

Dear Chavraya,

During the waning hours of one day's Ramadan fast this week, I attended a meeting at the new Roxbury mosque. As pink and gray streaked the dusky sky, a call from the minaret announced the breaking of the fast. Symbolic first foods of the fast's end were brought to the table of our meeting. Each day's fast ends with the sharing of milk and dates, as would be the desert bounty of Bedouin shepherds, and so we shared, Jews and Muslims. A second calling from the minaret came a short while later, as a gathering call for prayer.

Hundreds gathered to pray, little children lifted up on parents' arms and carried on waves of excitement, Ramadan nights so different from all other nights. I stood back and to the side, thinking to pray my own prayers of evening, a small *siddur*/prayer book in my pocket. Instead, I was touched by the excitement of a young mother, a first grade teacher in a Muslim school, wearing *hijab* and a "snugly," baby smiling and cooing as she delighted in sharing the meaning of Ramadan. Her husband approached, in long white robe, and smile as radiant as his wife's, asking me, "are you taken care of." I knew exactly what he meant, had heard the same words in Hebrew, the same question, a shared expression of Abrahamic hospitality. A flashback to a time long ago, to a Jerusalem synagogue on a Shabbat evening, approached by a man with a radiant smile as prayers finished, "are you taken care of, do you have a place to go?" I was a stranger, but alone no longer, bathed in the warmth of a home and family, a Shabbat evening I have never forgotten, not even the tunes that family sang. "Yes," I said, returning to the moment, to a mosque during Ramadan, "but I am so touched by your asking," our hands clasped as I thanked the man of warm smile and gracious concern. I would share *iftar*, the meal ending the fast, with the group I was meeting with.

The meeting was of the planning committee of "Building Bridges through Learning," a program to bring imams and rabbis together to learn each other's sacred texts. The real goal is to come to know and learn about each other as people. Our next study gathering is in December and the thematic focus will be "Love of Neighbor." We came to the topic fairly easily, through our own painful discussion as a committee of the tensions that flared once again this summer around the presence of the mosque. In the face of fear and misunderstanding, and of stereotypes that calcify so easily, we sought to respond from the depths of our own faith. As precursor and preparation for study in the larger context, we would share with each other the sources of faith that inspire us to pursue a more hopeful and affirming reality.

During this week in which the Torah portion is *Parashat Ki Tetze*, we shared texts concerning love of neighbor and of stranger. We wrestled with difficult questions, who is the neighbor I am to love, and who the stranger -- from among my own people or of another, interpretations narrow or broad, to sweetly tune the tension between the universal and the particular, or to be left with the grating sound of dissonance. *Parashat Ki Tetze* opens with laws of warfare and the taking of captives. It rises then to the noble exhortation, *you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt*, you know what it is like to be abused as a people. Several times in the portion we are reminded of the justice due the stranger, the orphan, and the

widow, emblematic of society's most vulnerable. And as we shared, of Jewish emphasis on doing good *for the sake of peace / mipnei darchei shalom*, in Quran we read: *Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him, and do good – to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer, and what your right hands possess. For Allah loves not the arrogant, the vainglorious.*

As we make our way through the book of Deuteronomy in the Torah reading cycle at this time of year, we encounter some of the most violent passages of Torah, of brutality done to others. I look to a nonviolent stream that flows beneath the words of Torah and speaks of its source in Eden. It wells up through words of commentary, discomfort with the surface meaning that does not accord with the ultimate call of Torah to choose life, with the knowledge of every human created in the image of God. As with so many passages in Torah that concern warfare, particularly in Chassidic tradition, so the beginning of *Ki Tetze*, *Ki Tetze lamilchamah al oyvecha/when you go forth to war against your enemies*, is spiritualized to refer to our own inner battles. Commenting on this verse, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches, *there is hinted in this the eternal war we are to wage with our own enemy, that within the soul which is the evil inclination/...oyvo banefesh hu ha'yetzer hara.*

Sitting at the study table in the mosque, I was struck by another text that seemed also to spiritualize war and warrior. This one from *Hadith*, the teachings of the Prophet that become Islamic "Oral Torah," if you will: *One who looks after the widowed and the poor is like the warrior who struggles in the way of Allah, or like one who prays all night and fasts all day.* A Muslim friend once spoke to me of his own inner conflicts at the time, of the *ijtihad* with which he was engaged, self-struggle toward new understanding and renewal, a battle waged within.

The good and the noble that is in Quran and in Torah rises up through our deeds, loving each other as neighbor even when we are strangers, transforming in practice the violence that is in Torah and in Quran. We are worthy heirs of Avraham/Ibrahim when from house to house we are able to say, "Are you taken care of, do you have a place?" Seated then at one great table, may we break the fast together and nourish the deepest hunger that is for peace.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor