

Dear Chavraya,

I sat on a *beyt din* this week, a rabbinic court, and with two other rabbis welcomed into our people a new Jew, a young man who had been in the conversion class that I teach. It is a great joy and privilege to serve as a guide along the way of such a profound journey. During the discussion that occurs prior to immersion in the *mikveh*, we spoke about what it means to be part of a people, and of the relationship of the individual Jew to all Israel. Not surprisingly, it did not take long for someone to raise one of the most profound and challenging rabbinic teachings on peoplehood, *kol Yisra'el arevim zeh ba'zeh*. These famous words are variously translated in different ways, *all Israel are responsible one for another*, or, *all Israel are guarantors for each other*. The key word is *arevim*, whose root has many possible meanings. It can mean "to guarantee" or "stand surety for," in that way coming to mean "responsible," as in the guaranteeing of a loan. It can also mean to be "intermingled" or "mixed together." As a people, we are intermingled and interwoven with each other, the same root even referring to the warp and woof of a weaver's loom. I have a particular love for the appearance of *arav* in the poetry of the evening prayers, when we bless God, *Who brings on the evening twilight/ha'ma'ariv aravim*. From the same root, *erev* is evening. I imagine evening to be a time of intermingled light, grays and reds and yellows all melding into a rich darkness of merging colors as day meets night. In the *Ma'ariv* prayers we have a moment of pause to consider the nature of our deeds, the way of responsibility expressed in the passing of one more day in our lives.

The word *arav* as "surety" appears in this week's torah portion, *Parashat Vayigash*. As Yehudah approaches the denouement of his poignant and powerful address to Yosef, viceroy of Egypt, not yet realizing that he is standing before his own brother, he pleads on behalf of Benjamin, who has been framed for stealing a goblet. It has been a well-choreographed test to see if the brothers have changed, whether they will defend the youngest among them, now Benjamin, as they had not done when Yosef as the youngest was cast into a pit and sold into slavery. Rising magnificently to the test, Yehudah's plea is that he be allowed to remain as a slave to Yosef in place of Benjamin, who has been entrusted into his care by their father Ya'akov only on condition that Yehudah would be surety for the child. Taking responsibility for his youngest brother, with whose life his own is entwined, Yehudah says, *ki av'd'cha arav et ha'na'ar/for your servant is surety for the child*.

As we sat around the table of the *beyt din* with one who would so soon become a Jew, so soon to enter that covenant of responsibility of one for another, whose life would now be interwoven as one more thread with the entirety of the Jewish people, there came a painful pause. What about the events of this week in Israel, in the town of Beit Shemesh? Violence against the other eventually turns within to devour one's own, all part of the same brutal cycle, whether directed against Palestinians or against women. How are we to see ourselves as Jews in relation to those of the *Charedi* or ultra-Orthodox world who would fashion an Israel in which women are not seen, whose campaign of violence and intimidation is of the same ilk as the ways of the Taliban and the ayatollahs of Iran? In the context of this week's vile behavior in Beit Shemesh, how are we to understand *kol*

*Yisra'el arevim zeh ba'zeh?* How should we explain to one about to enter our people, to ourselves, what it means to be responsible for each other, to be interwoven with Jews whose behavior is antithetical to our calling as a people?

There were tears around the table then, perhaps as the waters of the mikveh, to renew, to restore, acknowledging the pain, how torn the fabric can become. To the one about to enter, come, bring the thread of your being, your vision and hope and the beauty you see as a needle so fine, and help us to reweave the ancient tapestry, the future destiny, as from the beginning it was meant to be.

With blessings of hope for a more beautiful tapestry in 2012, all of us responsible to remind and help each other find the way, raising our voices to challenge and change, weavers all of weft and woof, ready to be as surety for each other, and as the evening twilight comes, all shades of light intermingled, the dusk of a new day.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor