

Dear Chavraya,

I am finding it very difficult to put forth words, trembling as I try to write. It is the week of Torah portion *D'varim/the portion of words* (Deut. 1:1-3:22), beginning of the fifth book of Torah, Deuteronomy, *Sefer D'varim/the Book of Words*. The book becomes a mirror for our use of language, whether to hurt or to heal, whether to build or to destroy, to join or to divide, a choice carried upon a stream of hope, whether words or weapons to be our way. At times, God forbid, words themselves can become weapons. It is *Shabbos Chazon/the Shabbos of Vision* that leads from the peaceful embrace of one day's vision of peace into the wrenching imagery, the painful words and memories of Tisha B'Av, fast day of mourning and grief for so much brokenness, our own and that of others. It is a shattering transition, the journey from Shabbos to Tisha B'Av. We hold back, even as we go forward, called to engage, however difficult, however much we wish not to, preferring silence to words, needing both.

I have preferred to remain silent for nearly two weeks now, reading many words, helped by some, crushed by others. It began with words, two words, two words among tens of thousands of words; two words in one paragraph of a massive document, two words that cut to the core. I have cried, I have stepped back and then forward again, wrestling, trying to look from many perspectives, turning it, and turning it again, as we are to do in wrestling with Torah. I have wondered why the choice of words, wondered what attitudes underlie the choice, whether sinister or its own reflection of pain. I have tried to read and feel from diverse facets of understanding, still to see the rainbow's light as it plays on each facet of human experience, holding my own and that of others.

The document is the Platform of the Movement for Black Lives, M4BL, <https://policy.m4bl.org>, a coalition of more than fifty organizations articulating in the present moment a vision and a way toward racial justice and the transformation of American society, addressing with breath-taking breadth a span of critical areas of needed change, race, gender, sexual identity, economic justice, criminal justice, climate justice, militarism, the scourge of violence that permeates all. It is vast in its vision and in its practical proposals. In the section called "Invest-Divest," there is one paragraph that has become a focus for many Jews, engendering a wide range of responses, from full agreement to full rejection, from pained readiness to engage, to calls to turn away from Black Lives Matter. The two words and their contextual tone are in regard to Israel, "The US justifies and advances the global war on terror via its alliance with Israel and is complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people.... Everyday, Palestinians are forced to walk through military checkpoints along the US-funded apartheid wall."

It is about words and our use of words, about the narratives that words carry. It is about the pain and hope embedded in words, about the accuracy and purpose of words. The occupation, grinding now toward fifty years, is relentless in the constant state of oppression and misery it brings to the daily lives of Palestinians, choking off hope and the ability to envision both a national and personal future. The occupation is corroding the Jewish soul in the Land of Israel and dragging Jews in a direction that is not ours. But the occupation is not genocide. Genocide

is defined as “the deliberate and systematic extermination of a national, racial, political, or cultural group.” The word was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1943, a Polish Jew who had long anguished for the suffering of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks; that anguish merging in the midst of the Holocaust with anguish for his own people.

The word genocide sparks fear for Jews, psychic fear of what happened once instilling fear for what we know in our bones could happen again. A nation guilty of genocide should legitimately be treated as a pariah state, one that in its essence is evil. As Israel represents the embodied presence of Jews in the arena of nations, however much we may differ among ourselves as to what that means, the charge of genocide can be felt as an attack on our collective body, stimulating pain that reverberates through each of our bodies.

The presence of the word genocide in the Platform can be explained away too quickly in our effort to support Black Lives Matter, failing to reckon with our own pain and the reality of anti-Semitism. So too, we can turn away too quickly from the pain of others, abandoning the healing power of common cause so carefully nurtured over time, so fragile now in the face of each one’s grievance.

Whether in regard to African Americans or Palestinians, or any other people seeking redress of long held grievance, the degree to which we hold only to our own narrative limits the degree to which others will hear it, and the possibility of its ultimate flowering and fulfillment. We need each other.

I urge you to look for yourselves at the range of response from within the Jewish community. You can find online statements from Jewish Voice for Peace, Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center, Boston’s JCRC, the Zionist Organization of America. I express my own bias in saying that I am most drawn and comforted by that of T’ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. The T’ruah statement affirms all that is positive and good in the Platform and yet gives clear voice to the pain and injustice caused by the inaccurate use of words, all while underscoring a continued commitment to work for racial justice, hand in hand with Black Lives Matter.

Underlying much of the painful churning of this debate is whether or not language is meant to challenge the other to change, or is meant only to condemn. In Torah portion *D’varim/Deuteronomy*, the challenge to be who we are meant to be is made clear, and the pain of failure cuts deeper through sharp words of Torah than through words of the Platform, but in the former we are challenged to change. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who lived in Germany from 1808 to 1888, writes on this *parasha*, “Israel is to enter on its path in the history of nations not as a mighty nation, skilled in the arts of warfare, but as the people of God’s moral law....” Taking its place “among the nations with a God-fearing respect for their possessions,” Hirsch says, “Israel must not see itself as a nation of conquerors....” Hirsch is offering a standard and a critique that is both painful and loving, and immediately timely, in its challenge.

The Prophetic reading for Shabbat *Chazon* (Isaiah 1:1-27), the vision of Isaiah is harsh in its critique of Israel's failure to do justly, but so too, the prophet's harsh words carry the challenge and possibility of change. From *your hands are full of blood*, we are told: *Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the case of the widow....* It is its own platform for social justice. And then Isaiah reminds us to use words rather than to back away, to engage with each other as with God, *l'chu na v'ni'va'ch'cha/come now, let us debate*. The reading ends with a cry of hope that change is possible; *Zion shall be redeemed through justice, and her penitent through righteousness/tzion b'mishpat tipa'deh v'sha'veha bitz'dakah*.

We are all responsible for how we blaze and travel the path of change, and whether or not we are committed to walking hand in hand. Words matter. I feel hurt and I feel challenged, seeking the words with which also to challenge. I will not walk away from Black Lives Matter, from the call for justice, nor will I limit the scope of justice. Our prophetic work requires the courage to respond to racism in all of its forms, including anti-Semitism. Nothing has changed in the American racial equation from before the Platform was issued. As autonomous activists, our task is to engage locally to insure that we are not divided by a platform formulated through a large national coalition. We need to hear the words that tell of Black reality and of wounds in the Black psyche, and we need to tell of Jewish reality and of wounds in the Jewish psyche. On this Shabbos of Vision, so easy to despair, seeds of hope nurtured with tears, unafraid, *come now, let us debate....*, as we seek the way of justice, of *peace and wholeness / shalom u'sh'laymut*.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor