

Dear Chavraya,

A timely thread runs through last week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tetze* and this week's portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*. Like a stream that courses at times out of view, subterranean flow or in hills above, and at other times right before us, dancing droplets glistening in the sun, the flow of meaning in these portions is at times obscure and at others crystal clear. Commanded to leave the gleanings of our fields for the stranger, the orphan and the widow, the intent of the Torah is clear. Whether urban or rural, the gifts we are given are to be shared with others. Feelings of the heart are not enough. In the way of *tzedakah*, not as charity but as the pursuit of justice, active concern for others is the grateful and expected response to God's promise in this week's portion, "Blessed will you be in the city, and blessed will you be in the field."

Like debris cast into a pure stream, pollution's blight, so on the moral landscape we also see the debris of heart and soul that dams the flow of compassion and caring. At the very end of *Ki Tetze*, we encounter Amalek, who attacked Israel just after leaving Egypt, falling upon the stragglers, the weak and weary at the end of the line of march, children and elders, the sick and infirm who could not keep up. We are told to remember what Amalek did and to blot out his memory. Amalek did not revere God, *lo yareh Elokim*, how then to revere the image of God in people? Representing evil in the world, Amalek seems distant from us, too extreme to see within ourselves, one of those passages with which identification seems obscure. At the end of a string of conjunctions describing Israel's weariness, the words *lo yareh Elokim/did not revere God* refer on the surface to Amalek. As one of our number in JP Lick's Thursday morning Torah learning pointed out, "but grammatically it could refer to us...." In the grammar of life it could, we are all connected, the potential for evil within each of us. How could we have left the most vulnerable among us at the end of the line, alone, to fend for themselves? Our own hearts blocked to the weakest among us, one midrash says of those who did not revere God, *eilu Yisrael/these are Israel*. Rebbe Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev teaches us to blot out from our own hearts the potential for evil that is known by the name Amalek.

As the thread winds through this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tavo*, calamities unfold as curses upon our failure to follow God's ways. A nation will sweep down upon us from afar, *a nation of harsh countenance that has no consideration for the aged and shows no favor to the young*. Once again, as always, the most vulnerable are singled out, the first to suffer. Not enough to know right from wrong, to desist from doing evil, the human challenge is to do good, to leave no room for evil to abide in the world. The words "harsh countenance," *az panim*, echo with dissonance in the Jewish moral lexicon. In *Pirke Avot/Ethics of the Ancestors*, Shammai says, "receive every person with a kind face/*b'sever panim yafot*." In direct contrast to one of *harsh countenance* who preys upon the vulnerable, we are given a mitzvah by which to replace such evil with good. In the portion *K'doshim*, in the book of Leviticus/*Vayikra*, we are given the mitzvah of *hidur panim/adorning the face of the elder: Stand up before a hoary head and honor the face of one "matured in wisdom," and revere your God*. Of the most vulnerable, we are to make their faces shine, radiant with their own inner beauty. Revering people, we revere God.

Long before current debate, in a paper presented to the 1961 White House Conference on Aging, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel gave wing to these moral depths of Torah. Challenging the spirit of Amalek and the harsh countenance of a people self-absorbed, he gave voice to the vulnerable: "The true standard by which to gauge a culture is the extent to which reverence, compassion, justice are to be found in the daily lives of a whole people, not only in the acts of isolated individuals. *Culture is a style of living compatible with the grandeur of being human....* In our own days, a new type of fear has evolved...: the fear of medical bills.... A nation should be ready to sell, if necessary, the treasures from its art collection and the sacred objects from its houses of worship in order to help one sick person.... Is there anything as holy, as urgent, as noble, as the effort of the whole nation to provide medical care for the old?"

"Life-style" is much more than how we pursue our own lives, but how we live in relation to others. At times the Torah challenges us with mitzvot as clear as day, and at other times, if at first opaque, with accounts of cruelty to remind us of the cost of callousness to the soul of a nation and its people. From our place along life's journey, if we would keep our "eyes on the prize," then we need to look not only forward but also backward, to see the needs of the weak and weary who have fallen by the way.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor