

“My Rabbi went to Senegal and all I got was this D’var Torah...”

Rabbi Dara Frimmer
Parashat Devarim 5770

The basics:

- I recently went to Senegal on a 10 day service learning trip with rabbinic students and graduate students sponsored by American Jewish World Service (AJWS) (www.ajws.org)
 - **Service:** 2 work projects in partnership with the Non-Government Organization (NGO) Tostan (<http://tostan.org/>) building a hen house and a mango orchard
 - **Learning:** each day and night – Jewish texts, commentaries on justice, grassroots vocabulary and concepts 101...
 - **Future rabbis:** ages 25-45, reform/reconstructionist/conservative/orthodox/non-denominational
 - **Graduate students:** social work, Int’l policy, Jewish studies...
 - **AJWS:** they give small grants to support grassroots int’l development, educate Jewish community about global issues, advocacy in DC, service learning...
- Typical day in Senegal:
 - Wake up in a conference center built by Tostan, 2 hours east of Dakar
 - Shared davvening (led by different students, NOT by denomination)
 - Breakfast: all food was prepared separately for our group, in line with laws of kashrut
 - Bus to community: 15 minutes on dirt roads
 - Work for 4 hours
 - Return to conference center for lunch
 - Study session – 2 hours
 - Special speaker – 2 hours
 - Dinner
 - Study Session/Check-in/reflection time...
 - Sleep
 - Start over!
- Dara’s job as a group leader: keep the students healthy in body and mind and spirit
 - Water, sunscreen, snacks...and teaching...and processing...

One way to think about the “goals” of the trip (in the words of our rabbi/scholar Sheila Peltz Weinberg):

- We are really here to learn with our bodies and our minds so that we can enter into a new level of relationship with the world. **We are here to SEE inequity, exploitation, deprivation, joy, harmony, courage and love.** We are here to **GET CONFUSED** enough so that we will continue to study and mostly continue to care about the global south, about Africa about human rights and about our responsibility as the “haves” on this globe.

It was a trip of extremes:
energy and exhaustion...
joy and sadness...
abundance and scarcity...

And each of us carried the faces of our family and friends and communities who had sent us off.
Who were eagerly awaiting our return...

All those people back home waiting for us *to make sense of it all...* (gulp.)

To make sense of the fact that:

- Half the world's people are living on 2 dollars a day.
- A billion people with no access to clean water
- 2.5 billion with no access to sanitation
- A billion going to bed hungry every night
- 1 in 4 deaths every year from AIDS, TB, Malaria and a variety of infections associated with dirty water -
- 80% of them under 5 years of age. (stats from Bill Clinton's TED talk in 2007)

And I should stop here for a moment to say:

I'm assuming that we agree that this is unjust...

That this world of inequality is undesirable...

And that we feel compelled,

in some small way,

to respond and to heal some of that brokenness...

That may be a bold assumption,

but I'm gonna go with it

for the sake of tonight's dvar torah.

But I needed to say it out loud –

That **THIS** is the foundation of my d'var Torah...

1. We agree that the world is profoundly unequal -
2. that this reality makes us uncomfortable -
3. And that we feel moved to do something to address that discomfort.

I know it's early to take a survey...

But can you just nod,

If you agree...?

If you agree that,

“This interdependent world, which has been pretty good to most of us...

Is profoundly **unequal.**”

And it's not only **unequal**...

(as if that weren't bad enough)

It is also **unstable**.

Unstable because of the threats of terror,

weapons of mass destruction, spread of global disease –

And a sense that we are vulnerable to it in a way that we weren't...

not so many years ago... ¹

¹ Bill Clinton, TED talk, http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/bill_clinton_on_rebuilding_rwanda.html

So, you see,
that feeling of discomfort (the one you nodded your head to...)
The one in our guts, in our hearts, in our heads...
It's getting stronger.
Harder to ignore.

~*~

So what was this trip about?
10 days of witnessing that inequality and instability from the other side.
And asking ourselves the questions that I'll ask you tonight:

When you think about the world that you want to leave for the next generation...
What does that world look like?
And how will YOU,
with the help of our religious tradition,
our Temple,
our community,
our city and our resources...
along with organizations like American Jewish World Service...
how will YOU help to create a world that you will **want** to leave as an inheritance
for your children and grandchildren?
A world of safety, stability, justice, and peace...

~*~

DISCLAIMER!
This is a taste of the experience...
So as not to make this the dreaded slide-show of my trip,
I'm limiting this to 3 questions –
One story (more or less) for each question.

Question #1: How do we build lasting partnerships and projects in the Global South?

Question #2: How will the Jewish tradition and/or the Jewish people shape our work in Tikkun Olam?

Questions #3: How can we act more responsibly and effectively as we pursue justice?

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Question #1: How do we build lasting partnerships and projects in the Global South?

Sitting on an dry, dusty field,
listening to the Israeli Ambassador to Senegal

Gideon Behar

talk about Israel's interest in bringing drip irrigation to rural, farming communities, he said:

You know, Africa is a graveyard for well-intentioned, international development projects.

Billions of dollars have been spent on this continent-

To alleviate poverty

To raise up the dignity of men, women and children

To educate, hydrate, facilitate...

A better life.

And while there has been some success –

Overall, it's a graveyard

“littered with the carcasses of failed projects...”

Abandoned buildings, books, classrooms, and water systems...

Knowing this history –

And refusing to capitulate...what are our choices?

IF the goal is for us to do justice more effectively

today and into the future...

We **can't** ask,

“How do **WE** do this work in the most sustainable way?”

We have to ask,

“How do we build lasting partnerships in the Global South?”

(that will allow us to do this work sustainably!)

This is one of the many questions AJWS asks

when giving out small grants to NGO's around the world.

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A HOUSE FOR HENS...

We had 2 projects on site: a hen house and an orchard.

I'm going to focus on the hen house.

Why spend time building a hen house?

AJWS believes, and I agree,

That it's important to witness and be involved in an international development project.

To simply study int'l development is too abstract.

So we had our hands in the bricks and cement and paintbrushes of a co-op hen house.

Building alongside of community members –

Who would benefit from the project.

Here's what we learned:

A group of women from the community had pooled some of their money and TOGETHER
They bought soaps in bulk.
They sold the soaps at a bit of a mark-up to their neighbors,
And with that profit they bought some hens.
Those hens laid eggs...they made more hens...
And the eggs and birds could be sold for a profit...
Which allowed them to buy more hens...
Until they ran out of space.
And that's when the group of women asked for help in building a hen house in the community.

Because they were ready for it.

International Development 101:

We may have some GREAT ideas about how to raise people out of poverty...
But odds are good that we'll do a much better job
If we ask folks, who are IN poverty,
To tell us what they think might work...
And to invite them into a conversation and a partnership
That will create the next project.
Together.

This group of women had been working together for some time.
They were also ALREADY working with an NGO, Tostan –
dedicated to teaching them about human rights, democracy, literacy, small businesses...
An NGO that was helping them to imagine a world in which they had agency and power.

...and waiting, patiently,
for the right time and space to help support a grassroots project
Like a hen house.

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The head of Tostan is a fantastic woman named Molly Melching
who told the following story
about one of Tostan's first attempts to partner with a community:

The idea was proposed to have a **community garden**.
Everyone would help.
Everyone would benefit.
Vegetables for all.
Land was chosen...

Week #1: 100% of the community shows up to begin turning over dirt, planting seeds. Fabulous.
Week #2: 80% show up. Okay.
Week #3: 60%...
Week #6: Someone steals the tomatoes...and the entire community is in an uproar.

What happened?

There was a meeting between the community members and the NGO...

NGO: Nu? We thought you wanted this!

Community: Well, yes, but it doesn't make any sense. It's one big plot and we don't know which vegetables belong to which families. We don't have the same motivation to work an entire plot when we don't see our share. Now, if you gave each family a row in the garden and said "this is your row," well, then we'd be okay and we'd plant and grow...

NGO: Great! Why didn't you say that 6 weeks ago when we first started this project?

Community: Well...you were so excited. We didn't want to disappoint you. So, we figured we'd just follow along...but it was never going to work the way you had planned.

How do we build lasting partnerships and projects in the Global South?

We have to take time to listen to one another –
It can't be top-down.
Not if we want to see lasting partnerships and projects...

We have to be patient.
This particular community was ready for a hen house.

And our job is not to take this one story of success
and immediately mass-produce hen houses
To drop into every community in Senegal.

Just to make this relevant locally...
It reminded me a lot of our work with public schools on the Westside of Los Angeles.
We're trying to create relationships,
slowly and patiently
with our local, neighborhood schools.
To really get to know the interests of our parents,
And of the other parents, teachers, and administrators of each school...

It would be a lot quicker to talk to a few people,
make a decision
spend the money
apply the solution to each school in the district
and call it a day:
we've fixed public education...onto affordable housing!

That approach won't work.
We know that...

So why would it work in Africa?

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This is no easy task...but we have to find ways,
To slow down.
To find a common language (which takes time!)
To agree to a shared project –
hen houses, school reform, the future of Isaiah –
That will help us, TOGETHER,
Work towards a shared vision of justice.

OR, we'll find ourselves out ahead of the pack,
Wondering why folks aren't keeping up...
Why that gap between us and them is so big...

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Question #2: How will the Jewish tradition and/or the Jewish people shape our work in Tikkun Olam?

Had we been given the book of Harry Potter on Mt Sinai,
we'd be looking for spells to guide us in our work.
But we were given the Torah...
So this is our compass.
Our guidebook for understanding God's divine plan...God's blueprint...

And so, we spent a lot of time studying Torah/texts
about tzedakah, poverty, and distribution of resources...

We also spent time thinking about Kashrut, T'filah and Shabbat.
Because we were living together for 10 days as one Jewish community –
With a fixed amount of time and space and resources to eat, pray and celebrate.

We were committed to doing this together
In part, as a model for our lives back home.
Because all too often we stay in our corners...
within the walls of our institutions.
We don't collaborate.
We don't share resources.
Unless we're attacked – and then, suddenly, we're one people –
strong and united.

So these 10 days are a pluralist reality show of sorts –
Can 17 Jews from across the spectrum live together, eat together, pray together?!
Or will a Jew be voted off the island?

The next story reveals a serious effort to find common ground...
Though, it has a bit of humor to it.
A serious effort to move towards a shared vision of peace and justice...
And the challenges of how we can get there
TOGETHER.

So,
in the midst of addressing global poverty
grassroots development
Justice, Equality, Race, Class, Power...

Here's a story about planning for Shabbat in Senegal...

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TO A/C OR NOT TO A/C...

We stayed in a conference center
Built by the NGO a few years earlier.
It was one of the nicer places I've stayed when doing these trips in the global south
Normally it's sleeping on floors.
Or hammocks.
We use latrines.
No running water.
No electricity.

But, here, in rural Senegal,
we had rooms. With beds.
And keys.
And flushing toilets.
And air conditioning.

And we gathered each day in Hut #1,
a beautiful conference room that did resemble a hut...
And it had air conditioning, as well.

And there we sat, a few days before Shabbat,
discussing how we might create a Shabbat experience that everyone
(reform through orthodox)
could enjoy.

First question on the table:
"What about the air conditioning in hut #1?"
This would be our common space for prayer on Fri/Sat.
Our study session space for sat afternoon.
How would we deal with the A/C?

Suggestion #1: Let's leave it on the entire time. That way we won't have to break shabbos by turning electricity on and off.

RESPONSE: No! Waste of resources! How could we do that ESPECIALLY on a trip that asks us to think about our impact!

Suggestion #2: No A/C at all.

RESPONSE: What!? No! That's ridiculous. Shabbat is about rest and relaxation and we'll be hot and sticky...it's not shabbosdik to be uncomfortable!

Suggestion #3: (from the liberal jews) Listen, we can turn it on. It doesn't bother us. It would make Shabbat nicer. No big deal.

RESPONSE: (from the traditional jews) Ack! No! We can't have Jews willingly and knowingly breaking the laws of shabbos for other Jews. That's offensive to us.

Suggestion #4: (from the traditional jews) Let's ask our non-Jewish partners/liasons who have worked with us this week through the NGO. Maybe they can help?

RESPONSE: (from the liberal jews) What?! No! That's offensive to us! You can't use the Shabbos goy loophole in Africa on a trip meant to help us explore and elevate our relationships to others!

And back and forth and back and forth...

(again one small voice suggested...) **What about no A/C?**

RESPONSE: NO!!

One liberal rabbi, recently ordained, raises her hand and says, "Look, I know this is crazy, but I'm a patrilineal Jew and technically, I don't count as Jewish according to the strictest standards, so I could be the one to turn on the air..."

At which point, one of the students grabbed his head and yelled "aaaaahhhh!!!"

And we agreed to pick up the conversation after dinner.

☺ ~*~ ☺

So what's going on here?

It's a conversation between people who WANT to work together – who genuinely are curious about one another and yet, each one has his/her own ideas about the best way to interpret Judaism to celebrate Shabbat

and to work on repairing the world.

It's not an easy conversation to have.

That first installment of "how to celebrate Shabbat" took 90 minutes.

We then followed up with conversations on the bus.

In the field.

Stacking bricks.

Eventually the group nominated a **sub-committee**

to represent the interests of the larger group and come to an eventual decision.

And they did...no A/C.

And we were hot and a bit sticky...and we were fine. Thank God.

But the lessons of this vignette are real:

It takes TIME to come to consensus about the best way for a group to move forward.

We didn't have to worry about the next Shabbat –
we only had one in Senegal.

But if we did, the pressure would be even greater.

How would we build a sustainable Shabbat practice TOGETHER?

Or would we end up separating and taking care of our own?

Because it was easier?

Because it was quicker?

If we want to have impact, we have to work together.

That means Jews need to work on talking to other Jews...

And non-Jews...

And people that live in Orange County...

We need to get a LOT better at having conversations...

That, truth be told,

Might be a little bit hot and sticky...and uncomfortable.

But, if you remember the original premise...

We're ALREADY uncomfortable –

So what's a little more discomfort?

It might even help...

~*~

Final story...

Final question...though it's all kind of the same story...and the same question:

Questions #3: How can we act more responsibly and effectively as we pursue justice?

(Fully embracing our lives AS THEY ARE...not pretending to be superheroes of justice.)

You don't need to go to Africa to pursue justice more responsibly...

From our lives
as they are,
Here on the Westside –
Here at Temple Isaiah –
We can do better...right here.
And we can do it in incremental steps...
But we have to be able to look at our lives
with a lens that is **different** than the one we use every day.

That's the advantage of going to Africa...
You can't help but see yourself differently.

It's been a long time since I felt SO out of my element.
So White.
So American.
So powerful and privileged.
And I realized, "Wow, I really don't think about how much power I have..."
Until I walk into a ferry station in Dakar...

"A GROUP OF JEWS WALK INTO A FERRY STATION IN AFRICA..."

On our very last day in Senegal,
We headed back to Dakar, the capital.

We had completed 9 **incredible** days of building relationships:
Solidarity between blacks and whites...
Between Jews and Muslims
Americans and Africans...

And our final destination was Goree Island
A 20 minute ferry away from the mainland.
A small island,
Perfectly positioned
To deport slaves from Africa
across the Atlantic to America.

It's now been redeveloped as a tourist destination.
There are a few, tiny museums dedicated to slavery.
A slave house here or there
Converted into a "memorial"
With a plaque.

And there are MANY,
many people who work there...

Many people who would like to sell you a painting
Or a necklace
A traditional Senegalese shirt
A wooden statue...

17 of our participants
Enter into this ferry station
Excited for their final trip
Their final day
And they are,
as can be expected,
Bumping around amidst other travelers:
School children from Senegal on a field trip –
Merchants waiting to cross over to begin their work day –
A few other tourists...

And our participants
are looking for the bathrooms,
and taking out their packed lunches
Of sandwiches and sodas
Out of their backpacks
(Which are big and a bit unwieldy...)
And they're wandering through the small shop in the ferry building
Wondering if they should buy here
Or wait.

And soon
A guard in the ferry station ushers our group into a glassed-in waiting area,
In the center of the ferry station.
Glass on all sides.
And couches.
And they remove the Africans who had been sitting there previously...
And a few more Africans try to follow us in
To this nicer space
And they are denied
By the guard
At the door.

And our group continues talking,
And eating...
"Oooh! Couches!"
And a few of the participants come over to us as group leaders to say:
This doesn't feel right.
And we nod.
Because it happened the previous year, as well.

And there's not much we can say.
Except to say this:
We're different.
And we're being treated differently.
And this is what it feels like.

And we reach the island – finally –

And 9 days of building relationships
Relationships of trust, sincerity, compassion...

9 days in which our interests seem aligned...

And the stories of Tikkun Olam have been written in journals...
And sermon titles have already been chosen...
For the welcome-home Shabbat service...
Full of hope and light and joy...

9 days of what we “know to be true” about the impact we can have
As Americans in Africa...

Are now challenged by a new paradigm of relationship:

- Buyer and Seller
- Consumer and Producer
- Haves and Have-nots
- Rich and Poor
- Power and lack of power...

Because we are now surrounded by men and women
Laden with jewelry
Tapestries
Clothing
Musical instruments...

- “Buy from me.”
- “Come see me in my shop.”
- “American! American! Come here!”

And they don't care about why we're here.
Our earnestness – our openness
Our text studies on Tikkun Olam.

One participant commented:
It's like I have a dollar-sign on my forehead.

And there's not much we can say.

Hundreds of years of slavery and colonization

have led us up to this point.
On Grree Island.

And as I wrestle with my OWN discomfort...
I wonder:
Do I have to **own** part of that inheritance...
Of power and privilege...
Delivered to me over hundreds of years of oppression –
And exploitation

Do I have to OWN part of that history,
and **recognize** its presence in the midst of the relationships
I'm trying to create
across lines of race and class and country...
there on Gorree Island –
and here in Los Angeles?

Do I have to own it?
Recognize it?
And wrestle with it
if I hope to someday
move OUT of this place of discomfort...

~*~

Questions #3: How can we act more responsibly and effectively as we pursue justice?

We have to learn more about our impact.

We have SO much power –
And we forget...
We say “no...it’s not me...”
But it IS me! and it’s You.

Every time we travel.

Every time we purchase something, local or global...
We have impact.

When we vote, and we don’t vote –
we have impact.

When we read the article on poverty in Africa...
and when we don’t –
We have impact.

And, my sense
is that while we won't have the **perfect** response every time...
Overall we can do a lot better:
at reducing our negative impact
and increasing our positive...

So I want to bring back the language of the 6 pointed-star
that I showed some of you before I left.

6 ways to think about your impact –
And because concrete suggestions are often appreciated...
I'm going to be SUPER concrete...
But you also have permission to interpret each category
As you see fit:

- **Tzedakah:** Support organizations like American Jewish World Service, who are doing this kind of work in the Global South. Give them money.
- **Political Advocacy:** Plan a trip to Sacramento or Washington, D.C. Visit with your elected representatives.
- **Learning:** Read one of Tracy Kidder's books, "Mountains Beyond Mountains," or "Strength in What Remains."
- **Teaching:** Hold a house party for friends and neighbors and teach something from one of the books you just read.
- **Ethical Consumption:** Buy Fair Trade products. Ensure that the production and the passage of your coffee, tea, chocolate, and clothing were done in the least impactful and most positive way possible.
- **Service:** Our strongest, most active global-concerns group at Isaiah is Jewish World Watch, currently working to end genocide in Darfur and the Congo. Call or e-mail our chair, Susan Silver and ask her, "What can I do to serve?"

~*~

We cannot come to Africa as anyone but ourselves.
Just as we could not come tonight to Shabbat services
As anyone other than who we are
At this moment.

We cannot be more or less knowledgeable or capable or insightful.
We can wish that we were...
But sitting here,
In this space of Shabbat,

This is who we are...

And we are incredibly **powerful**.

AND

We're incredibly uncertain
about the nature and extent of that power.

So I invite you to come and sit at the table (literal or metaphoric)

And explore that power...

And your own capacity to learn...

And grow...

And develop...

And act more intentionally...

And sustainably...

And connect your vision of the world as it could be...

to the world as it is today.

And help us move it forward.

This is no easy task –

To lead in a time of brokenness

To reach out to those who are most vulnerable

To believe in a future that is not yet our own...

But, as our ancestors, once did,

so too shall we join hands and walk together through the wilderness...

“V'eileh ha'davarim asher diber Moshe el kol Yisrael.”

These are the words that Moses spoke to the entire people of Israel...

On the banks of the Jordan

Looking out, over the horizon,

To the Promised Land...

May WE be blessed with strength to speak and act and record

the next chapters of our shared story –

A story filled with more dignity, more compassion, and more justice

for all people –

And let us say,

Amen.