

Parashat Vayera, 5774 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

Coming of age during the Vietnam War, I prepared to register for the draft as a conscientious objector. I assumed that I would make my case as an objector to war on humanist grounds. It never occurred to me that I might do so on Jewish grounds. My rabbi, Rabbi Meyer Finkelstein of blessed memory, a wise and gentle man, hearing of my plans, suggested that we spend some time learning together. The time that we spent in his study, large volumes open before us, was my introduction to the nature and possibility of Jewish learning beyond Hebrew school. The books that Rabbi Finkelstein drew from the shelves, many published in pre-Holocaust Poland, set a mood that was as important in that formative time as their content. The frontispieces that told of origins, the smell and texture of pages, Hebrew letters peeking through the cracks of worn out bindings telling of an even earlier time, the warmth of my rabbi's voice and the twinkle in his eye, all combined to touch my heart. In those sessions were intimations of a path I could not have known then would be mine.

In the aura of an attic study in the old synagogue where I had grown up, the process of learning itself drew me to the content and guidance for which I had come. In the spirit of the times, the medium became the message. I came seeking a Jewish path that countered war and violence. Discovering the way of Jewish learning, I found in the seeking the beginning of the answer.

The nature of Jewish learning at its core is a way of relationship, with people, with text, with God. Torah is meant to bring people together. Traditional learning is done with a study partner, a fellow seeker called a *chevrusa*. Of the word and its dynamics, the verbal and spiritual root of this partnership means "to join," to connect, from which comes *chaver*, friend, one with whom we are joined. Learning is meant to be passionate. We bring all of who we are to the learning table, our proclivities and sensitivities, our insights and limitations, our biases and burdens. In the presence of a friend, we are able to be vulnerable, asking, probing, able to say when we don't understand. In the way that kindergarden is meant to teach us all we "ever needed to know," Torah is a training ground for life, the essence of its content reflected in the way of our engaging with it. Competition gives way to cooperation, we learn to listen, to know the thinking of the other, to be concerned for their well-being, to disagree even vehemently but with respect, each as guide and follower, remaining together on the same page.

Though I often think about Rabbi Finkelstein, I feel a particular connection to his teaching and heightened appreciation for his gift to me of a Jewish foundation for peacemaking at the time each year of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayera*. It is a portion whose cup runneth over with themes and teachings, archetypal events that churn in our souls and psyches. We learn at the outset of two *mitzvot*, visiting the sick and welcoming guests. We learn that the way of God, *derech Hashem*, is to do righteousness and justice. We struggle with the tension between doing right by those we are closest to and doing right in the world, so often losing the balance in one direction or the other. We hold our breath, no matter how many times we've read the dramatic telling, as Abraham argues with God to spare the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities so filled with violence and cruelty. We sing out mazel tov on the birth of Isaac and we cry with despair at the casting out of Hagar and Yishma'el. We are horrified as Abraham raises his hand to slay his own son on the altar of zealotry.

Refusing to raise a sword for a nation's zealous pursuit of war, I spent ten days in the tumultuous spring of 1970 in the Worcester County jail, including the days of Pesach. A few years after the learning that we did in support of my claim for conscientious objection, Rabbi Finkelstein again shared teaching with me that became foundational. He wrote a letter to me in jail that remains a treasured document in the files of my life. In that letter, seeking to affirm what I had done and to offer strength and encouragement, he rooted his teaching now in *Parashat Vayera*: "Abraham argued with God to try to prevent the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Rabbis explained that destruction by posing a question and then answering it. They asked - 'surely not all of the residents of Sodom were people of violence. Why were all of the people destroyed?' Then they answer - 'Those that were not men of violence and crime committed an even greater sin. They stood by and never raised their voices in protest.' They thereby acquiesced to violence and crime and sin.... You are free because you act out your sensitivity to the wrongs that are committed in our society. As long as you do not accept the spirit of violence, you are free." At the end of Rabbi Finkelstein's letter is an official stamp that says, "Office of the Sheriff, Worcester County, CENSORED."

It is the nature of Jewish learning to wrestle unfettered with the text, with God, and with each other. Approaching each other as friends, *chaverim* learning in *chevrusa*, every voice has a place at the table, the learning itself reflecting the dynamics of nonviolence. In that spirit we gathered around the tables at JP Licks on Thursday morning, as we do every week. We dwelled for a long time on the very first word that introduces Abraham's encounter with God, *Vayigash Avraham/And Abraham approached....*" In that one simple word is crystallized the essence of Abraham's challenge to God and to us, and the essence of Jewish

teaching for the peacemaker, the very nature of nonviolent engagement, approach, draw near to the other. Not enough to eschew violence, joining together we seek common ground and take the first steps on the path of peace.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor