

Dear Chavraya,

My body tensed as I saw the subject line of the email this week. It was from Haqel: Jews and Arabs in Defense of Human Rights, the new organization that my friend, Rabbi Arik Ascherman, founded with a small group of other activists. The subject was direct and blunt, " GRAPHIC VIDEO OF RECENT ATTACK ON RABBI ASCHERMAN. At first, I wondered, hoped, in the way of pushing away news that we don't want to hear, thinking this must be about last year's attack, when a settler attacked Arik with a knife in the olive grove where he had come to help protect Palestinian farmers during their olive harvest. Realizing that "recent" meant now, I took a deep breath. I didn't want to open the email, didn't want to see the video, but I knew I had to.

I became sick as I watched the video, feeling nauseous for several hours after seeing it. The images are grainy, dizzying, undulating, as of bodies bending to protect themselves, as of the pastoral hillsides, weeping for what might be. It is unclear whether the camera is on Arik or on someone else nearby. A swarm of masked young hoodlums from a nearby settlement descend on the activists, those who had come this time to help protect Palestinian shepherds who had previously been fired on by settlers. The shouts and the stones begin to fly. Large boulders are hurled, sticks and iron bars cut through the air, landing on bodies bending to protect themselves. There is labored breathing throughout, clearly someone close to the camera. Arik's voice pleads with them to stop, *tafsiku, tafsiku*, saying so simply, as teacher, as witness to what is meant to be, *zeh lo ba'Torah/this isn't in the Torah*. At some point a military helicopter sweeps in and then continues on its way, disappearing into the distance.

Then they too disappear, running back up the weeping hillsides to their lair, the hoodlums, the haters, these vile imposters who call themselves Jews. I gasp as I see their *tzitzis* flying out behind them as they run. I feel my own, wondering of the *mitzvot* of which they are meant to remind, of the same Torah that we read, the same Torah as source of the *mitzvot* whose purpose is to sensitize the Jewish soul, to remind of God's presence and embrace of all. According to the rabbinic standard held in our calling as *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*, it would be easy to write them off as Jews. That would be too easy, though, avoiding responsibility and struggle. And so I struggle, and feel sick.

I thought of the question we had wrestled with in our Thursday morning Torah-learning, that we try to address with the children and parents of our Mishpacha Hebrew school; what does it mean to hear God, how do we know what is right, what is the Torah really saying...? I thought of the theme we have been exploring with the Mishpacha families through this year of learning, how to hold many narratives, to celebrate our own story and to hear the story, the narratives of others. All of this was unfolding during the week of *Yom Ha'atzma'ut/Israel Independence Day*. For the most part, against the backdrop of fifty years of occupation, I shy away from engagement with the day, whether for a lack of courage or the depth of pain it brings.

The depth of pain reflects a depth of connection. I feel in my being the miracle of homecoming. And I feel as well the catastrophe, the *naqba*, as felt by Palestinians as their narrative. In the Jewish way of wrestling that we try to impart to our children, our challenge is to hold each reality, two people's narratives, *atzma'ut* and *naqba*. It is impossible to avoid the depth of ancient connection. Every time I daven, in the *Amidah* of morning, noon, and night, I chant words of yearning for the Land, *to Jerusalem Your city, may You return in compassion/v'lrushalayim ircha b'rachamim tashuv*. And in the morning, as I gather the *tzitzis* from the four corners of my *talis*, *Bring us back in peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us upright to our land/v'tolichenu ko'm'mi'ut l'artzenu*.

I think of Arik, for whom that way of homecoming became real when he made *aliya* many years ago. I think of his effort to hold both realities, both narratives. I feel the pain I felt a few months ago when Arik spoke in our shul when fellow Jews attacked him with words because he lives in Israel. I thought then, and feel now in the lingering nausea, of what it means to put one's life on the line every time we go out to work for the sake of justice in the place we live.

Amidst the swirl of thoughts and struggles, I turn to Torah, even as Arik tried to call the haters to remember what they had forgotten, or perhaps had never known. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Acharei-Mot – K'doshim*, a double portion, we encounter one of our greatest challenges as Jews. We are told at the beginning of *Parashat K'doshim*, *Be holy/k'doshim ti'hi'yu, for I, God, your God, am holy*. We are not left to wonder, but offered immediate guidance toward what it means to be holy. A lengthy enumeration of commandments follows the challenge. Most of them are meant to regulate interpersonal relations, to plant seeds of justice, to wean us of a misguided will to oppress, to bring us near to each other if we would be near to God. We are to leave the corners of our field for the poor and the landless, not to withhold the wages of a day laborer, not to gossip or bear a grudge, to love our neighbor as ourselves. The rabbis taught on the challenge to be holy that as God clothes the naked, so should we, and so in visiting the sick, and comforting the mourners. There is a standard of goodness, of what it means to walk in the way of God, of what it means to hear God's word and live it.

As I turn to the wellsprings of Torah that the vile ones would poison, I find strength in the chain of a tradition that affirms goodness and the quest for justice that must remain ours in spite of all. My nausea is eased by the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, whom Arik often quotes. Responding to the challenge to be holy, he teaches: *We honor God; therefore we honor also everything that lives and breathes because it is godly and belongs to God. God is holy; therefore we, too, must exercise our ability and our calling to be "holy"; i.e., to be truly human in moral freedom and to emulate God in truth, justice, and loving-kindness*.

Underscoring the social dimension of his lofty teaching, that we not think it is only about our own personal relationships, Rabbi Hirsch offers commentary that speaks to the two lands of our greatest connection as Americans and as Jews. Among the *mitzvot* that unfold as a thread of justice through *Parashat K'doshim*, we are told, commanded, *the stranger who has come into your midst from abroad shall*

be to you as a citizen, you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I God (Lev. 19:34). That we not miss the power of what these words mean in real terms, Rabbi Hirsch tells us, speaking to a time when we shall return to our own land: You yourselves have experienced the harshness in which a land can lose itself when it refuses to recognize the human rights of foreigners.... Therefore the constitution of your own land is based upon the principle that all inhabitants of the land... are equal before the law in every respect.... The love and respect you give to the stranger is the true test of your fear and love of God.

Alienated at times from ourselves and within ourselves, it is not always clear who the stranger is, who the home-born and who the foreigner, two peoples bound to the land and ultimately to each other. We hold many narratives at once and that is our challenge, part of accepting the challenge to be holy. There is a *naqba* among and within our own people that would destroy us along with the Palestinian people. I pray for the healing of the wounded, for the souls of the haters, for the undulating hills and bodies. I pray that peace and justice might come as we remember who we are and are meant to be as *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor