

Dear Chavraya,

Fearful, dreading to go there, I pressed my father to reflect on a moment of explosive anger that remains a painful memory of my childhood. Well into my own adulthood, I had never been able to speak with him about it before. I did not know to what degree it had affected him, only knowing how present it was in my own psyche, and, for all of my father's gifts to me, that for a long time it had scarred our relationship. "It's not something I'm proud of," my father haltingly shared. In its being a very present memory for my father as well, there was a bond, the possibility of creating a shared container for the pain, and of moving on together in a way that had not been possible before.

While I still think about it and try to understand that moment, no longer able to share the process with my father, wishing we could have talked more, I am able to see it in the larger context of my father's life. I see both the sources of his anger and the deeds and ways that outweigh the sorrowful and shameful. I don't think it is so much about forgiving as about seeing the fuller picture of my father's life. The child who was hurt is no longer present to forgive, but the adult can see the shortcomings of father and of son and hold them both, the bad and the good.

Acknowledging the vile essence of those who are truly abusive, we reach out to those who have suffered at their hands. For most of us, and of those we love, it is a question of what defines our essence, of what tells of who we are in the world. Striving to expand the best of who we are, one of life's instructive challenges is to learn how to integrate our mistakes, our words and deeds that violate our essence, into the full picture of who we are. In the heartache and struggle that comes of our all too human mistakes, inherent goodness can be affirmed. In each of our lives, there is that which is worthy of emulation, and that which is not, the moments of which we are not proud.

The Torah offers a guided journey through life, paradigmatic moments that serve as mirrors, a context in which to wrestle with all of life's realities, including anger. There are many instances when anger burns, in people and in God. In a moment when all seems to hang in the balance following the incident of the Golden Calf, God tells Moses, *My anger will grow hot against them so that I will destroy them.* With prayerful plea, Moses responds with dignity, reminding God of God's own essence, *for what purpose, O God, shall Your anger grow hot against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt...? Retreat from the heat of Your anger and let Yourself be moved to change/shuv me'charon apecha...* (Ex. 32:11-12). Moses has in effect asked God to do *t'shuva*, to make amends and return to God's own essence. God is able to hear Moses, a paradigmatic moment for people, its own teaching in the way of receiving critique, *thereupon God was moved to change the intent regarding the evil that God had spoken of doing to the people* (Ex. 32:14).

Of that which we are guided to emulate in God, the doing of good and the dynamics of return and repair, for that of which God cannot be proud, this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, is the source of the 611th commandment, *lalechet bi'dra'chav/to walk in God's ways*. Framed in the context of relationship and all of its implicit dynamics, we are told, *you have today caused it to be said of God*

that God shall be God to you and that you would walk in God's ways (Deut. 26:17). Explaining in real terms what it means to walk in God's ways, the rabbis taught, mah ha'kadosh baruch hu nikrah rachum/as the Holy Blessed One is called compassionate, af atah he'yeh rachum/so shall you be compassionate; as the Holy Blessed One is called gracious, so shall you be gracious; as the Holy Blessed One is called just, so shall you be just; as the Holy Blessed One is called kind, so shall you be kind (Sifrei to Deut. 11:22). In his enumeration of the commandments, Maimonides adds a deeply insightful and helpful note in regard to walking with God; that we are to emulate the good deeds and the honorable attributes/l'hit'damot la'ma'asim ha'tovim v'la'midot ha'nich'badot. There is implicit recognition that there are times when even God has acted less than honorably. These are not moments that describe God's essence but stand as an aberration, the Psalmist reminding, God's anger is for a moment, God's desire is for life/ki rega b'apo, chayyim bir'tzono (Ps. 30).

We learn to acknowledge the moments in our lives of which we are not proud, weaving them into the full human tapestry of who we are. And so for those whom we love, emulating ways that are worthy, weaving into the fullness of their lives words and ways that caused us pain, of which they are not proud. As part of what it means to walk in God's ways, we learn even from God the way of repentant turning. Tomorrow night is the beginning of *S'lichos*, the prayers for forgiveness said through the week before Rosh Hashannah, in Sefardic tradition for the entire month of Elul. Looking at times through the eyes of the child each of us once was, may we see the goodness in our selves and others, though obscured at times by a passing cloud, the goodness that is the essence of who we really are.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor