

In memory of my mother  
Sarah Chavah bas Yosef v'Rivkah

Dear Chavraya,

Only now, as I sit down at my desk to write, do I start to understand the meaning and the hope of a distressing and frightening encounter that I had this morning. I feel particularly open and vulnerable as we approach this Shabbos of *Parashat K'doshim*, in which we are told, *You shall reverence every one their mother and their father/Ish imo v'aviv tira'u*.

Much sorrow is held in the span of the past week's embrace. In truth, there is not a week that passes of which we could not say the same. This week it was close to home. A young man was shot and killed on the basketball court by the Stonybrook station. He was twenty years old, a father of two, trying to break out of the cycle of violence in our city that has claimed so many young lives. We have read the details of his death, as of so many others. But this one was in our neighborhood, not more than half a mile from Nehar Shalom. I did something different in regard to this death. With some other clergy, I went down to the basketball court on a raw evening last week and mingled with the grieving young people gathered there. They were trying to protect from the wind and rain the shrine they had created in memory of their friend, of oh so many liquor bottles, and of votive candles and baseball caps, of messages scrawled in English and Spanish, of flowers and one very sad and wet teddy bear.

It was another world, one so close and so far away. I felt out of place and conspicuous, until we quietly began to help hold the wind-whipped tarp in place. Conversation began slowly, coming to be the natural bridge that can join strangers to each other if we are willing. A priest invited all to gather and pray. There was openness, but a sense of not now, maybe later when the work was done. I thought of a Talmudic story, "if you are planting a tree and someone comes and tells you that the Messiah has arrived, first finish planting the tree and then go greet the Messiah." The task finished, we were surprised, almost embarrassed standing in the presence of a strange and unexpected innocence. A prayer circle had formed so naturally and easily around the shrine, and we prayed, and I still cry so easily for the rare beauty of the prayers that were offered, even one for the killer.

This morning I cried at my mother's grave, held in the embrace of her soul's presence, so palpable. I went to visit mom on the eve of her *yahrzeit*. I stopped at my grandparents' graves and those of other relatives and friends, so many familiar names from the neighborhood of my earliest years transplanted here. Lingering long at my mother's grave, the tears for her and the tears of the week merged into deep sobbing. I had been very aware of her presence on the basketball court, honoring her with my presence among these mourners as much as with the Torah that I will learn and teach in her memory. My mother taught for many years in a rough and tumble Catholic high school in South Boston, an ever so humble, quiet, and short Jewish woman, who in that strange land was no stranger, reaching out to all as a friend. She loved her students, helping them in

all the ways she could to make a path out of a world of guns and drugs and despair.

Alongside the cemetery there are woods. Alone at my mother's grave, I looked up at the sound of rustling. Just beyond the fence there was a fox. It looked mangy and hungry. Running in what seemed to be aimless circles, it soon found its way into the cemetery and ran among the graves. It leaped up and sat on a headstone. I could feel panic rising within me, even as I told myself to stay calm. I would not be able to get to the car without passing the fox, nor could I safely go over the jagged chain-link fence. I found myself saying to my mother words that would not usually come from my mouth, Yiddish words that I once heard my father say in the name of his mother as we stood at his father's grave, *zeit a guter betor/be a good intercessor*. After a while the fox moved further away, still among the graves but far enough now for me to say good-bye to mom and make my way quickly to the car.

In the safety of my study, a story in the Talmud came to me, and then I understood. It is a story of four rabbis going up to Jerusalem after the destruction of the holy Temple. As they approached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies, and they started to weep. But Rabbi Akiva smiled. Perplexed, they asked him how he could smile. He explained that now, following the destruction, the prophecy of Zecharia could be fulfilled; "Old men and old women will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem." The other rabbis said to him, "Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us."

We weep for so much destruction, for so much violence. Tears fall for a slain youth. We cry for those in our lives who are no more, who were for us a Holy of Holies. A fox runs among the stones, it is so easy to despair. Comforting each other, may we smile upon what yet can be.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor