

Dear Chavraya,

One of the most dangerous and most ugly of conceits is that of religious arrogance. So too as with nationalist arrogance, each involves a failure of perception and of perspective. It is the conceit of seeing oneself as the whole picture, rather than as one brush stroke on God's canvass, as the only clan or tribe, rather than as part of the human family, as the only cherished one, rather than as but one precious child of God. Within one's own immediate family, one's own religion, or people, or nation, it is the failure of seeing oneself as the only legitimate heir to the inheritance of one's ancestors, to the mantle of legitimacy as bequeathed by those who came before.

Until this week, and this year's reading of *Parashat Ki Tissa*, I had not seen the powerful teaching against such arrogance as expressed in this week's Torah portion. Long familiar as a positive teaching on the importance of each one, is the law of the half shekel at the outset of the *parasha*. As part of a census, each person is to give a half-shekel toward the upkeep of the sanctuary. As a very small amount of money, *the rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less*. No one is complete unto her or him self, each needing the half shekel of another to bring wholeness to the community. Fortuitously, I was in the car one day this week at the time of NPR's "On Point" with Tom Ashbrook. As I turned on the radio, Tom was introducing his guest, Rev. Richard Watts, author of the recently published book, "Hungers of the Heart: Spirituality and Religion for the 21st Century." Tom poignantly shared that Rev. Watts had been his own childhood minister and teacher. As I continued to listen, Rev. Watts became my teacher as well.

Speaking about the dangers of fundamentalism, Rev. Watts offered a story by way of urging that we be "people of search, not certainty." He began to tell of Moses asking to see God's glory. I was drawn in with excitement, the story he was about to tell being from this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tissa*. God accedes to Moses' request, but tells him, *you cannot see My face, for a person shall not see Me and live*. God then places Moses in the cleft of a rock, and says, *I will cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away My hand, and you will look after Me; My face shall not be seen*. Rev. Watts offered this story from Torah as a cautionary tale for believers, delivering an earthy warning, "If you think you know God and have it all figured out, boy are you mistaken."

I was amazed, never having thought of the story in this way, as a teaching against religious arrogance. If not even Moses could know God fully, then who is anyone else to think they can? Returning to my study, I was eager to explore this understanding through Jewish sources. Grateful to Rev. Watts and for the serendipity of being in the car at the right time, I became even more amazed and excited. Concerning the words, *v'ra'ita et achorai / and you will look after Me*, there is in the Talmud what seems at first a rather perplexing statement by Rabbi Chana bar Bizna, *it is to teach that the Holy Blessed One showed to Moses the knot of t'filin*. Resting low down, in the soft spot at the base of the skull, the knot of the head *t'filin* can only be seen from behind, and this is what Moses saw. The word for knot, *keshet*, also means "connection." An elaborate interweaving of the *t'filin* straps, the knot is a visual teaching about connection. Dazzling new meaning begins to emerge and beckons me to continue on the path through my own

tradition to which Rev. Watts has pointed me. A beautiful 19th century commentary of Rabbi Boruch HaLevi Epstein, called the *Torah T'mima*, teaches, *the Holy Blessed One wanted to show Moses through intimation that he could not see a vision of God's holiness in all of its fullness*. Drawing on an expansive collection of ancient sources, the *Torah Sh'leimah* offers a similar teaching, *achorai/you will look after Me means, you will see only a small part of God's glory; and My face you will not see — the essence of My glory you are not able to see*.

I am thrilled to have found new insight into *Parashat Ki Tissa* this year. Whether in person or through waves of sound carried from afar, it is only through openness of heart and mind that we can receive the gifts of another's understanding. Within our own immediate Jewish family and in the great extended family of all humanity, may we learn from each other's insights and wisdom and so come to appreciate ever more deeply the depths of God's holiness and the interconnection of all people as God's precious children.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor