

Dear Chavraya,

I wanted to thrill at the sound of Hebrew, of Torah, uttered beneath the great dome of the capitol; reference to Purim and the story of the Jewish people; words of an Israeli leader honoring Elie Wiesel..., still present to hear and be honored..., imagining the swirling images of his thoughts, from Buchenwald to this moment, as there have been so many other breathtaking moments for him. And it breaks my heart to have heard it all with such pain, pain for what was not said, pain for the arrogance with which it was said, pain as a Jew, as an American, as citizen of the world desperate for change in the ways of nations in relation to each other, of people in relation to each other.

The words of Torah spoken before Congress were words of Moses, spoken to the people in exhortation soon before his death. Pointing to the painting of Moses in the balcony above the gathered legislators and guests, the Prime Minister uttered the words of our teacher and leader, *chizku v'imtzu al tir'u v'al ta'artzu mipneihem/be strong and of good courage, do not fear or be frightened before them*. In the image of Moses, the first teacher and leader of the Jewish people as a nation, we might also consider what is said of him and of no one else, meant as a challenge and model, *anav mikol adam/the humblest of people...*

If Moses is our first teacher and leader, he was hardly accepted as such by all the people. Ultimately, it was not Moses himself around whom we were to rally, but around Torah, the focal point of our being as a people. So it is today. There is no one who stands before us as the leader or representative of the entire Jewish people. The question is not who represents the Jewish people, but, more importantly, who interprets our history, and who interprets our Torah. That is one of the presumptions that I found most painful in the speech, one person presuming to interpret the way and meaning of Jewish text and history, the context of our being a people.

A page of text and commentary is its own teaching of who we are in all of our diversity as a people. On every page of Torah with commentary, or of Talmud, or any other holy book, there is a plurality of interpretations and opinions, all arranged around the central text, all giving loving embrace to what joins us in all of our differences. In the presence of each voice on the page is an affirmation of difference, without assumption or presumption, without arrogance.

Representing a quest for certainty and the need to concretize in the face of so much that is unknown and frightening in human life, we come in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tissa*, to one of the lowest points in the desert journey, in our life as a people. The antithesis to pluralism and diversity, the people demand that Aaron build a god. Whether to be used for good, as in the building of the sanctuary, or for evil, the offerings of the people are now used to fashion the golden calf. Across the pages of commentary, echoing through time and space, voices plead their case, some justifying Aaron's acquiescence as an attempt to buy time, to negotiate. Others are horrified in his willingness to indulge the people in facilitating idolatry.

From either perspective, the golden calf is surely an idol, the transcendent focus of human yearning limited by narrow vision and shaped by images of that which is nearest at hand. The golden calf, as all idolatries, requires no effort to reach or stretch beyond what has always been. The golden calf represents a misdirected channeling of sincere desire for security, a desperate attempt to find certainty before the unknown, an inability to wait, to seek positive ways to express and act on real concerns. The people arrogantly dance around the golden calf, as though it represents ultimate meaning, failing to see the hollowness of its cast construction, or to hear the empty sound of their rationalizations echoing from within. Hearing the exuberance of the people, Joshua says to Moses, *kol milchama ba'machane/a voice of war is in the camp*. Giving rise to war becomes the great danger when ideology becomes idolatry, when the ways that have always been in keeping people apart from each other are allowed to calcify into absolutes, precluding our evolving toward God's hope for human history.

So too, a one-dimensional lesson on Purim was offered to Congress, feeding the voice of war, rather than sharing the rich diversity from the pages and hearts that struggle with Jewish text and context. I thought about a discussion with the kids and parents of our Mishpacha Hebrew School. We created a lesson around one of this year's themes, *kavod ha'bri'ot/honoring God's creatures*. We discussed and debated, wrestling with how to understand *kavod ha'briyot* in the context of Purim, how to understand evil in ways that allow for hope and that recognize all as God's creatures, however twisted. We struggle and we cry with what it all means, how to hold it all together. It is life, lived without absolutes, allowing for all to strive toward wholeness, not limited by the ways that have always been.

The Megillah is a scroll of struggle through which we are meant to feel the pain and horror of what happened to those who would have destroyed us, even as we feel relief in our survival. The names of Haman's ten sons are chanted in one breath, reminding us that we are not to gloat. It is for the same reason that we pour off drops of wine with the recitation of the plagues at the Seder, and that we alternate between joyful and sorrowful melodies in chanting the Song at the Sea, juxtaposing verses of our redemption with the drowning of the Egyptians. It is not simply a matter of defending ourselves in the Purim story, as related by the Prime Minister, removing all moral struggle. We learn through Purim to embrace contradictions with humility, all as one upon the sacred page of life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor