

Parashat Bamidbar 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

There is great opportunity for growth when our ideals are tested in the crucible of reality. In pausing to reflect on our response, to consider how we did under moral fire, a mirror is held up in which to examine perceptions of self in relation to our behavior. In the midst of our collective grief for the Marathon bombing, a grief that will linger and render us mourners for a long time, the question of where and whether to bury one of the bombers has felt like a cruel distraction. So too the backlash in some quarters against Muslims. I am not sure if these two intrusions are part of one xenophobic response. Given that the Oklahoma City bomber, an American and Christian born terrorist, was buried in American soil with little protest, it would suggest xenophobia, at least in part. I suggest that it is also more and deeper than this, having to do with how we express the rage and pain we feel toward one who has so brutally sundered the fabric of life. It is about how we contain and direct those feelings and see ourselves in the process.

With the practical dilemma of where to bury resolved, there is opportunity to pause and ask hard questions, to engage in personal and collective self-examination. Until we do that, the dilemma hasn't really been resolved at all. We have simply been relieved of an immediate challenge, leaving all the unanswered questions as a moral goad. In this place of pause, we find ourselves in the gap between the ideal and the real. It is a place in which to consider how we would ideally like to respond and what values we would like our response to express in relation to how we did respond, both within ourselves and outwardly.

Instructively, this is where we find ourselves in the Torah reading cycle this week, as well, standing between the ideal and the real, seeking our way forward. We have just completed the third book of the Torah, *Sefer Vayikra*, and now move to the fourth book, *Sefer Bamidbar*. Fittingly, *Bamidbar* means in the desert or in the wilderness, and so we seek our way. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch speaks of the third book as representing the ideal, in its focus on the desert sanctuary, the *Mishkan* as sacred dwelling, place of communion with God and each other. Resuming the factual narrative, as he puts it, Hirsch writes that the fourth book "shows us the relationship of the nation of Israel, as it actually is, to the ideal of its calling as outlined in the Third Book."

The question is -- what is our ideal calling, as human beings, as Jews, as

Americans? I truly believe that if asked in a reflective moment of their highest values, most Americans would speak of compassion, of graciousness, of a desire to be of service, and on some level even of feeling a bond with all people. So what happens when faced with moral challenge, when raw emotion takes over, when openness melts into the morass of “us and them.” I want to believe that the protestors in front of the Worcester funeral parlor that received the body were moved by pain and identification with the victims of the bombing. The ugliness in their ways of expression, however, spoke more of xenophobia and hatred than of compassion and love.

Values that emerge under stress reflect the depth of training throughout our lives by which we strive to inculcate in ourselves, our children, our communities, our nation the best values we hope to live by. So we wrestle with the question of our response to the burial of one become so evil. That wrestling can be part of our struggle to come to a place of deeper meaning and connection in the face of tragedy, seeking glimpses of the transcendent and ultimate. The way of our response under stress can become an affirmation of humanity in the face of its most brutal denial. Honoring the miracle of life and creation, we struggle to see through tears the twisted distortion of what is done with the gift of life. The human body is a sacred vessel into which is breathed the breath of life, *nishmat chayyim*. That breath is the soul, *neshama*. Part of our pain is in the bewilderment that comes of wondering what went wrong, how did such pure breath, as breathed even into this body, become so befouled, the image of God so contorted, yet physically present in the body of a person become so evil? As distant from the Source of life and its breath the bomber had become, we affirm life in the face of such denial of life by responding in accord with the hope of that first breath, in accord with who we would most like ourselves to be.

A calmer response, more in keeping with our ideal response allows us to hold our feelings of grief in more sacred embrace. Our anger becomes one in the way of its expression with our grief, and there is greater wholeness in relation to who we are and strive to be, and in our relationship with the victims, for whom our compassion and love remain unsullied.

That every person is created in the image of God is at the source of the Torah's affirmation of life, even in death. That the human body is sacred is the reason for the Jewish, as well as Muslim, funeral practice to bury the dead as soon as possible after death. Remarkably, this practice is derived from the Torah (Deut. 21:23) in regard to the execution of a criminal, whose body is not to remain overnight; *you must bury even him on the same day/ki kavor tik'b'renu bayom hahu*.

Though the rabbis made capital punishment a virtual legal impossibility, they draw great teaching from this instance in the Torah of what they sought to avoid. Respect for the body of the most debased is an affirmation of life, exactly what we seek to do in the face of life's denial, as in the brutality of the Marathon bombing. For the sake of the living, may this be the ideal toward which we strive.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor