

Dear Chavraya,

The warm sunny days of summer are touched by horrors wrought of human hand no less than are dark days of storm and cloud. Of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, the great Hebrew poet Bialik wrote in his memorial poem, *In the City of Slaughter*, "The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and the sun shined!" During the same weeks of summer that we encounter *Tisha B'Av*, weeping for our own people, recalling a multitude of tragedies long before Kishinev and long after, we also encounter some of the most violent portions of Torah. In the sweep of a season, in the sweep of a single portion of Torah we are left to stagger sometimes, dizzy, caught in the tension between beauty and pathos, grandeur and degradation. At times in our own history our hands have been the hands of Esau, wielding sword rather than book.

Last Shabbos, as we finished *davenning* and gathered for *Kiddush*, one of our *minyan* blurted out a pained plea, "What about all the violence that we are reading, aren't people disturbed?" It was a prophetic voice crying out among us, challenging, pleading, reminding. If we are not disturbed by these portions something is wrong, if we do not respond to being disturbed we have not understood Torah at all. On Thursday morning in our weekly Torah learning we took up the challenge. I share some thoughts here, longer than usual, for which I apologize. These are painful matters. I would sooner stay in the heights of Sinai and bask in the loftiest ideals of Torah. The Jewish way is not to retreat, but to live in the world as it is while striving to create the world as it might be.

These are the seven weeks of comfort following *Tisha B'Av*, weeks in which we read Isaiah's exquisite messages of hope each Shabbat in the *haftarah*. These are also weeks in which many of the Torah readings contain some of the most difficult of what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls the "harsh passages." In last week's portion, *V'etchanan*, we rise to the grandeur of the *Sh'ma* and the Ten Commandments and we descend to the depraved command concerning the Canaanite nations, "You will strike them down; and you shall give them utterly to be annihilated; you shall make no covenant with them nor show them any favor." In this week's portion, *Parashat Ekev*, we are given the source for the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, ultimately a plea not to behave wantonly in the land, and with the land, that the earth may give freely of her bounty and blessings. And once again, we cringe in horror, "You will devour all the peoples that God, your God, is giving you; your eye shall not feel any mercy for them—so that you will not serve their gods—this is a trap for you."

There is an internal tension in these *parshiot*. What are such horrors doing here? What are we to do with them? Rabbi Heschel shares his own struggle: *We...encounter passages which seem to be incompatible with our certainty of the compassion of God. In analyzing this extremely difficult problem, we must first of all keep in mind that the standards by which those passages are criticized are impressed upon us by the Bible, which is the main factor in ennobling our conscience and in endowing us with the sensitivity that rebels against all cruelty. We must, furthermore, realize that the harsh passages in the Bible are only contained in describing actions which were taken at particular moments and stand in sharp contrast with the compassion, justice and wisdom of the laws that were legislated for all times.*

In *Parashat Ekev* the contrast is sharpened further. We are asked, reminiscent of the prophet Micah, "What does God, your God, ask of you? Only to revere God, your God, to walk in all of God's ways..." Only a few verses later, the way of God is made clear. It is God as universal God, God of all peoples, "Who makes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the stranger, to give (the stranger) bread and clothing." Then we are reminded, "You, too, shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This is the way of God that is introduced to us through Abraham at the very beginning of our journey. Prior to destroying the violent cities of Sodom and Gomorah, in *Bereshit* / Genesis, chapter 18, in a startling soliloquy in God's own head, if we can so speak, God muses, "Should I hide from Abraham that which I am doing...? For I have made Myself known to him only so that he may command his children and his house after him to keep the way of God, to practice righteousness and justice..." And then Abraham rises in stirring challenge when God violates God's own way.

To practice righteousness and justice as God's way represents the essence of Torah. The harsh passages stand in jarring contrast, waking us up, shaking us to respond, to challenge in the way that Abraham did. As Abraham and Sarah's descendants, the rabbis challenge us to be *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim*, "Compassionate children of compassionate parents." This is the essential hope of Torah, eternal and timeless. There is no hope or ultimate value to be drawn from the harsh passages of Torah. These are surely not meant to instruct us, God forbid, to foster brutality in our children.

So why the harsh passages? Where do they come from? They don't belong. Or, do they? I wish they weren't there. I also wish that the newspaper wasn't filled with so much horror. The Torah is not sanitized. It is about life, challenging us to respond to life, life as depicted in Torah and life as we experience it in the world. If the Torah was only about the lives of saints it would do us little good as a *Torat Chayyim*, a guide to life, or a living Torah. We could then pretend that the horrors never happened. The Torah doesn't let us pretend. We chant the harsh passages too, in an undertone, through tears, even as we cry at other times for our own suffering at the hands of others.

We have been oppressed and we have suffered. At times we have transcended the pain with an outpouring of love expressed as a passion for justice. At other times we have succumbed to the pain, emulating the brutality of the oppressor and unleashing it against the other, the very stranger in whose face we are to see ourselves.

These are the seven weeks of comfort. In the Torah portions of these weeks we confront violence done in our name and in God's name. In the same readings we are challenged to remember the Torah's essence and God's essence and to be repelled by all that denies that essence, even from within the Torah itself. In the *haftarah* Isaiah comforts us, for the harm done to us and for the harm done by us. God calls to us through Isaiah, "Hearken to Me, you pursuers of righteousness, you seekers of God; look at the rock whence you were hewn and at the hole of the pit whence you were dug. Look at Abraham your father and at Sarah who bore you..."

Horrified by violence and brutality, recoiling from the harsh passages of Torah and of life, we affirm that we are children of Abraham and Sarah, keeping the way of God by practicing righteousness and justice.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor