

Dear Chavraya,

Mishpacha means family. A family is defined by relationship, but how broad, how narrow? As we define our most intimate relationships with those we are closest to, our closest loved ones, our people, do we still remember the more expansive family of all people? At the very beginning of the Jewish journey God tells Avram, *I will bless through you all the families of the earth/kol mishpachot ha'adamah*. Do we understand these words narrowly, chauvinistically, or expansively, as a challenge to each one of us to be a blessing in the world, each of us part of the great family of earth. The root letters of *mishpacha*, *shin*, *peh*, *chet*, can mean to "join together," or to "pour out." There is a tension, the same tension as in our understanding of family, only narrowly, or narrowly and expansively at the same time? Do we join together to exclude or to include? Do we pour love or hate out into the world? That all humanity begins from the same two people, *Adam/mortal*, of the *earth/Adamah*, and *Eve/Chavah*, from *chayah/to live*, *mother of all life*, is to remind us that all violence is domestic violence. The tension is found in the Pesach Haggadah, a different spelling, but the same sound and meaning, in the words after the meal, *Sh'foch chamascha/pour out your wrath upon the nations....* Pain born of oppression and persecution blinds us to the expansive bond of family. In a medieval Haggadah, alongside the words of pain become hatred, there is also written, *Sh'foch ahavatcha/pour out your love upon the nations*. Pain is transformed, family is acknowledged.

This is the tension that fills this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayera*. Dramatic and wrenching, at times uplifting and inspiring, the tensions swirl -- love or hate, narrow or expansive, ways of violence or of nonviolence, noble of word and deed or depraved and ignoble in both? It is about life, both raw and refined, and the nature of family, both inclusive and exclusive. It is about us. Sarah says of Hagar and Yishma'el, *Cast out this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid shall not inherit together with my son Yitzchak*. Hagar raised her voice and wept. God comforts and says of her child, *I will make him a great nation*. Hagar's cry is a universal cry that is also Sarah's. Two mothers who cry for their children. Two mothers who are sisters, as their two children are brothers. In one of the most stirring scenes in Torah, Abraham rises to challenge God's thought to destroy the violent cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Within his own family, Abraham fails the test and offers not a word of protest to the call he thinks he hears to sacrifice his own son. Sarah cries silently, away from the text, said to have died from shock upon realizing what Abraham has gone to do. The faithful has turned fanatic. It is about us.

The tensions swirl. Not much has changed. Can we feel the pain of others as well as our own, one not discounting, but including the other? I have trembled upon reading the word "traitor" recently, used to disinherit members of our own Jewish family who love Israel in the way of family, a relationship both caring and critical. What to make of a letter from a rabbi that tore me apart with horror this morning? The suggestion was to bomb Iran into the twelfth century, "which would only take them back about 100 years." The writer suggested that it is "cheaper to use the nuclear sites of Iran as the dumping grounds for our old bombs." I was overcome by disbelief, sickened and shaken by the pouring forth of such hate, by the glib disregard for so many innocent human lives. I was

soothed by a memory from only yesterday, sitting at a meeting in a mosque, Jews and Muslims verbalizing the experience of greater trust as it grows over time, part of an "Abrahamic Family Reunion," an organization and a concept. Hagar and Sarah, Yitzchak and Yishma'el striving to be family.

On Sunday we will begin a new program of *Nehar Shalom*, the "*Mishpacha* / Family Hebrew School," parents and children learning together, modeling family, intimate and expansive, particular and universal, all together. May all of our children be vessels of hope, not sent away from each other, but joined together, untouched by hate, pouring forth love upon the human family.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor