

Dear Chavraya,

Words came slowly at first, and as they began to come forth, some were hard to understand, spoken with Hebrew and with Arabic accent. I met this afternoon with a group of Israeli Arab and Jewish high school students and their teachers who are travelling together as part of a group called "Friends Forever." I received a note just before they arrived that one of the Muslim students was feeling very uncomfortable about entering a synagogue. Hoping that the student would at least cross the threshold, I thought about how to set each one at ease as they sought to find comfort far from home and with people they rarely interact with at home. Once seated at the learning table in the shtibl, some seeming with intention to sit at a distance from the table, I welcomed them. I knew how important my words would be in setting a tone and fostering a sense of connection for each of them, both the Jewish and the Muslim students.

I did not know which of the students had felt hesitant to enter a synagogue, but I spoke to the group as though it could have been any one of them, but in general enough terms that no one would feel singled out. I spoke of how much I respect and appreciate their presence, acknowledging how difficult it can be to come so far from home, to enter into unfamiliar situations, to be with discomfort. I spoke of my own feelings of discomfort when I entered a mosque for the first time, wondering how people would see my kippah. I remembered my discomfort the first time I entered a Catholic church as a young person to witness a friend's first communion. The group had just come from a mosque and had met with a good friend and colleague who is the imam. By prior agreement, we each spoke of our friendship and of the work we do together to build bridges between Muslims and Jews.

Around the table, we spoke of words and of common roots, cognates that jump out from Arabic and Hebrew words. We underscored the obvious connection in the words of greeting exchanged when they had arrived, Shalom Aleichem/Salaam Aleikum, and so in sharing may peace be upon us all. I shared an experience of a number of years ago, telling my name to a new Muslim friend. Hearing my middle name, Hillel, he smiled and said that in Arabic it refers to the crescent of the new moon. And so we recite words of praise, *Hallel*, upon the arrival of that new crescent. Seated at the table, travelling together, there was an Avraham and an Ibrahim, joined by name and descent from a common father.

I have thought so much this week about the nature of words, their ability either to hurt or to heal, in the context of the Torah portion, *Parashat D'varim*, the first portion of the fifth book of the Torah, *Sefer D'varim*. A new paradigm emerges in *Sefer D'varim*. It is a paradigm that emphasizes the use of words rather than war and its weapons. It begins in seeing *Sefer D'varim* not simply as the name of the fifth book of Torah, but by its actual meaning as the "Book of Words," which becomes a description of the content and theme of the book, a teaching on learning another way, the way of words as our means of engagement, rather than war.

The paradigm is set at the beginning, on the very first verse of D'varim, *These are the words that Moses spoke/Eleh ha'd'varim asher diber Moshe*. In an exquisitely

touching midrash (Midrash Tanchuma), the people are amazed to hear Moshe speak so eloquently, reminding him that only "yesterday" he had said of himself, *I am not a man of words/lo ish d'varim anochi*. Rabbi Yitzchak says that Moshe's transformation teaches that Torah heals, saying, *teach Torah and be healed*.

Soon after, Moses defies God's command to go to war with Sichon, king of the Emorites. Or perhaps this is what God wanted, a test to see what Moshe would do when faced with the consequence of going to war being upon him alone, for the command had been given only in the singular. Having been told earlier to reach out to Seir, why not with Sichon, seeking a way to avoid war? Perhaps Moshe has truly learned a new way and seeks to follow it. Even though it didn't come to be, a new path is set, a new way of response. The challenge to act on that way and make it real remains for us. When Moshe sends messengers to Sichon, he sends *words of peace/divrei shalom*.

As we speak words of peace with each other and with all whom we encounter, may we come to a place of comfort in each other's presence, whether in synagogue, church, or mosque, helping to create a new paradigm that gives precedence not to weapons but to words.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor