

Dear Chavraya,

Through the window of my study there is such beauty in the snow-covered trees, in the interplay of green and white upon the fir trees and in the stark contrast of bare branches laden with a wintry cloak. It is mesmerizing, holding the eye in wide-open gaze with its magic. It is hard to turn from such beauty to the harsh images of winter's other side, to the pain and sorrow in the world that knows no respite for any season. I participated in a memorial service today for homeless people who have died in Massachusetts during the past year, one in our city during just the past week. Among the offerings of other clergy, I chanted the memorial prayer, *Keyl Moleh Rachamim*. There is a gathering tonight, not even a mile from Nehar Shalom, to support and plead for nine families about to be evicted through foreclosure. Eyes and hearts that are closed to pain are closed to beauty too.

This week's Torah portion, *parashat Va'y'chi*, is the only portion in the Torah that is called a "closed portion," *parashat s'tumah*. It is called closed because it is the only portion in the Torah that continues without any space between it and the preceding portion. Any such anomaly in the Torah is meant to invite interpretation. In the closing of space between portions, the rabbis see allusion to the closing of Jacob's eyes as he approaches death. The rabbis ask, *Why is the portion closed? Because there was closed from Jacob all the pain that is in the world.*

In death, our eyes are closed to the world, to all of its sorrow and all of its joy. Our memory is blessed to the degree that in life we saw both. In seeing, we are obliged to respond, offering songs of heart and lips in praise of Creation's beauty; comforting those who for sorrow and pain cannot see beauty, challenging ways of state and society that foreclose on the birthright given to all of God's children.

At the memorial service today, the family of closest mourners wept softly for their sisters and brothers of the streets, as all 163 names were read of those known to have died this year in Massachusetts without a place to call home. As my own tears fell, I found beauty in the presence of these people and strength in the bond they share with each other.

As the first book of the Torah, *Sefer B'reishit*, is completed this Shabbos, we rise and sing out together, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek / let us be strong, let us be strong, and strengthen one another*. As a community, may we help each other to open our eyes to the beauty and the sorrow that is all around us, and through each other find the strength to respond to both.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor