

Dear Chavraya,

Carried on the voice of an old friend calling from Victoria, British Columbia, images of people and places I once knew so well rose up before me. I could see the layered mists that roll across the Georgia Strait between the Canadian mainland and Vancouver Island. As though standing awestruck at the rail of an island ferry, I could feel upon my skin the perfumed breeze carrying the scent of forest, field, and foam. As Rick shared details of the matter he had called to discuss, I could feel the breeze stiffening, a certain sickness on the swell as it churned within me. I wondered at the inability of people to live in accord with such beauty, to offer human harmony as gratitude for the gift of earth and sky and water.

In Rick's own story and intermingled roles he becomes the human bridge across the strait. He is the son of a Holocaust survivor, his mother saved through the kindness of others in her native Holland. Rick is the head of the Victoria Jewish Cemetery, a naturalist and protector of the environment, one who has long worked with First Nations peoples, and he is a Kohen, one who serves God and people, reminder that we are all meant to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," made real in the way of our interactions with others. Acknowledging the irony of a Kohen engaged with matters of death and burial, Rick shared the story of a different burial ground and of chiefs of another people.

Rick described the details of a sad situation that offers a classic moral challenge, a "what would you do?" kind of case. Seeking resolution, he is serving as a liaison between First Nations peoples and an observant Jew from the Canadian prairies. At issue is a very small island in the Georgia Strait that is the ancestral burying ground of First Nations chiefs. Owned privately for many years, though never built upon, the Jewish man recently purchased the island and has decided to build a summer home at this meeting of land and sea. The local First Nations people are deeply distressed, both for themselves at the prospect of their ancestors' graves being disturbed, and for the wellbeing of those who would show such disrespect for the dead. Seeking a path to the heart of one of his own, Rick has sought various approaches. What way of argument and outreach would be more likely to move the man? Would it be to emphasize matters of law, both Jewish and civil, and the Jewish call to go beyond the letter of the law, *lifnim m'shurat ha'din*, beyond what is permitted in order to do what is right and good. That quickly becomes the approach of moral suasion, striving to speak to the hidden spark of holiness within the man's heart?

The various approaches are woven together as one in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat K'doshim*. In the great all-encompassing challenge of Torah, we are told *K'doshim ti'h'yu/you shall be holy, for I, God, your God, am holy* (Lev. 19:2). It is about how we behave in relation to others in all spheres of life. The words of the

challenge set at the outset of the portion are followed by a lengthy enumeration of *mitzvot* pertaining to relations among people, commandments pertaining to justice for the poor and the worker, for all that are vulnerable, of respect for people regardless of station, that we not go about as a talebearer, nor stand idly by the blood of our neighbor. The portion rises to one of the most famous and challenging of commandments, *v'ahavta l'ray'a'cha ka'mocha/and you shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Rabbi Akiva calls the commandment to love one's neighbor "a great principle in the Torah." Remarkably, Ben Azzai disagreed, and drew on a simple verse in B'reishit (5:1) as offering a greater principle; *zeh sefer toldot adam/this is the book of the generations of Adam*. Ben Azzai is concerned that neighbor can be understood narrowly as referring only to those who are of your own people, closest to you, and therefore points to the greatness of a verse that recognizes the image of God in every human face. We are all one as part of the human family, all descended from the first human, *Adam*, the mortal who is of the earth, *Adamah*, The ancestors of one people are in truth the ancestors of all, and where any of our ancestors lie in death is sacred ground, the *adamah* to which we all return.

Concern for cemeteries and burial grounds is itself embedded in an unlikely verse in *Parashat K'doshim*, or, as an expression of human concern perhaps not so unlikely. We are told, *v'lifnei iver lo titen mich'shol/do not place a stumbling block before the blind*. The verse is understood far beyond its literal meaning. Rashi explains that we are not to put a stumbling block *before the blind in a particular matter/lifnei ha'somah bid'var*. The rabbis ask (Mo'ed Katan 5a), "from where in the Torah can you find a hint regarding the obligation to mark graves?" According to Abaye, the answer is our verse, "you shall not put a stumbling block before the blind." Both in regard to Kohanim and all those who tread this earth with respect for people and place, one in whose vicinity and care is a burial ground is obligated to mark and protect it, honoring both the living and the dead. Even in regard to one's own property and in the absence of crimes and sins of commission, to abstain from involvement with others and their needs and desires is a moral affront. Nechama Leibowitz, the great Israeli Bible commentator, expresses so powerfully and poignantly the essence of the challenge to be holy:

The Torah teaches us that even by sitting at home doing nothing, by complete passivity and divorcement from society, one cannot shake off responsibility for what is transpiring in the world at large, for the iniquity, violence, and evil there. By not protesting, "not marking the graves," and danger spots, you have become responsible for any harm arising therefrom, and have violated the prohibition: "you shall not put a stumbling block before the blind".

To love our neighbor is also to love the one who is yet blind to their own responsibility, who cannot see the moral challenge they have been called to meet. To mark graves that none might tread upon them means at times to leave them alone, islands unto themselves. Hearts softened by the kiss of salt spray and perfumed breeze, may the living and the dead be honored, one with each other and with the beauty of nature all around, earth and sky, and water.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor