

Dear Chavraya,

I don't remember the proximity of Shavuous to Memorial Day that year. As the two become one in this year's calendar, it is only in retrospect that I find myself thinking about the tensions that played out then, that are highlighted in the juxtaposition of these two days of sacred memory, that reflect competing realities within Shavuous itself, within life. It was in the spring of my senior year in high school. I was wrestling deeply with how to declare myself as a conscientious objector to the draft, beginning to think about the nature and meaning of nonviolence, nascent awareness of another way in the world forming. I had become close to a Protestant minister in town, with whom I was working in the early years of the protest movement against the Vietnam War.

On that Memorial Day in 1968, I gathered with Rev. Mackie and a handful of others in a peace vigil at the gates to the town cemetery. Inside there would be speeches honoring those who returned from war and those who did not, some buried in that sacred ground beyond the gates where we stood. One of the first of the young from our town to fall in Vietnam was only a year or two ahead of me in school, still so recent his life and his death. Rev. Mackie, as one of the local clergy, had been invited to be on the dais inside the cemetery. As he made his way from our vigil to walk through the gates, he was stopped by town officials and told he could not enter unless he removed the armband for peace that we all were wearing as part of the vigil. Refusing to remove the armband, his quiet witness to another way, he began to engage in earnest conversation with those who blocked his entry. At that moment, as we all stood at a respectful distance and watched, my father suddenly bolted from the group and planted himself between Rev. Mackie and the town officials. My father's right arm shot up in a Nazi salute as he shook with anger, shouting into the faces of the gatekeepers, "Sig Heil."

From out of the stunned silence came pandemonium, police and officials pushing away my father and Rev. Mackie, disbursing the vigil. Tendrils of a conversation that might have been were uprooted; a bridge that might have formed between people was blown up in an explosion of anger. I was mortified, embarrassed as only a teen can be by the outrageous behavior of a parent. Even as I have come to understand and respect the raw feelings that motivated my father, on a deeper level I was horrified by the reflection in his behavior of the ways that were tearing the world apart, and so they continue to, the ways of violence and war for which I sought glimmers of an alternative. That my own father exhibited in public the very way and approach that the vigil was meant to counter was something that tormented me at the time and has stayed with me through the years. As a World War II veteran who had served in Europe as part of a medical unit, I knew what my father had seen. I knew that he took fascism personally. I knew the scars he carried from a difficult childhood. And I knew that fierce anger was part of his nature, though I do not know whether it had been part of him before or had come back with him as a bitter memento of war. I often think of that moment by the gates of the cemetery in trying to understand the fine line between violence and nonviolence in good people, in trying to understand the tensions that play out against each other, that threaten to destroy us from within and without.

Until this year's juxtaposition of Shavuous and Memorial Day, I have never thought about how these tensions appear in this beautiful agrarian holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah, song of soil and soul. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'midbar*, that forms the gateway to Shavous, there is an interplay between the individual and society, neither to be denied their due through the needs or demands of the other. We work to make a better social order for the sake of the common good, with full recognition that every individual is a precious part of the whole. The portion begins with a census. Just as in counting a *minyan*, the whole is made up of individuals, each one to be counted. That individual identity not be subsumed to the collective, we are told, *Every person shall camp next to their standard/ish al diglo, each designated with the insignia of their ancestral home* (Num. 2:2). However much we are a collection of individuals, it is only as part of the community of Israel that we receive the Torah. The Torah is given at Mount Sinai only when the entire people stand together as one.

Drawing on the theme of unity as it emerges from the Torah portion, the Haftorah of Shabbat B'midbar, from the prophet Hosea, imagines a way of transformation through forgiveness, singing God's promise to transform the *Vale of Sadness into the Gate of Hope/v'et emek achor l'fetach tikvah* (Hosea, 2:17). From the family setting in which forgiveness begins, Hosea then imagines a new way in the world, peace between people and people and people and nature: *And on that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and with the birds of the heavens and the creeping creatures of the ground, and bow and sword and war will I break from the earth/v'keshet v'cherev, u'milchama eshbor min ha'aretz...* (Hosea, 2:20). In the liturgical turning of these days, from Shabbos to Yontev, we come to the Haftorah for the second day of Shavuous, from the prophet Habakkuk, who, seemingly horrified by human violence, places the sword in God's hand, perhaps to shock and shame us into looking more deeply at our own culpability for violence: *You strode through the earth with wrath; in anger You trod down nations....* (Habakkuk, 3:12). It goes on with terrifying imagery, and we are stunned into silence, feeling God's fury, as of my dad screaming at the gates of the cemetery, anger, disgust, pain given voice through violence.

As for God, so for us, indignant and distressed by the human penchant to block the way from the Vale of Sadness to the Gate of Hope, more anger and violence is not the way to change and transform. Shavuous offers a model of unity for us and for the world, reminding each year that Torah is given only when we stand together, honoring each one for who they are. Remaining awake through the night to receive Torah with the morning light, it is a night of *tikun/repair*. As on Memorial Day, so with *Yizkor* saying on Shavuous, we remember the dead who lie beyond the gates of the cemetery, honoring them with a promise to strive for peace among the living. Holding all the tensions that play out between these two sets of sacred days and within each one, tensions within our families and within ourselves, between ourselves and those we love, they are all the tensions of life. Stepping back from anger, shaken, I imagine that even God feels shame, all that has been witnessed, carried within, waiting now for us to break the bow and sword and war from the land.

Shabbat shalom and Chag same'ach,  
Rabbi Victor