

Parashat Vayechi 5774 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

Last Sunday evening, the new Community Chevra Kaddisha held a training session for those who will head teams to prepare the dead for their final journey. Through my experience in having started and trained a Chevra Kaddisha in my community in Victoria, B.C., I was asked to lead the training. In a certain way, I felt more nervous than if it was actually to prepare a body for burial. In a strange way, in actually doing the work, there is a profound sense of partnership that even includes the dead who lies before us. We are reminded of our equality, that every human being enters and leaves this world so vulnerable and so dependent. Speaking as much to myself as to those gathered last Sunday, I shared background thoughts and words to set the tone before we began the training. I explained that our nervousness should not be about making mistakes in all of the varied details, all of which can be corrected and bathed in our *kavannah/intention*. Nervousness should be felt only as *yirah/awe* in the presence of one who has completed their life journey, the holiness of life magnified and brought to its essence. The group that does this work is so aptly called the *Chevra Kaddisha/Holy Society*.

I took home with me a neatly folded set of *tachrichim/shrouds* to be used for another training. I walked into my study holding them in an open paper bag and suddenly wondered what to do with them. I had a moment of pause. Did I really want them just sitting there? I shrugged and set them down on the floor of the closet, able to see them each time I turned to the right while sitting at my desk. I realized quickly that these garments with which to clothe the dead serve a similar purpose now as my own *kittel* does, a burial garment worn at special moments in life, as it sits in my dresser drawer, seen every day as I reach for socks and underwear. It is all about life and the fullness of life, death being a part of life. For all of its sorrow, death is a reminder to live.

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi*, offers a framework for talking about death in the context of life. In the dying of Ya'akov, the poignant experience of one person and one family guides us in the particular way of our own people as we respond to the universal reality of death that joins us to all people. The name of the portion itself offers its own powerful teaching, *Vayechi/and he lived*. That is the challenge. We will all die, but how fully do we live? Ya'akov acknowledges his own coming death, telling Yosef, *I will lie with my ancestors*. He asks Yosef to care for him *in loving-kindness and truth/chesed ve'emet*. That becomes the basis for all that we do for the dead as *chesed shel emes/true loving-kindness*. It is true because it can only be done out of love, without hope of acknowledgement or reward from the one for whom we do it.

Guiding his children in what will become the sacred way of our people in caring for the dead, Ya'akov weaves a thread of continuity, saying simply, *I will be gathered to my people/ani ne'esaf el ami*. Calling his children together to offer blessings before his death, Ya'akov uses two words of gathering, *he'asfu* and *hikaotzu*. To be gathered to our people in death is given meaning in our being gathered together in life. The way we respond to death tells of our response to life, and the way that we live informs the way of our response to death.

The primary source book that instructs the work of the Chevra Kaddisha is called *Ma'avar Yabok/the Fording of the Yabok*. The Yabok is the river by whose banks Ya'akov wrestled with the angel before encountering his brother in a quest for reconciliation. It is about the way we live and seek wholeness in life and with each other, so that we shall be similarly gathered to our people in death. On the title page of the *Ma'avar Yabok*, the book is presented not as a manual for caring for the dead, which it is, but as a guide for living, which it is, for reflecting on the nature of our journey through life, *for within it there is made clear how a person should conduct themselves in numbering the days of their lives until the time of coming to the day of their accounting*.

A little while ago, as I tried to write and focus thoughts in the approach to Shabbos, the call came that a team is needed on Sunday to conduct the first *tahara/ritual washing and purifying* of a man who has died. As we respond to him in the way of *chesed shel emes/of true loving kindness*, may that be the way of our response to the living, and may our nervousness be only of *yirah/awe* in the presence of one who has lived, *vayechi*.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor