

Dear Chavraya,

Arranged vertically, the Hebrew letters of God's most holy name, *yud*, *hey*, *vav*, *hey*, represent the human form. The little letter *yud* represents the head, the letter *hey*, with its horizontal top and vertical sides, represents the shoulders and arms, the straight letter *vav* represents the spine, and the second *hey* represents the pelvis and the legs. Created in the image of God, every human being is also created in the image of God's name.

I thought of this, the human being representing God's name in the world, as I read this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Emor*, and navigated the events and emotions of the past week. With the killing of Osama bin Laden came the inevitable questions concerning evil that the religiously sensitive soul wrestles with. In a world so filled with God's goodness, why is there evil? How do we acknowledge and respond to evil in ways consistent with God's image that each one of God's creatures bears, both the good and the wicked. As we work toward the eradication of evil in the world, seeking to replace it with good, how shall we respond to the eradication of those who do evil?

It cannot be that God wants us to respond to the killing of an evil person in the way that we respond to a sporting victory. Perhaps it is the source of the sporting metaphor itself that needs to be recalibrated, that we not train our children to seek blood; that we not build civic bonds through the vanquishing of an enemy. In *Parashat Emor*, God commands, *v'lo t'chal'lu et shem kodshi/do not profane My holy Name*. Literally, *lo t'chal'lu* means do not "hollow out," as in to empty of meaning. As the bearers of God's name, when our way of response to evil is not consistent with God's hope and with God's pain, then we empty God's name of meaning, God's name as it is carried in human form. The second part of the verse is God's plea, *v'nikdashiti b'toch b'nei Yisra'el/and I will be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel*. It is a universal hope, expressed for all people in the way of God's word given to each one, that God will be sanctified, filled with meaning, in the realm of human affairs. In extremis, we are challenged most deeply to affirm the Name we bear.

In Jewish tradition, it is not only through words that we learn the way of response to the downfall of enemies, even of those who would destroy us. Words are accompanied by instructive actions through which our hearts are directed and behavior meant to be influenced. So much is learned from the liturgical drama of Pesach and the telling of our own tale of liberation from oppression and degradation. That we not gloat at the suffering of the Egyptians, we pour off a drop of wine for each of the ten plagues during the Pesach Seder. Even upon our liberation, our cup of joy cannot be full for the accompanying loss of life. To lead from the path of revenge, during then fearsome tenth plague the Israelites in Egypt were told to stay indoors. Writing as "One of the Passionately Concerned Rabbis" in the early twentieth century, Rabbi Aaron Shmuel Tamares offers a beautiful explanation, that it was not to protect us from the angel of death, but to protect us from seeking vengeance, from our becoming angels of death. As we approach the latter days of Pesach, when we mark the crossing of the Reed Sea, we do not sing the full Hallel, the psalms of praise said on festive occasions, full-throated song no more appropriate than a full cup of wine. When we sing *Shirat*

*Hayam/the Song at the Sea* on the seventh day of Pesach, also that we learn not to gloat, the verses of redemption are sung to a joyful tune, while the verses of destruction are said quickly in an undertone.

In a famous *midrash*, when the angels in Heaven are about to offer their own songs of praise upon Israel's redemption, the Holy Blessed One says, *My handiwork is drowning in the sea, and you would offer a song before Me?* Though Israel is allowed to sing, themselves having experienced the lash of slavery upon their bodies, they are told at first to be silent. In the ethical tradition of Musar, the tension between horror and joy is clear, offering a poignant antidote to triumphalism, a reminder that our own redemption is not cause to rejoice at the downfall of others, even of those who would destroy. *And God saved Israel on that day from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw Egypt dead upon the seashore. They had not yet uttered song, they had not sung their redemption song, nor sung concerning the downfall of the Egyptians, for they were greatly distressed; for all this, how is it possible to sing and to rejoice with complete joy when seeing a great camp of human beings strewn upon the seashore, writhing in terrible agonies, the dead and the dying?*

Not only through the way of our telling and living the Pesach story, but even amidst the raucous celebration of Purim, we learn that we are not to gloat at the downfall of an enemy, however evil. During the chanting of the *Megillah*, the names of Haman's ten sons who were killed are to be said in one breath, not to be drawn out or said as though with relish. Upon the execution of an evil person, God says through the rabbis, *kalani mey'roshi, kalani mey'zro'i/how pained My head, how pained My arm.*

In the way of our response to the destruction of those who bring great evil into the world, may we not cause God any more pain. The destruction of God's image in the form of a human being, however debased, is pain enough. In prayerful silence, may we pause, and sing then of hope not victory that through our deeds as individuals and as a nation we shall sanctify God's name in the world.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor