

Parashat Tazria 5774

Dear Chavraya,

God's candle is the human soul, continuing to shine even when the container that carries the flame is no more. And in life, the soul's brightness shines undiminished whatever the condition of the vessel that carries it. That was the teaching that shined so brightly on the tremulous voices carried on the radio waves of NPR's Story Corps this morning. A young retired Marine and his wife spoke of their love, a love that grew like vines toward the light. Love's challenge for them was to reweave their dreams, to adjust and live with the terrible wounds he suffered due to a roadside bomb in Afghanistan, the curse of war that would put out the light if it could. His face so disfigured, his body mangled, fingers missing with which to caress, he could not believe she could look, let alone to love.

I thought of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tazria*, as I listened to their story, moved to tears by their ability to look beyond the surface, beyond the garb of skin to see the inner light. *Parashat Tazria* begins with the miracle of birth, and from that place of awe, as though to remind of essence when we could so easily forget, there follows a telling of travails. After a mere eight verses that celebrate new life, beauty undiminished for brevity, all the rest of this portion and the next tell of skin ailments that afflict the body once so pure. The very first word that begins this litany is *adam/human*, without prefix, context or condition, *Adam/Human – ki yi'h'yeh v'or-b'saro/if there shall be in the skin of one's flesh a very white spot, or one that is nearly so, or one that is shiny white, and it forms a leprous mark in the skin of his flesh/v'or b'saro....*

Each of us is a human being, each one bearing the image of God, without prefix, context, or condition. So we are reminded at the outset, whatever happens along the way, don't forget that you are a human being. The rabbis remind all of us, every single one among us, *atem k'ruyim adam/you are called adam/human*. That we are created *b'tzelem Elokim/in the image of God* does not change in spite of afflictions to body and soul. I think of Pope Francis bending to kiss the image of God in the face of a man sorely disfigured, a teaching for all of us, *you are called adam/human*.

Death brings the ultimate disfiguring of the human body. If even in death the light of the soul still shines, we are challenged by death to see in life the beauty of each one. In spite of all that might cause us to avert our eyes and deny our love, we are bidden to look and behold the image of God. That is the courage of the young marine and his wife, the courage of the Pope, the courage of each one of us in extending a hand, in honoring the vessel from which the soul's light shines, miraculous in its essence. There is a remarkable teaching on the words *Adam – ki*

*yi'h'yeh v'or b'saro/Human – if there shall be in the skin of one's flesh.* Rabbi Yishayahu Horowitz, known as the *Sh'nei Luchot Ha'b'rit* directs us to learn from death the way of life. Looking back to *B'reishit*, he reminds us that God made for the first people in the Garden of Eden garments of skin, *katnot or*. With a simple shift from the letter *ayin* to the letter *aleph*, we have *katnot or*, as in *garments of light*. The clothing of the *kohanim* as they served in the sacred sanctuary are called garments of light. The dead are clothed in garments that recall the clothing of the *kohanim*. As the skin fades, garments of light surround and remind of the essence. It is the light of life that is revealed at the beginning and still shines at the end, the light of each soul that is God's candle in the world. If we tend to that light so carefully in caring for the dead, garbing them in garments of light, so may we also tend to it among the living, however afflicted the vessel from which it shines. It is that teaching that came so tenderly on the voices of the young marine and his wife, *atem k'ruyim adam/you are called human*, each one of us, without prefix, context, or condition.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor