

Parashat Sh' mini 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

A Shabbos afternoon walk around the pond, at a certain point we paused, uncertain, drawn to a stillness, to a silence. There by a fallen tree that reached out into the water, the still form of a Canadian goose tucked into a little harbor among the rocks, a vessel at rest from the storm, snug in its resting place. We walked to the edge and stared at the unreal form, or perhaps so real we didn't recognize it as such. So full and feathered, perfect in form and color, but so different from the way that geese are supposed to look. Its long neck was not extended, reaching up so high, whether to convey a playful arrogance or to be the instrument by which to emit its squawk. Not quite as when sleeping either, when its neck bends down with a crook in its fold, head tucked into its wing. Not as a goose we had ever seen before, its neck laid out full length upon its back, no bend or curve, limp and still.

The next day, I was drawn again to the pond, needing to look, to honor one of God's creatures, to remind myself of the naturalness of it all. There, on the edge of living waters, witnessing the cycle of life, a mother and her young daughter stood and looked at the goose so still. I was close enough to hear their sharing of words. "Look mommy," said the little girl, "the goose is sleeping; she's sleeping, isn't she, mommy?" "Yes, the goose is sleeping," said the mother. Pained by the untruth she had uttered, so wishing her words to be true, the mother turned to me and whispered beyond the hearing of her daughter, "it is sleeping isn't it?" "For a very long time," I said with a smile and in measured tone to comfort. The little girl scampered up the rocks from staring so intently at the goose. One of them skipping and laughing, hand in hand, the two continued on their way. Unable to speak its name, the mother knew, and within herself the little girl did too, that death is part of life.

At the center of our being there is a place of stillness, amidst all the words and the striving, a silence of knowing. From that center, marked by the pebbles of our deeds, ripples spread out upon the pond of life. There is silence in life and silence in death, each one an affirmation of the other, needing each other, neither one an end in itself, each giving meaning to the other. In the silence of death there are questions without answers, as there are in life, and the song continues in another key. And we do not know, for all of our striving. My Bobbi used to say, "Y is a crooked letter." And if there was an answer for every death, would it help? There are deaths that are cruel and have no answer. There are deaths that are gentle and are their own answer. We try to make meaning in all that we do, to draw knowing from the silence that is at the center.

There are many reminders of death this week, and of its dominion if we would allow it. We walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, which is this life, this world in which we live, learning to laugh and to skip like a little girl in her first encounter with death. We learn over time to talk about it, to speak its name, to give voice to its silence and to hear the song that death cannot still. My mother taught me more than anyone else that death is a part of life. It is her eighteenth *yahrzeit* this week, a renewal of her teaching of life in remembering her death. On the eve of my mother's *yahrzeit* is *Yom HaSho'ah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Bearing eternal witness, their silence cries out for us never to be silent in the face of hatred and cruelty. It was the forty-fifth *yahrzeit* this week of Rev. Martin Luther King's death, a cauldron of racism boiling over that April night, simmering still.

From around the table of our early morning Torah learning, one of our number shared the anguish in her heart for another death this week, a young man she had known from the time he was born who had died so suddenly. As she imagined his grieving parents, her friends, she thought of how Aaron must have felt in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'mini*, his two sons, Nadav and Avihu, struck down by sudden death before the altar of their priesthood. Moses sought to explain, unable to speak death's name or acknowledge its pain; *and Aaron was silent/va'yidom Aharon*. It is that silence which is at the heart of the Torah, the silence of knowing and not knowing, knowing that we cannot know, affirming life in the way of our going forward. In *Parashat Sh'mini* is the very middle of the Torah. In the loving counting of scribes long ago, the middle comes with two words, *darosh* | | *darash*. It means to earnestly seek, to search out with care. Two words can't together mark the middle of the Torah. The rabbis point out, therefore, that the first of the two words marks the end of the first half of the Torah, while the second of the two words marks the beginning of the second half of the Torah, each word meaning to search, to seek. The exact middle of the Torah is in the silent space between these words of seeking. In the very heart of the Torah is the still small voice of God, silence.

Drawn to the stillness as in a Shabbos walk around the pond, there is in the silence an affirmation of life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor