

Dear Chavraya,

Amidst the horror and heartache recalled and relived through the Boston Marathon bombing trial, we have come to know the deeper meaning of "Boston Strong." We can be forgiven for the times we have reduced it to a slogan, such simplifying its own cry of desperation. In the will to survive, to remember and reclaim, we have seen through these endless weeks the human spirit rising, wholeness emerging from brokenness, strength from vulnerability, love from hate. We have seen the courage of those learning to navigate day-to-day details, facing barriers as daunting as the high mountain summit before the climber, or as the storm-tossed sea before the mariner. We have cried for those whose dancing legs were blown away, spirits no less agile, striving to live and to love. In the images of the dead, their faces and memories shared, the wrenching loss of young lives, somehow to see the way forward, the light of their souls to guide.

Guilt admitted from the start, we have struggled in moments of pause to grasp the absurd, the unfathomable, that which is impossible to understand. In the midst of springtime sun, then and now, we have tried to integrate evil into the web of human life. There is nothing new in that, endless instances of evil through time and place for which insight eludes, context and contours as varied as the perpetrators. Amidst the human tragedy, we are left to wonder what goes wrong that one person can so destroy another, and another, and another. We wonder how a human being can so twist the image of God imprinted upon their own face, how once breathed into their own baby body the breath of life so pure can become so putrid. Trembling, we wonder how to make sense of it all, not of the deed itself, for that we cannot do, but in going forward how to affirm life, transcending death, nevertheless.

That is the deeper challenge, going forward nevertheless in a way that affirms life, the way of strength and spirit, the deeper meaning of "Boston Strong." The tension between baser instinct and refined response is real, to lash out, to destroy the destroyer, to affirm good by eradicating evil, not enough to contain and remove, to protect. The way of deeper healing and repair is lost in the focus on capital punishment. In the emphasis on motive and upbringing in what became a twisted life, in the effort to convince that life in prison will be worse than death, something the most urgent question is lost. What is the impact of capital punishment on us? The taking of a life by the state is done in our name, and its burden is upon us. Entering the realm of death, breathing its stench in the details of how, and when and where, appeals exhausted, the testimony of witnesses to the moment, not the way of healing and wholeness so desperately needed.

All of the human tensions are in the Torah itself, and in the way of Jewish law as it unfolds over time. Each one created in the image of God, the breath of life breathed by God in the very beginning, shattering moments of violence, God's and ours, tears flowing, God's and ours. People are put to death in the Torah and we are meant to be horrified. How can it be, the breath of life, the image of God? The Torah sets forth stark realities and begs us to respond, training us to respond in the world. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Emor*, it is said so starkly, *one who strikes down a human being shall be put to death/mot yumat*. An ideal is expressed in the most basic and basest way, the ideal of human equality, every

life is equally precious. The rabbis understood the ideal and its challenge, how to affirm life and all of its tragedies and tensions without being sucked into the grip of death, losing hold on life in the name of a greater good. Inspired by the Torah's own tensions, the rabbis made capital punishment virtually impossible to ever carry out. To every capital case there had to be two witnesses, each one needing to ask the accused immediately prior to commission of the crime if they were aware of its being a capital offense. The accused needed to answer in the span of an "utterance," the time it might take to ask of another's wellbeing, needing to answer with full acknowledgement and intent. If each of the witnesses' testimony before the court was exactly the same it was discounted for fear of collusion. A minimum of seven questions was asked of each witness, questions impossible for most people to answer, not simply the time and date of the crime, but in what cycle of the seven Jubilee cycles, and in what year of the seven year *Sh'mita* cycle. A court that carried out an execution once in seven years is called a murderous court in the Mishna. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said once in seventy years. Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva said that if they had been in the Great Court of the Sanhedrin no one would ever have been put to death. Only among the judges of the Sanhedrin could death be pronounced as sentence, and only in the place of the court's seat in the Hall of Hewn Stone in the Temple when it stood in Jerusalem. With the destruction of the Temple and the end of the Great Court, another way needed to be found, a way that in the face of death affirmed life.

To affirm life in the face of death is the challenge that has emerged through these heart-wrenching weeks. In our quest to heal, it is not about the perpetrator, it is about us and about the deeper meaning of what it means to be "Boston Strong." May we act in accord with the way of strength and spirit that has emerged from so much pain and brokenness, refusing to be sullied by entering the realm of death, refusing to lose focus as we walk together on the path of life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor