

Parashat Ki Tissa 5774 (2014)

Dear Chavraya,

Our ancestors meet on the sacred page, engaging with each other, even when for their descendents words between them may come with difficulty. They are common ancestors, the mothers and fathers of Israel, revered in the Quran as prophets and teachers. They are called by different names, though clearly the same, *Ibrahim, Ischaq, Ya'qub*, so familiar, warmth in the connection. The way unfolds, peoples of the Book, *ah'l al kitab/am ha'sefer*. We are also each a people of law, peoples rooted in a way of going that emanates from our holy books, beginning with Torah and Quran.

Imams and rabbis gathered recently as part of a program I co-founded with a Muslim colleague some seven years ago, "Building Bridges through Learning." Our topic was *Sharia and Halacha – Law as a Way of Going.* *Sharia* derives from the root "sha'ra," meaning pathway, direction, a directing of oneself. *Halacha*, the overarching term for Jewish law does not in itself mean law, but is derived from the root *halach*, meaning to walk or go. *Sharia* and *Halacha* represent a common view to law as a path through life. Particular laws become as signposts on the way. For all of the differences in ways of interpretation and understanding within each tradition, there is, nevertheless, a celebration of the majesty of details that mark all facets and moments of life from birth to death. Law as a way of going provides the thread by which we weave together all of life's diverse strands. The dynamics of interpreting and applying law become a practical application of both Jewish and Islamic scholarship. Living life somewhere between the ideal and the real, law as a way offers a path toward the ideal and a light to help us find our way back when we veer from the path.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tissa*, the people despair of Moses returning from Mount Sinai with the gift of Torah. Feeling bereft and abandoned, they compel Aaron to fashion a golden calf. There is debate that is as current as it is ancient, did the people violate the first commandment, not to worship other gods, or the third commandment, not to make a graven image? Surely not to worship other gods is paramount, but the Jewish ideal is equally clear in the prohibition against the use of images, that we not limit either God or ourselves through physical representation. Offering a way of return, the rabbis nevertheless draw hope from the reality of human frailty: *Israel sinned only to teach t'shuva/repentant turning to the many* (Avodah Zara 4b). Finally returning to the camp below and seeing the calf, in his anger Moses smashes the Ten Commandments cradled in his arms. Ascending yet again, to receive the Commandments a second time, Moses is told to stand waiting for God upon the

summit of the mountain, *al rosh ha'har*, but not higher, lofty, yet grounded, between heaven and earth, the ideal and the real.

In our gathering to build bridges through learning, so too between the ideal and the real, I learned of a fascinating *Hadith*, an oral teaching of the Prophet, a teaching of encounter between ancestors and our selves. When Muhammad ascended to heaven, rising through each one until the seventh heaven, he encountered along the way many of our own ancestors who blessed him, the universal ancestor, Adam, and then Yosef, Aharon, Avraham, and Moshe. Descending from the highest Heaven, bringing God's word back to those who shall follow him, Muhammad encounters Moses and the following exchange occurs between older and younger prophet:

I descended till I met Moses who asked me, 'What have you done?' I said, 'Fifty prayers have been enjoined on me.' He said, 'I know the people better than you, because I had the hardest experience to bring Bani Israel to obedience. Your followers cannot put up with such obligation. So, return to your Lord and request Him (to reduce the number of prayers).' I returned and requested Allah (for reduction) and He made it forty. I returned and (met Moses) and had a similar discussion, and then returned again to Allah for reduction and He made it thirty, then twenty, then ten, and then I came to Moses who repeated the same advice. Ultimately Allah reduced it to five. When I came to Moses again, he said, 'What have you done?' I said, 'Allah has made it five only.' He repeated the same advice but I said that I surrendered (to Allah's Final Order) " Allah's Apostle was addressed by Allah, "I have decreed My Obligation and have reduced the burden on My servants, and I shall reward a single good deed as if it were ten good deeds."

In the warmth of the telling, the encounter of peoples and prophets and the lived tension between the ideal and the real all become intertwined as one teaching. However beloved is human prayer to God, in the context of life, fifty times of daily prayer is deemed too much. As Muhammad descends and the degree of obligation is reduced, just as Moses remains upon the mountain, high enough but no higher in his remove from the people and the mundane details of life, each of them has come to a place of deeper understanding, of themselves and of each other, and of the nature of human striving. Law as a way of going, *Sharia* and *Halacha*, offers a guide for living life somewhere between the ideal and the real. From the place where we are in this world, living life in human key, we strive to rise as high as we can toward the ideal, and in the words of a Yiddish folk tale our striving is then regarded as "if not higher...."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor