

Dear Chavraya,

Unexpected thoughts came with this year's reading of *Parashat Sh'lach L'cha*. In the context of our Thursday morning learning, associations and memories rose unbidden for me through verses long treasured but never read in the same way before. The poignant sharing of insights and struggles around the table opened up deep associations with anti-Semitism. I have continued to think about moments of hate experienced, trying to recall and understand the nature of my response at different times in life to a similar motif.

As a college student I was walking to an old shul in a rough neighborhood of Worcester. The shul was boarded up except for a basement *shtibl*, in which a minyan of very old men met, people I had become close to, whose warmth and friendship I cherished. As I approached one day, from a nearby porch a man yelled out, "hey kike." Confused, afraid, embarrassed, not looking up, I hurried to the shul and sought refuge and comfort among the old men.

As the rabbi in Victoria, British Columbia, I went to a photocopy store to pick up material for the shul. With one penny in change for the bill, the owner of the store laughed and said, "With a name like Reinstein I guess you'll be wanting that." My first response was shock, which flustered the storekeeper. I engaged him with both anger and compassion, not letting him pass it off as "only a joke," telling him I would continue to do business with him if he would continue to talk and engage with me about what he had said and why it hurt.

I was walking with my friend Rev. Terry Burke in downtown Boston just a few years ago. A man approached us both and asked for money. Terry gave him something as I reached for my wallet, which just happened to be empty. As I apologized to the man, he snarled "Jew" as he turned and walked away. I was speechless, wanting to run after him as he disappeared into the crowd, but my feet froze.

I think of my mother, who described with so much pain how students in the South Boston high school where she taught one day rolled pennies toward her and laughed expectantly. Then I could only cry.

How do we see our selves as Jews and as people in the world? How does the way in which we see ourselves affect how others see us and how does the way we see ourselves influence the way we respond to attacks on our self-hood? These are questions that emerge from one verse in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'lach L'cha*. While very conscious of teachings concerning identity that emerge from this portion, I had, remarkably, never before made the association with Jewish identity and anti-Semitism, always having looked much more broadly at issues of human psychology. I am grateful to all of the seekers around the JP Licks table for opening up a new dimension for me this year in reading *Sh'lach L'cha*.

At the outset of the portion, Moses appoints scouts from each tribe to go ahead of the people and search out the land. On their return, the scouts bring back a glowing report of the land's beauty, but then tell of the giants who live there.

Except for Kalev and Yehoshua, the consensus among the other ten is that there is no way they will be able to enter the land. Terrified, the people clamor to turn around and go back to Egypt. Concluding their report, the ten scouts said, *we were in our own eyes like grasshoppers/va'n'hi v'eyneynu k'chagavim, and so were we in their eyes/v'chen ha'yinu b'eyneyhem.*

Known for his crustiness, the Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, responds sharply, not so much to the scouts but to his own followers, and by extension to us, *what do you care how you appear in the eyes of others/mah ichpat l'cha aych atah nireh b'eyney acherim?* Much earlier, though also directing their question to us, the rabbis ask more gently, *from where do you know what is in the hearts of others/mah haya b'libam shel acherim?*

There are times when it seems clear what is in the hearts of those who hurl hateful words at us. Even then, perhaps there is opening to touch another place in those very same hearts if we respond not as grasshoppers but from a place of pride and dignity. At other times, our assumption about others is a matter of projection, rising from psychic scars carried as a people, scarring that waits to be salved by that same balm of pride and dignity. One of those around the Thursday morning learning table shared so poignantly of an effort to hide obviously Jewish or Hebrew reading matter while riding the subway. Yet, on the very same subway cars people read from newspapers in many languages, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, telling of many places of origin. Drawn in by the openness of one person's sharing, a new dimension was opened up in the story of the scouts.

In Chassidic literature, the sending out of the scouts is understood in a personal way. The Toldos Yakov Yosef, Rabbi Yakov Yosef of Polnoy, teaches it as a metaphor for searching out our inner selves as the first step toward engaging with others, *latur et atz'm'cha t'chila/search out yourself first, and afterward search out the other.* Searching deeply, may we find that place of pride and dignity in who we are as Jews and as people. From our own place of inner strength, may we know and present ourselves in the world, and so help others to delight in who they are. And with love, may we transcend hate, bringing out the best in every heart, creating bridges one to another.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor