

Dear Chavraya,

Last Monday, I participated in an interfaith offering of prayers before the opening of the year's first session of the Boston City Council. In addition to mine, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist prayers were offered. Most symbolic as a measure of how far interfaith relations in Boston have come, the first Jewish president of City Council was elected at the start of that session, Councilor Michael Ross, son of a Holocaust survivor. I share my prayer below, an expression of hope that extends far beyond our own city, that people everywhere will come together, strive together, and together recognize each other's dignity.

While I do not reference this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi*, directly in the prayer, *hamaskil yavin / the one who knows will understand*, a phrase Torah commentators use when making a cryptic reference. It is most important for us all to understand the reference, though. It is the very last line, "be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another." This is the meaning of the Hebrew words that we will sing out this Shabbos upon the completion of the Torah reading, which will also complete the reading of *Bereshit/Genesis*. As upon the completion of each of the five books of the Torah, the scroll is raised and we sing out antiphonally, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*. Beginning closest to home, sending ripples of hope out into the world, may we of Nehar Shalom each find renewed strength within ourselves, in Torah and in *tikkun/repair, healing*, and so strengthen one another.

At this time when hope is so sorely challenged, I share with you words that I did not share in the giving of the prayer, now to my regret. They are the lines just below the prayer whose place is indicated with an asterisk.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

Prayer before the Boston City Council
January 5, 2009

In the wintry winds of a year's beginning, help us, dear God, Compassionate One, to find warmth in the presence of each other. In Your oneness we are one, though we often forget that we are. Open our eyes to see Your image in the face of every woman, man, and child. Remind us at every turn of season and of year that all are equal in Your eyes and so let them be in our eyes, each one beloved, no one to You a stranger or illegal. As Your image is the source of all the colors of the human rainbow, and of every way of speaking Your name and striving toward Your light, and of every way of loving and of being, so let us not put barriers among us as shattered trees fallen across the road. Harsher still than the winds that chill our bodies, are the winds that freeze our souls, the icy daggers of greed and indifference that turn us from each other.

Help us not to lose our way in the blinding storms that come, when vision is lost and the heart cannot see those along the way who have no place to go. Heating

vents upon the sidewalk and stations underground are not places to call home. Do not let dreams be foreclosed upon and homes snatched away, giving us to know that none should profit on the misery of others and their misfortune. It is not a spirit of charity You seek to instill, but the pursuit of justice that will give each one their rightful due. Disabuse us of the notion that coins dropped into a cup are enough to say we've done our part. Raise our voices to say enough of war, its waste of life and wealth the abyss that drains our cities of possibility and backdrop for the violence that engulfs this land and tears our young apart, offering them no hope of spring and of blossoms yet to come.

In the uncertainty of beginnings let us see the light of hope that twinkles among the stars in a crisp clear sky, and help us to know for a certainty that only if we walk and talk together, even in the darkest of times, shall the light grow brighter through the night. As we go hand in hand into the year ahead, renew our faith in the possibility of realizing the vision You have given us of a caring and just society in a world at peace. (*) Gathered by the hearth in the home that is our city, in the neighborhood that is our world, let us sing of what might be, and to each other say, be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another. Amen.

(*) Help us to know the other's pain and cause each to recoil at violence done by those who share our name. May we build bridges here in Boston, between Jews and Muslims among all others, not to be dissuaded or divided, to span the chasm now exploding, to pray together for Gaza and Israel. Give us the courage to be peacemakers in Your name, which is Salaam/Shalom.