

Dear Chavraya,

I want to believe that when held in God's scales, human acts of love in the world would outweigh acts of violence. Striving to live with hope, I hold dear the poignant message of Anne Frank that people are really good at heart. It has been a week of anguish for the Jewish people with the return to Israel of the bodies of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. I have wanted only to be a mourner among family, to put aside our differences, to refrain from criticism and critique, however loving. There is a time for that, as this week has been, even as we know that unless we speak out then we are implicated in so much violence in all the spheres of our lives, and there will be no end to mourning.

Opening the *chumash* to this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Pinchas*, does not readily bring comfort. Pinchas is a zealot who slew an Israelite man and a Midianite woman. Acting on his own initiative to stem assimilation and decline, Pinchas is regarded in some strands of the tradition as a hero. Even God appears to honor and reward Pinchas, saying; *Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace*. As we are troubled by Pinchas, so too in the *haftarah*, the prophetic reading following the Torah reading, the towering figure of Elijah the Prophet presents a moral quandary. As the selection from the Book of First Kings opens, Elijah fears for his life. In its full Biblical context in the *Tanach*, Elijah has just slain four hundred and fifty prophets of *Baal*. Understanding that violence begets violence, no wonder he is afraid.

Not to wrestle with and challenge interpretations that give honor to the violence of Pinchas and Elijah is to participate in textual violence, a frighteningly short step for the zealot to violence against real human beings. Read with greater care, there is a message in these texts of violence transformed. Hope begins with a simple instruction to every scribe who writes a Torah scroll. The small vertical letter *vav* in the word *shalom*, as in *b'rit shalom/My covenant of peace*, is to be written as a broken letter, a small space separating the upper and lower parts of the letter. So it is in every Torah scroll, and in the entire Torah this is the only place where a *vav* is written in this way. In the Talmud, the broken *vav* comes to speak of a covenant deferred. Of God's promise to Pinchas of a *b'rit shalom*, Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel, *Keshehu shaleyim v'lo keshehu chaser / when he is whole, not when he is wanting*. Pinchas is challenged to transcend the violence in his soul, then becoming whole and worthy of a covenant of peace.

Identified with each other, some say that Pinchas and Elijah are even one and the same. Elijah is to be the harbinger of the Messiah, announcing the arrival of that time, may it come soon, when swords shall be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, the ultimate flowering of nonviolence. Wandering the world, often as a beggar, he reaches out to help those in need. Elijah is present at three liturgical moments pregnant with the possibility of redemption, at the *b'ris*, when Pinchas is also present, every child a link to the promise of Messianic time; at the Pesach seder, past liberation as inspiration to bring the future liberation; at *Havdallah*, infusing the hope of Shabbos peace into our day to day striving. Pinchas and Elijah, blinded at first by zeal, come to be identified with life-affirming moments and deeds of kindness. Their place in Jewish tradition represents a practical path by which to transcend the violent part of their

characters. Exposed to people most vulnerable, babies, the poor and infirm, and invited to share in intimate moments of joy and hope around a family table, the violence will be uprooted from their souls. It is their path and it is our path, along which the *vav* will be made whole and the covenant of peace fulfilled.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor