

Parashat Vayechi 5773 (2012)

Dear Chavraya,

It is hard to believe that it has been forty years since our teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel died. His *yahrzeit* is the eighteenth of Teves, this Sunday evening through Monday. As surely as one breath follows another, saying his name elicits the name of his friend and colleague, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. They are forever joined, soul to soul, *nafsho k'shura v'nafsho*, as said of Jacob and Benjamin, their arms linked in eternal chorus, We Shall Overcome. Forty years, the years in remembering Heschel, years reminding of the desert journey, forty-four in remembering King. Each died well before what we wish might have been their time, one taken by an assassin's hate-spawned bullet, the other wearied in body by the pain of the worlds he carried. We cannot know what else they might have done, what else we might have learned through their prophetic witness. How would they have adapted their words and ways of action to the needs of times that came after their own? The nature of what they saw that lay beyond was closed to us in the details of how to go from here to there. The path to a dream and vision fulfilled is for us to chart, their legacy an imperative to act.

Our ancestor Jacob sought to tell his children just what would be in the end of days, *b'acharit ha'yamim*, the time of *Moshiach*, of swords turned to plowshares, of spears to pruning hooks. It was not to be though, he could not tell them just what would be, only of a way of being with each other. That would be enough, guiding them to live as if that time was now, and so it would come to be. It was a legacy of action, bequeathed in the closing of an elder's eyes. In a scribal anomaly, wisdom shines through the narrow space from there to here, from then to now. This week's Torah portion is *Parashat Vayechi/and he lived*. It is the only Torah portion that is called *parashat s'tumah/a closed portion*, because it has no space between itself and the preceding portion, here but the space of one letter, not the usual space of nine, life running together, reassurance of generations still joined, the legacy and its source. The rabbis ask the same question we do, why? They offer *midrashic* possibilities, reading between the lines of text and life, inviting us to do the same, groping toward understanding and fulfillment. *Why is it closed? Because Ya'akov our father sought to reveal the end, and it was closed from him/v'nistam mimenu; Davar acher/another matter: why is it closed? Because there was closed from him all the pain that is in the world/kol tzoros she'ba'olam*. With this last thought, there is a sense that he had seen too much already, too weary to see any more.

Ya'akov cannot tell his children just what will be, but he can tell them of what he hopes, as though to say, "I have a dream." His legacy is a call to gather and to be as one, and that so simply is the vision and the way, *hey'asfu v'agidah lachem/gather yourselves as one, and I will tell you....* It is a call to act now as if it was then, in the way we shall be with each other when swords and guns and hatred no longer cut people asunder from each other. There are layers of allusion to that time. In the word *agidah/I will tell*, there is echo of *agudah/one unit, association*, the joining of all in their diverse parts into one, as the four species are so called in their being joined together as Lulav and Esrog. In the verse just preceding this, Ya'akov speaks of what he has

wrested from the Emorites with his sword and bow. Ya'akov is not a warrior, not a man of sword and bow, described as *ish tam yoshev ohalim/an upright man dwelling in tents*. The stream of nonviolence that flows beneath the surface of Torah wells up, sword and bow transformed by the rabbis to refer to *his wisdom and his prayer/chochmato u't'filato*. In the textual turning of sword and bow to wisdom and prayer is the challenge to do so in life. In the image of nonviolent transformation is reflected the ideal Ya'akov, in whose way we strive to be as Yisra'el, the name given to Ya'akov in his limping toward wholeness in the embrace of Esau his brother.

If this is the highest calling, literally and figuratively, of what it means to be a Jew, each one as Yisra'el, then surely it is *shver tzu zein a Yid/hard to be a Jew*. That is our legacy, from long ago and from across the span of forty years. It is hard to speak up, to speak out, to challenge the rigid verities of the way it has always been; that block the vision of what can be, not through the gentle closing of eyes that have seen so much, but through eyes so tightly closed they cannot see at all the possibility of what might be. As the prophets long before them, Heschel and King knew the slings and arrows from those who would malign. Among our own people, even as Heschel was celebrated for his poetry and philosophy, he was ridiculed and mocked when his quest for justice brought him to oppose the Vietnam War. In response, he said, "Vietnam is a personal problem. To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam is blasphemous." Their souls joined in purpose and destiny, *nafsho k'shura v'nafsho*, in his first address concerning the Vietnam War, King said, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Opposition to war, to racism, to economic injustice, to all that demeans God's image in human form is the legacy of activism that comes to us from them. We dare not sanitize their legacy through narrow focus on what is easy to affirm today, though it wasn't easy then. Of people gathering together as one, it is to be and become a model for the world as it has never been, as in the end of days it shall be, when swords are turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks. As we prepare to make Shabbos, may it also be to make the day that is all Shabbos, *yom she'kulo Shabbos*, when Shabbat shalom shall fill the whole world. "The Sabbath," as book and way, and his challenge against war and injustice were all of the same fabric, the same Torah, for Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. May we celebrate and honor the wholeness of his legacy on his fortieth *yahrzeit*, and find our way out of the desert and into the garden of peace.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor