

Don't Be the *Terumah*

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Last week JTS, The Rabbinical Assembly, United Synagogue Youth, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Camp Ramah, the Jewish Youth Climate Movement Powered by Adamah, and Congregation Adas Israel in Washington, DC, launched Ruchot, the first ever advocacy and lobbying training for Conservative Movement teens. We gathered as an *erev rav* (mixed multitude) of 36 teens from 11 states (and one Canadian), 7 rabbinical students, 6 rabbis, three youth director staff, and an Israeli *shaliah*.

We celebrated Shabbat together; learned how to advocate in meetings with senators, members of congress, and their staff; learned about the specific issues of climate change, immigration, and reproductive rights with Dayenu, Bend the Arc, and National Council of Jewish Women; and went to Capitol Hill and had 28 meetings with legislative leaders on these issues.

Students wrote and delivered speeches asking their legislators to support the [Global HER Act](#) and the [Right to Contraception Act](#), undo the reversal of the sensitive sites protection for religious institutions (in an attempt to prevent ICE from disrupting religious services and communities), protect the Environmental Protection Agency funding and staff from enormous cuts, and support clean energy tax credits.

The teens mined their own stories to share with the elected officials about why the issues mattered to them. Their stories were personal and addressed an individual need for hormone contraception to address menstrual pain, flooding and fires in their home communities that jeopardized their health and their homes, and fear that people in their communities will be forced from their schools and religious

institutions, despite having been raised in this country. They were particularly asking for religious institutions to be places that could actually welcome people who are poor and marginalized, as religious institutions are intended to be.

And they brought Torah. They shared specific teachings that helped them root their requests in Jewish tradition. They asked the elected officials to take their stories and religious values seriously and remember them as they vote and work to protect democracy.

Both Parashat Yitro and Parashat Mishpatim offer us frames that inspire the kind of learning we did on Ruchot.

In Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, sees him convening all the Israelites who have disputes with one another. Moshe sits from dawn until late at night adjudicating, keeping everyone standing in line until they can be seen. Yitro tells Moshe that concentrating the right to judge and act in one person is unfair to him and to every single person seeking a judgement. He needs to seek out well established, God-fearing people of integrity who aren't chasing money:

וְאַתָּה תִּחְזֹה מִכָּל־הָעָם אֲנָשֵׁי־חַיִל יִרְאֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲנָשֵׁי אֱמֶת שְׂנֹאֵי
בְּצַעַ וְשִׂמְתָּ עֲלֵהֶם שְׂרֵי אֱלֹפִים שְׂרֵי מְאֹת שְׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים וְשְׂרֵי
עֶשְׂרֵת

You must discern, from among all the people, people who are well-established, God-fearing, people of integrity, who “hate” money. Appoint these individuals over the people as leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens. (Exod. 18:21)

Similarly, lobbying and advocating are not one-person activities. They are activities of the people. Elected officials represent the people of their districts. So, the people of their districts must be the people who lobby them. Yitro's

advice is a reminder that we must spread out responsibility, training anyone willing to learn how to lobby. And we must do our best to ensure that the people we train have integrity and keep refining themselves to be God-fearing people of honor who are not motivated by money. We hope the elected officials will be too! We need to do whatever it takes to help us put aside ego and personal gain, to prioritize the greater good. We don't win awards for being the best individual lobbyist or advocate. We make progress by creating the context for the greatest number of people to bring their stories, values, and priorities to their elected officials.

Parashat Mishpatim includes the famous response by the Israelites to God's commandments that

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' וַעֲשֵׂה וְנִשְׁמָע:

And he [Moses] took the book of the covenant and read in the hearing of the people; and they said: "All that God has spoken will we do, and obey." (Exod. 24:7)

Much has been made by the commentators about the Jewish response to act and then understand. I thought of this orientation frequently during Ruchot. Lobbying and advocating are a constant dance of acting and learning. One can never know everything there is to know on a subject or policy. And time doesn't stop while you are lobbying. In an ideal encounter you go to lobby, and not only do you offer your perspective and request for your elected official to represent you, but you also ask why they are planning to vote how they plan to vote, or co-sponsor the legislation they plan to co-sponsor, or defend a policy they plan to defend. You are learning. They are learning.

Our theory in creating Ruchot is that to be a Jewish person in the world requires us to act upon our values. Judaism is not silent on climate, immigration, reproductive rights, or any other issue of the day. The Torah in most cases doesn't say exactly what should be done, but it does offer us values and orientations to the world as well as definitions about who falls within our communal responsibilities that can guide our response. We are building muscles. By taking teens to

learn to lobby and then practicing, they are doing and learning. They are speaking from their hearts, listening to the reactions of the elected officials, and creating muscle memory so they can stay engaged for the rest of their lives.

We learn in Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim Siman 2 that "If a human being does nothing [lit. sits like a *terumah* grain in the corner of the house] and says, 'What do the affairs of society have to do with me? Why should I trouble myself with the people's voices? Let my soul dwell in peace!' this destroys the world."

וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים. זֶה שֶׁאָמַר הַכְּתוּב: מִלֶּךְ בְּמִשְׁפָּט יַעֲמִיד אֲרֵינְוֹאִישׁ תְּרוּמוֹת יִהְרָסְנָה (משלי כט ד, (מלכה של תורה בְּמִשְׁפָּט שֶׁהוּא עוֹשֶׂה, מַעֲמִיד אֶת אֶת הָאָרֶץ. וְאִישׁ תְּרוּמוֹת יִהְרָסְנָה. אִם מֵשִׁים אָדָם עֲצָמוֹ כְּתְרוּמָה הַזֹּאת שֶׁמִּשְׁלַכְתָּ בְּזוּיֵת הַבַּיִת וְאוֹמֵר מָה לִּי בְּטֶרַח הַצְּבוּר, מָה לִּי בְּדִינֵיהֶם, מָה לִּי לְשִׁמְעַת קוֹלָם, שְׁלוֹם עֲלֵיךְ נַפְשִׁי, הֲרֵי זֶה מַחְרִיב אֶת הָעוֹלָם. הֵי וְאִישׁ תְּרוּמוֹת יִהְרָסְנָה

Now these are the ordinances (Exod. 21:1). The Torah teaches elsewhere: The king by justice establishes the land, but the person who sets themselves apart (*terumah*) overthrows it (Prov. 29:4). The Torah's king rules through justice and therefore causes the earth to endure, but the person who sets themselves apart (*terumah*) overthrows it. This implies that if a person acts as though they were a *terumah* (the portion separated, or set aside, for the priests) by secluding themselves in the corner of their home and declaring: "What concern are the problems of the community to me? What does their judgment mean to me? Why should I listen to them? I will do well (without them)," that person helps to destroy the world. Therefore the saying, the person of *separation* (*terumah*) *overthrows it*.

We have started building scaffolding for teens, rabbinical students, clergy, and staff of Ruchot to remember that the affairs of society have everything to do with each of us. We did and we listened. The work now is to keep on doing it and like Moshe, inspired by Yitro, to keep refining our souls and seeking out new people to teach how to advocate and then join together with them to do it.