

Dear Chavraya,

In the end, as at the beginning, it is about how we see each other, whether we see each other at all. Through gun sights and bombsights it is impossible to see the image of a human being, nor the image of God, therefore, but only a target.

Perhaps not so different than at many other times, but seeming to explode lately, so much violence and brutality surrounding us from so many places, choking the human spirit, Ferguson, Gaza and Israel, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine. Reliance on might masks deeper issues, while illuminating them with terrifying clarity, the underlying violence of shattered human connections, of justice deferred, of our inability to see each other as human beings.

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Re'eh*, is about the nature of our seeing and the way of our going, and about the curse of violence in the place where God dwells, which is every place. It is about place itself, Place as God's name, *HaMakom/the Place*, God's most embracing name. It is about a place in Jerusalem, a certain mountain top, place of God's dwelling that in not being named becomes both rooted in space and transcendent, beyond one place and time. The portion is about our struggle to find and define place, to name it, leaving enough place for our selves and for the other, each one with a place in which to breathe and to be.

The portion opens with an imperative, a plea, *Re'eh/See! Anochi noten lifneychem ha'yom/I am setting before you today/b'racha u'kla'la/blessing and curse*. It is all in the present tense. The choice is before us today, every day. We are not told explicitly to choose, to decide, that is understood. It is in our hands, not God's. Of course we would choose blessing rather than curse. But the choice is not like low-lying fruit just waiting to be picked, blessing as the more luscious fruit upon the tree. We so easily lose sight of the blessing, of the beautiful fruit upon the tree of life, failing to see through the thicket of the way things have always been. It becomes clear that blessing and curse are about how we live, about how we go in the world, as people and as nations. It is about choosing the way of blessing, the way that affirms life; that affirms humaneness and therefore humanity.

I find myself thinking this week of the old and bitter ways made manifest in so many places. People think they are seeing the blessing and choosing it, but really they are seeing the curse. Trapped in a brutal cycle of violence that destroys all, how can that be the way of blessing? How to see through the thicket, the miasma of the way things have always been and see the goodly fruit, to truly choose the way of blessing?

I try to imagine..., what if Israel had stayed in Cairo when the cease-fire ended? What if Israel took a disarmingly different approach than what has ever been and said, "In the interests of peace, we are going to wait for Hamas. We understand that the people of Gaza, as all Palestinians, have legitimate needs, as do we. Your needs will not be met by firing rockets into Israel. Our needs and your needs depend on each other. We will wait for you...." Focusing only on what the other is doing to us will not bring peace.

And in Ferguson..., what if the police had called a day of mourning for Michael Brown, a day of shame, setting aside public space in which to apologize, issuing a public expression of grief, acknowledging the insidious sickness of racism, a statement calling on citizens to join together to work for healing through justice? If we only see the dynamics of protest gone awry through violence, then we miss the cry of a multitude pleading for change, for integrated policing, for an end to the curse of economic and social disparity, for an end to fear and reliance on force. Failing to see the essence of what has happened, we don't even see through the thicket the body of one more young African American man lying dead in the street.

The evil of idolatry is underscored in *Parashat Re'eh* as the consigning of children to the fire. That is the greatest evil in all times and in all the ways that we do it. We are called to see evil clearly, to identify it, not to avoid challenging it, but to do so in the way of blessing, not to choose the way of the curse in the name of or while seeking the way of blessing. Amidst the violence all around, we are called to name racism and anti-Semitism for what they are, one more expression of the curse of violence. No matter how brutishly or cleverly framed, attacks on Jews are dichotomous with love or concern for Palestinians. The way of blessing needs to include all, or it is the way of the curse.

The word *place/makom* appears some fourteen times in the Torah portion. Twelve of those times it refers to the unnamed place where the Holy Temple shall stand in Jerusalem. The essential phrase is repeated each time, framed the first time as conditional, *if you would come to the place/ki im el ha'makom..., that God, your God, will choose..., to give God's name a dwelling there*. And in its first expression, we are told, *so shall you search for God's presence/l'shich'no tid'r'shu*. Rabbenu Bachya asks from thirteenth century Spain, *why does it not say clearly it is Har Ha'moriah/Mount Moriah?* That is the place that is to be the mountain of God's house, the place of the holy Temple. It is the place that in almost consigning his son to the fire, Abraham called *Adonai Yireh/God will see* (Gen. 22:14). Maimonides offers three reasons why that holy place is not named: naming the place would cause strife; the Canaanites would destroy the place; the tribes of Israel would contend with each other. Each reason expresses a concern and a hope to avoid violence.

Not named, one place of God's presence, of God's seeing, becomes all place. The question is whether we will see, whether we will truly see and choose the way of blessing. Turning away from the curse of violence, we allow God to dwell in all of the holy places where people have learned to dwell together, seeing each other as human beings.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor