorient the Israelites away from the idols of wealth and greed and onto the right path. As Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels describes in his 2008 Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Vayelech*, “Song here is meant to awaken the people of Israel, to help them reconnect to their essentially pure nature, the fundamental meaning of *tshuvah*, and so enable them to live out their true commitments.”

[Las Reinas Chulas](#), a troupe of Mexican cabaret and street performers supported by AJWS, uses the same medium today to [awaken their community to call for change and equality](#) in a country grappling with astounding levels of violence and discrimination. Their satirical tunes help people cope with serious problems in their society and raise awareness about contentious topics. Ideally, their shows also catch the attention of corrupt government, military and police leaders, who have long strayed down their own wrong path.

“We consider ourselves activists and feminists, activists and artists, and we’ve made this part of our work,” said Nora Huerta, a founding member of Las Reinas Chulas. “Cabaret is a tool to share ideas and to strengthen the social transformation.”

As these activists demonstrate, song has just as much power in the 21st century as in the time of Moses. Rabbi Jacobson-Maisels explains: “Song, that fundamental assertion of joy and meaning, can remind us of our authentic self and our genuine power. Through it, we can transform the way we live and fully embrace our true nature—our potential to transform ourselves and the world.”

Check out Las Reinas Chulas’s modern-day songs of change and repentance [here](#). And learn more about how song enables us to find our way in Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels’s Dvar Tzedek below.

Parashat Vayelech 5776

By Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels
October 8, 2016
(Reprinted from October 4, 2008)

We read *Parashat Vayelech* this year on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Fittingly, this *Parashah* deals with sin and repentance, with becoming lost on our way and returning to our true selves.

In the *Parashah*, God foretells Israel's future sins and their consequences, how they will turn to other gods and then be overtaken by suffering, leading God to say, "*anochi haster astir panai*—I will surely hide my face."¹ The hidden face of God, the classic theological expression of the presence of suffering and evil in the world, here seems to be a response by God to the sins of Israel, a punishment for their misdeeds.

The Chasidic master, Rebbe Ephraim of Sudylkow, understands this passage differently. Carefully re-reading the Hebrew, Rebbe Ephraim separates the phrase into two sections and reinterprets the implications of God's actions. When *anochi haster* —the I-ness of God—is hidden through our entering the slumber of self-deception and idolatry, then *astir panai*—[God's] face will be hidden. When we forget our values and our humanity, we obscure God's holiness from the world; then God's face, God's true presence, is hidden from us.² When we pervert what is just and right through the pursuit of that which is not the true center, we cause God's presence to disappear, not as punishment, but as consequence.

The Torah explains that this turning away will occur when the people of Israel "eat their fill and grow fat and turn to other gods."³ It is through complacency and an absorption in wealth that Israel will lose sight of the locus of divinity and the genuine values that flow from it. And this prophesy has come true.

Our modern consumer society affords us wealth that often engenders precisely the indifference and false pursuits that our *Parashah* describes. Caught up as we are in material gain and upward mobility, we often lose sight of our true values. As we spend money on clothes, cars, coffee and all the other goods we consume, do we take the time to see how our lifestyle conforms to our deepest values? Do we check the source of the products we consume, where they are made and how? Do we consider the nature of our work and whether it brings healing or suffering to the world? Do we consider our investments and whether they meet our ethical standards? Do we give away the ten percent of our income that Judaism expects? Can we genuinely ask ourselves how we earn and spend money, not in the sense of self-denying guilt-ridden asceticism, but with a gentle and wise questioning of how we are living out our core ideals and whether we are hiding or revealing God's face?

How then do we transform ourselves to reveal God's face, God's self, in the world? What enables us to lead a life where our actions are manifestations of our core values?

Our *Parashah's* answer, remarkably, is song. God instructs "therefore, write down this song and teach it to the people of Israel, put it in their mouths so that this song will be a witness for Me before the people of Israel."⁴ Song here is meant to awaken the people of Israel, to help them reconnect to their essentially pure nature, the fundamental

¹ Dvarim 31:16-18

² Degel Mahaneh Ephraim p. 38, *Parashat Vayetzei d'h Vayikatz*, Hotza'at Mir, Jerusalem 5755. Here *anochi*(I) the subject of the sentence, is read as the object of the verb *haster* (to hide) and each one of us, in our own delusion, is the subject which causes the hiding.

³ Dvarim 31:20

⁴ Dvarim 31:19

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meaning of *tshuvah*, and so enable them to live out their true commitments. The true song enables the people of Israel to once again find God's face; to turn away from the subtle idols of wealth and greed and to bring God's holiness into their midst.

In Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav's terms, it is only through this song of faith, this assertion of meaning, hope and possibility, that one leaps over the abyss of God's hiddenness to encounter the truth of *anochi*—I-ness, that is both God's true face and our own.⁵

It is easy to get lost, to find ourselves unwittingly acting in ways estranged from our fundamental principles. Yet we can find our way to a life that embodies those core beliefs by manifesting our true self through the hope, confidence and power, which is the nature of song. Song, that fundamental assertion of joy and meaning, can remind us of our authentic self and our genuine power. Through it, we can transform the way we live and fully embrace our true nature—our potential to transform ourselves and the world. In so doing, the deep *anochi*, the true faces of both ourselves and God, will be revealed.



Rabbi Dr. James-Jacobson Maisels is the founder of [Or HaLev: A Center for Jewish Spirituality and Meditation](#) and has been studying and teaching meditation and Jewish spirituality for over fifteen years. He received his PhD in Jewish Studies from the University of Chicago and teaches Jewish thought, mysticism, spiritual practices and meditation at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and in a variety of settings in around the world. He strives to integrate his study and practice and to help teach and live Judaism as a spiritual discipline. James can be reached at jamesmoshejm@gmail.com.

⁵ Likutei Moharan, I, 64

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