

Dear Chavraya,

In a recent edition of NPR's radio program, "This American Life," the focus was an expose of the brutal conditions in a Chinese factory in which iPhones are produced. In the way of sweatshop labor, whether of an earlier time or of today, the finished product comes to be through piece work, each worker monotonously producing one component. Workers become cut off from the whole picture, often never seeing the finished product, unable to take pride in what has been created, or to see one's own contribution as an essential part of the whole. It is a painfully powerful metaphor of the human spirit demeaned, of people cut off from themselves and from each other.

In the destruction of the human spirit, of bodies and souls enslaved, there is an interweaving of themes come together as one in the confluence of anniversaries marked this week. Approaching his birthday, it is the essential message of human and civil rights in the life and teaching of Rev. Martin Luther King. It is also the message remembered on the one-hundredth anniversary this week of the Lawrence Mill Strike. Their song still carried on the wind, women led the way, leaving their looms and walking out of the mills to begin the strike. Representing a multitude of ethnicities and languages, workers were united through a common language of song and the strike came to be known as the "singing strike." In the joining of labor and civil rights, more than a coincidence in time, it is significant that Martin Luther King was in Memphis on the eve of his assassination to support a labor strike by the city's sanitation workers.

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'mot*, offers a context for marking these two anniversaries. A new Pharaoh arose "who knew not Yosef," and the enslavement of Israel begins. The brutality of the enslavement, as it comes to be a backdrop for our own response to oppression in every time and place, is expressed in a one-word phrase repeated several times in the portion, *b'farech*, connoting violence, harshness, hate, and separation; *the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel "b'farech"/with crushing harshness*. In its connotation of "separation" there is a reflection of people cut off from each other, of the human spirit destroyed, that of both oppressed and oppressor. There is also a subtle teaching of hope.

Offering a fascinating connection, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points to the common root in *b'farech* and in *parochet*, the curtain that marks off or designates the sacred space of the Holy Ark, as it was in the ancient sanctuary and in our own. People can be screened off and divided from each other, treating each other harshly, *b'farech*, or we or we can be joined together, a human tapestry forming the *parochet* before the ark of life itself.

Of a dream yet to be fulfilled, of justice flowing down like water, we shall overcome, walking hand in hand until someday shall be today. Of workers oppressed then and now, the call of the Lawrence Mill strike was for "Bread and Roses," working conditions and wages that would allow for sustaining both body and soul. It is a song whose coda is still to be sung.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor