

Dear Chavraya,

I heard my own voice, as though detached, coming from a place far away, pleading for my life before a death sentence just imposed. I felt dizzy, not sure where I was, or if it was all really happening. How could people be so cruel, people I knew, or thought I knew? People who knew me and who knew my precious children. I tried to explain. Yes, I had gathered sticks on Shabbos. No, I was no more aware than anyone else that such a deed would bring death by stoning. Not even Moses knew, for such had not been made clear / *lo phorash*. In seeking guidance, could this really be the answer Moses heard from God Who is *rachamav al kol ma'asav/merciful over all creatures*?

Whether it had been God's word or Moses' hearing of it, or lack of hearing, his inability to hear with his heart, I had to speak from my own heart, hoping I might touch the hearts of all those gathered around me. Their eyes seemed implacable, glazed over with fear, zealous perhaps to make up for the sin of the scouts who only a short while before had rebelled against Moses and Aaron. I knew that they could not really see me for who I was, no longer their friend and neighbor, only a danger to the community now. As with acrid smoke, the blindness of zealotry had blurred the sameness of self and other.

My voice quavered, as I tried to help them look beyond the juridical, to break loose from the straightjacket of law devoid of compassion. I tried to open up the text of their lives by bringing them into the context of my life at the time I gathered sticks on that Shabbos afternoon. I spoke of my own love for Shabbos, for God, for the Torah that was still so new among us, of my love for them, even now. I began to speak in what seemed to be a hoarse whisper, knowing I needed to raise my voice. "What I did was not meant at all as a rejection, but as an affirmation of the essence of Torah and of how we have come to understand God as merciful and compassionate. Of the mitzvot we are earnestly striving to fulfill, so recently taken into our lives, Moses our teacher has explained, *chai vahem/you shall live by them*, meaning that we are not meant to die through their observance. You see, I had a sick child at home, who was shivering with fever. I knew I had to make a fire, even on Shabbos, to warm her by. That is why I went out to gather sticks."

The telling of the *m'koshesh eytzim/the gatherer of sticks* is in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'lach L'cha*. For many years, I have felt this to be my own story, ever since a rabbinic retreat in which I participated in a workshop on Biblio-drama. A type of role-playing, Biblio-drama is deeper. We are drawn in to the head and heart of the character we seek to understand, becoming that long ago person in all the immediacy of our own lives and time. In that workshop, we were specifically engaging the difficult narratives of Torah, those which Abraham Joshua Heschel calls the "harsh passages."

As the workshop finished, I felt drained, not having expected to experience the story so personally. It was the second workshop that day in which I had played a father. The first time, I played myself as a rabbi too often away from his children. In that scenario, I spoke with my eldest daughter, Noa, who was then a young child. Needing some additional time to debrief, a friend and I decided to spend

some time learning Torah, specifically to look at the story of the *m'koshesh eytzim*. It was only then that a thread of understanding began to weave together the day's emotions. As my friend and I looked at commentaries on the painful story, I saw for the first time a statement by Rabbi Akiva identifying the gatherer of sticks as Tzelofchad, a father of five daughters and no sons. Upon their father's death, the daughters petition Moses for the right to inherit. Hearing the justice of their claim, affirmed by God, the daughters are given the right to inherit. One of the five daughters is Noa. As I read Rabbi Akiva's words, *m'koshesh – zeh Tzelofchad/the gatherer – this is Tzelofchad*. I suddenly realized what I hadn't realized consciously at the time of the Biblio-drama; that I had been playing the father of my own child. Pained in the first scenario by my lack of attention to my daughter, I rose in the second desperate to do whatever was needed to help her. I was Tzelofchad, father of Noa, the gatherer of sticks.

That is what we are meant to learn from the harsh passages of Torah, they are about us. Engaging them, wrestling with them, they represent facets of our own lives, telling of events only too real in our own world and time. Rabbi Akiva gives a name to the *m'koshesh eytzim*, as though giving him a face, making him a real person, a parent whose concerns and pain we share. Hearing the far off voice that is so close of one who cries out in the face of cruelty, we are called to respond. The voice of the other is our own.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor