

Dear Chavraya,

The universal human story is reflected in the personal story of every person. The flowering of human redemption depends on the flowering of people and communities. Only when we can raise up and hear each other's stories will the human story find its full expression. When we can make peace in our own places, homes, families, communities, neighborhoods, in all the circles of our lives as they flow outward, only then can we hope to make peace and bring understanding to the larger spheres of life within the universe. This is why I devote so much time to interfaith work. I truly believe that unless we can make peace among us where we dwell, there shall be no possibility of peace within the world. And in the process of engagement is the very blessing of what might be, lives enriched through knowing the other.

There is painful irony in offering such reflections in the context of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Pinchas*. Bearing the name of a violent zealot who slew an Israelite man and a Midianite woman, there flows through this portion just beneath the surface a stream of nonviolent teaching. It is a "river of peace," *nehar shalom*, that offers an alternate way of being in the world from what we encounter at times in the surface words of Torah. There are several places where the stream bubbles to the surface, waters of life / *mayyim chayyim* waiting to be tapped. God offers Pinchas a covenant of peace, *hi'neni notein lo et b'riti shalom/ behold, I shall give to him My covenant: Peace*. It is unseemly that such an honor be given to a zealot, the needle of whose moral compass is a spear to point the way. But looking closely at the word "shalom" as it appears in the Torah itself, the letter "vav" is broken, cut in two, an open space waiting to be bridged. The simple letter "vav" is the conjunction "and," as in two joined together, this one and this one. It is yet an incomplete covenant, challenging, waiting for Pinchas to bring together and make whole that which he has torn asunder. So it is our challenge, if we would transcend the violence of text and life.

In this portion too, Moses is told that he will not enter the Land, the fairness of God's judgment to be wrestled with, but so it is the consequence of Moses' own act of violence, striking the rock to bring forth water, not with words to soothe as he had been told, but flailing with a stick in angry rage. Rising now to the fullness of his noble spirit, Moses pleads with God that the people not be left like sheep that have no shepherd. Moses speaks to God with words of address that he uses only one other time in the Torah, speaking his prayer to *God, the God of the spirits of all flesh/ Elokey haruchot l'chol basar*. Speaking on behalf of the people of Israel, Moses' words are entirely inclusive, speaking on behalf not only of the whole people, but of each and every one through whom the people comes to be. As the *God of the spirits of all flesh*, Moses also reminds both God and Israel that God's embrace is universal, encompassing every person and every people.

From the breadth of God's concern for each and all that is revealed in Moses' prayer, the Ba'al Shem Tov teaches that the leader of a generation is one who is able to *raise up the words and the stories of the people of the generation / l'ha'alot kol hadiburim v'hasipurim*. When Pinchas is able to point the way with words rather than the spear, and in the calming of his anger hear the stories of others, then the two parts of the "vav" shall be joined, the Covenant of Peace complete.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor