

Dear Chavraya,

As each name was read, the person lighting extended the taper in their hand to kindle another flame. There were so many flames, each to remind with its flickering of a life extinguished. It was the annual memorial service for the region's homeless, for those who have died during the past year with no place to call home. It is held each year on the day that is followed by the longest night. As names are read, there is a quiet weeping of recognition from those in the sanctuary for whom a particular name brings a face to mind, a presence sorely missed. The reading of names is shared, some of them read by homeless people, some by clergy and others. One homeless man paused as he said the name "Brian B." The reader looked up and spoke in soothing tones, whether to wistfully address the friend whose name he had just spoken, or to calm himself, "you loved us unconditionally, and so we loved you." To a ripple of emotion, the death of Paul F. was announced, a man who had died only the night before. I was asked to add his name to my list of names, suddenly feeling a connection through the immediacy of his death. I felt welcomed into this community of people who dwell on the streets, in the parks and shelters.

For all of the past years that I have been participating in the homeless memorial service, names of those who had died were written on cardboard gravestones and placed around the church. It was different this year, only two cardboard markers, one with Jane Doe written on it, and one with John Doe. Instead of the many markers, there were folded and wrapped blankets stacked in the front, each one with a name taped to it of one who had died. These are blankets that are distributed to the homeless by the Pine Street Inn shelter. People were asked to take a blanket after the service and bring it back to their place of worship. The blanket I took bears the name Shelia Jean F. I don't know anything about her other than she was a homeless person who died during the past year, probably not so far from where we live. I don't know if the spelling of her name is a handwriting mistake, or if it reflects a unique twist as given to her by her parents, perhaps their hope that something special in her soul would shine, something creative, quietly different. I don't know her age, not likely very old, or what she might have looked like, the way of her voice and manner, whether she cried for herself or others at night, or had come to be quietly resigned to her plight. She is among us now, at least her name and the questions it brings. We were asked to keep the blanket for a time, and then to find a homeless person to give it to, and so I shall, as a gift from Shelia Jean.

At the end of the service, a man with a deep, rich voice asked that we also remember Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin. In that place and time that reflects each year the failure of our society to care for all, he wove together the frayed strands of who we are, of so much injustice, strands that form the death shroud of homelessness, of racism, of poverty. They are all part of one injustice in which some lives don't seem to matter as much as others. Then he raised his guitar and sang out "Ella's Song," an anthem of the civil rights movement by Bernice Johnson Reagon, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." Homeless and housed, so many diverse people, we stood and clapped, swaying and singing together.

As each candle was lit, the light of so many souls seemed to shine among us. I spoke of Chanukkah when it was my turn to speak, of the Shammash giving of its light to raise new light, the flames of two candles rising together, burning with extra brightness in the moment of their contact. As the light of all the souls remembered continues to shine among us, the light of Brian B., of Paul F., of Shelia Jean and so many others, may the menorah of common humanity light the way home to a time when all lives truly matter among people, as they do to God. I then chanted the Memorial Prayer in Hebrew and offered my own interpretive translation meant for those remembered. I share it here as a prayer for this Shabbos of Chanukkah, the week of *Parashat Miketz*, upon whose opening words the rabbis drew from the Book of Job, *keytz sam la'choshech/put an end to darkness!* As we kindle so much light tonight, for Shabbos and for Chanukkah, so may it be.

O God, exalted and full of compassion, grant perfect peace in Your sheltering Presence, among the holy and pure, to the souls of all those whom we remember today, who have gone to their eternal home. Welcome them home, please, with open arms. Show to them the love and acceptance denied to them in life. Knowing that You have given us the resources, help us to create a just society in which everyone has a place to call home. In Your embrace of their souls, please show to them the meaning their lives held for You. Be a mirror, God, in which they may see Your image in their eternal selves. Please forgive us for the times we did not see Your image in them, and help us to open our eyes to the holiness of every single life. Master of mercy, we beseech You, remember all the worthy and righteous deeds that they performed in the land of the living, deeds of infinite meaning in Your eyes, however small, whether for family and friends, whether on the streets or in shelters, for each other and for others. May their souls be bound up in the bond of life. You are their portion. May they rest in peace. Let us say: Amen.

Shabbat shalom and Happy Chanukkah,
Rabbi Victor