

Dear Chavraya,

Witnessed by all of us, each with our own reflections and associations, hopes and fears, both shared and solitary, the events of the past week have been momentous. As Torah unfolds in time, so the events of every week, whether profound or mundane, take place within the symbolic framework of a week's Torah reading. At the close of the book of *B'reishit/Genesis*, we called out *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek/be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another* – and then we entered the book of *Sh'mot/Exodus* and the crucible of slavery. This week of inauguration, of new beginnings, is framed for us through the Torah portion *Va'era/And God Appeared*. Revealing a new name, one of being and becoming, God appears as liberator, charging Moses and Aaron to go and bring the call of freedom before the hard-hearted Pharaoh. From the pages of sacred text, the ancient call rings out, "Let My people go," as counterpoint in this week's context to a crescendo of hope, the cresting of a dream toward the once distant shore.

God's name is not new in *Parashat Va'era*, but Moses is given new insight into God's most holy name, the name whose letters are the letters of the verb to be. God has already introduced to Moses the divine name of becoming, *Ehiyeh Asher Ehiyeh/I Will Be That Which I Will Be*. Arranged vertically the Hebrew letters of God's name of being, *yud, hey, vav, hey*, can be seen to reflect the human image. Created in God's image, even in the image of God's most holy name, every person is created equal. Such basic truth has not always been as self-evident in this land as it was meant to be.

This week of coming closer to realizing founding tenets, this week of receiving with Moses God's name of infinite possibility, has brought me an unexpected gift of reflection on my own process of being and "becoming" an American. Born in Boston, having lived in Canada for many years as rabbi of a wonderful community, acquiring dual citizenship, I am an American by birth and a Canadian by choice. With trepidation, I share some of these very personal reflections, unedited and un-processed. I share in part out of my own need to express in order to further clarify, and in part as invitation to others to use a historic moment as opportunity for one's own self-reflection and clarification. Longer than my usual Shabbos message, I apologize, and suggest that if you read no further, but here go off into your own reflections, then *dayenu/enough*, for that is the greater purpose of my own sharing. I also acknowledge that there is not necessarily any chronology or sequential coherence in these thoughts that are in formation.

From my earliest years I cherished the values that America was supposed to stand for, but I rarely saw America standing for them. In the haftarah that I chanted for my Bar Mitzvah from the Prophet Micah, though deeply moved, I did not realize then that I had found God's call and my life's banner; "It has been told to you O mortal what is good and what God seeks of you, only to only to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God." So I began to do and to walk. In the school year following my Bar Mitzvah, an eighth grader, I stood in a weekly vigil after school, alone with a Protestant minister, urging passage of the voter registration bill. I recently found a sketch for the sign I held. In the

gendered language of the time, it read, "One Man, One Vote." During that year I heard for the first time words and phrases of fear and hate, venomous epithets that still make me cringe.

I registered for the draft as a conscientious objector. I had planned to do so on humanist grounds, but my rabbi, Meyer Finkelstein of blessed memory, with great wisdom asked me to learn with him, and through this first adult Jewish study I found a Jewish voice by which to express my opposition to war. Scandalized, my small town draft board never addressed my claim. As for many of my generation, I came of age through the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, not realizing then that these events would shape my entire life. Images of Vietnamese children running, their bodies on fire from napalm, haunted me; of black Sunday school girls killed in the firebombing of their church; of Cheney, Schwerner, and Goodman, three "freedom riders," two Jews and a black man, not much older than me, shot and dumped into a river for seeking only "to do justly." I still cry, as in this writing, when I hear or think their names. These were the images of my political and Jewish coming of age.

As I grew, it became more personal and immediate; lungs burning from tear gas, seeing a friend clubbed to the ground by police on the streets of Washington, courtrooms and jail cells. As a young person, it was hard to feel pride as an American. Led off to jail with six others as the result of a draft board sit-in, our lawyer addressed the judge with words that have stayed with me, that gave me my own legacy of pride as an American; "What these people have done is in the highest spirit of American democracy, civil disobedience." I came to believe that we were the true "patriots," who understood that democracy did not allow for the stifling of dissent in its own name, or its imposition on others through force.

I spent independent study time from college at a farm for nonviolence. Having recently been attacked by a right wing paramilitary group, ironically called the "Minutemen," the walls of the farm kitchen were pocked with bullet holes. There we made bread and discussed nonviolent philosophy and action. Those who embraced nonviolence sought to affirm the dignity of every person, whether of like mind or in opposition, passersby or wearers of a badge and gun. We sought to challenge all violence, whether at the hands of the state or the "movement." The means were the ends, the vision to be made real in the moment. Coming of age in the cauldron of a violent time, the noxious brew still not boiled off, I embraced Judaism and pacifism as a common, if uncommon, path and source of faith.

As a child who both by nature and nurture recoiled from violence, who was horrified by pain caused to others, I came to feel set apart from what seemed to define the American cultural and social norm. I was drawn to those, historically and immediately, whose social critique also set them outside the norm, who did not easily belong or fit in. I found a unique sense of place and belonging and a particular American identity in the holy community of resisters and prophets, if you will, who peacefully spoke truth to power, and lived their truth. Some of the most spiritually deep moments in my life, filled with awareness of God and purpose, remain those gatherings of opposition and affirmation, singing "We

Shall Overcome" and other prayerful hymns, afraid and not afraid, as carried off together to police vans. While I felt an unfamiliar pride living as a Canadian in Canada, I came to realize that my roots as an American were planted deep in those moments of alienation and connection, in my hope to change what seemed would be forever the norm. Though she was pilloried for her words, I understood deeply what Michelle Obama meant when she said that her husband's candidacy had made her feel proud as an American for the first time.

Filled with hope, I have to challenge my own moments of sweet illusion. I have been disappointed often enough in the political process and the ways of people and state to know that a national culture will not change overnight or in the course of one presidency. The vision and the way are still far from one and there is so much work to do. For all the euphoria of this week, times will come when we will have to remind President Obama of the vision and hope that he represents and that he has given us. In his being the one to remind, though, is the measure of how far we have come.

In these days that have come in our time, after forty years and so much more in the wilderness, though Moses did not enter the Promised Land, nor Martin Luther King, the possibility that we will arrive seems more palpable than I have thought to know. In the voting of so many Americans change has been made real. "God was in this place, and I, I did not know." As real the change, so much further to go, the well of despair so close by in the desert just behind. I feel a new sense of pride as an American, and for the way that I have been an American. Appearing as though a dream in the midst of night, change did not come quickly or by itself, but on the backs of those who dared through generations to dream, to struggle, and to sing, who lived and died giving voice to freedom's ancient call that is our own, "Let My people go." The Prophet's vision awaits, of swords turned to plowshares, of tanks to tractors, and of learning war no more. In sacred opposition and loving affirmation, much more as part of one whole for me now, with a new sense of purpose and possibility, the task is still to bring the nonviolent flowering of a better world. And so, we'll keep on keeping on, all together as one in God's image, being and becoming the best we can be.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor