

Dear Chavraya,

Perhaps as you do too, I cringe and wait for what will follow when I hear the phrase, “politically correct.” Generally used in a disparaging way, I find the term insulting, suggesting a lockstep adherence to a particular set of values. When uttered by the likes of a Donald Trump, it is a warning that people are about to be disparaged, parameters of decency swept away on a foul flow of effluence. I don’t know how or when the term came to be, but it suggests reaction to the rising of hopeful change. Amidst all the cause for despair that we easily succumb to, that which is disparaged as “political correctness” represents deep seated change, often in very simple ways, as in greater sensitivity for the feelings and needs of those easily oppressed or ridiculed. In ways unimagined not so long ago, there is widespread recognition of the inappropriateness of ethnic jokes, or of humor that turns on physical or intellectual difference. However far we have to go as individuals and as a society, we have come a long way. One of the great challenges is to bring along those who disparage, to reach out and show that the love and sensitivity that they mock also includes them. That is our challenge, to be open to people, to be willing to hear sincere struggles in the face of change, even as we firmly rebuke the insults of those who disparage.

I found myself reflecting recently on the Hebrew word *nachon/correct*. Used most often in mundane ways, acknowledging a correct answer, correct information, as in directions to a destination, *nachon, nachon*, perhaps in absent response to a long-winded monologue meant to be conversation. A simple word, its root suggests something much deeper, not of absence, but of presence. *Nachon* suggests the right way, as in a moral path, a path of uprightness. It is one with the root of *kavannah/heartfelt intention*, as in purposeful behavior that is meant for good and enacted with goodness. It is of the same root as *l’hachin/to prepare*, as in preparing a new way forward, as in *kivun/direction*. In its most elemental form, the most basic word of affirmation, *ken/yes!*

In the context of so much that violates sensibilities and sensitivities during this campaign season, I found myself reflecting on the values that flow from this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat K’doshim*. The portion begins with what is arguably the Torah’s greatest challenge, *k’doshim ti’hi’yu ki kadosh ani ha’shem elokeychem/be holy, for I, God, your God, am holy*. It is a powerful challenge, and yet so simple, rooted in finding the correct and upright way. The nature of that path may vary among people, yet the Torah is very clear in what it means. So much that might be ridiculed as “politically correct” then follows as the way, the direction along which holiness comes to be realized. Emphasizing their centrality in the living of human life, the lengthy list of holy deeds, the *mitzvot* that follow constitute what the rabbis refer to as *rov gufei ha’torah/the major part of the body of Torah*. As we ask how shall we be holy, the *mitzvot* enumerated in *Parashat K’doshim* bear almost entirely on human relationships, the interactions of one with another, responsibilities of people for each other and a society’s collective responsibility for the most vulnerable of its members.

As the portion unfolds, we see agricultural laws rooted in a vision of the just society, setting a path toward economic justice. A pre-designated corner of one’s own field is to be left for the poor and the landless, and so too we shall not

retrieve the gleanings that fall from the plow. Whether in agrarian or urban setting, we are warned by way of teaching the correct and upright way, not to oppress and not to hold overnight the wages of a day laborer. Of consideration for all manner of physical and emotional needs, we are not to curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind. When all seems to be obvious, warnings against behavior that we would never do, the light of correct living shines into the crevices and potholes in which we all stumble, *lo telech rachil/don't go about as a talebearer*, don't gossip, don't peddle in hurtful talk, *loshon hora*, neither to speak it nor listen to it, for it is not the way of holiness. It is so easy to bear a grudge, to nurture ill will in our hearts, convinced we are justified, but here we are told not to: *do not hate another in your heart*. We are told instead to speak up, to rebuke rather than nurture a grudge, to engage rather than to distance from another. The challenge of each *mitzvah*, of each teaching along the way to holiness, then finds its grand crescendo in one of the most familiar and most challenging verses of Torah, *v'ahavta l're'acha ka'mocha/and you shall love your neighbor as yourself*.

Guided along the way of holiness, directed in the way of correct living, living with intention that respects the image of God in each one, we are guided to also look within ourselves. There is always need to explore and consider the nuance of our words and ways, to engage in self-reflection, and to be wary of absolutes, whether our own or those of others. The way and manner in which we convey and explain our views affirms a new way only when consistent with the values we strive to nurture. However certain we may be in the correctness of our views, as soon as we disparage the other in their humanness we have lost the correct way. To rebuke in order not to hate, and then to bring near, means to rebuke in the way of love and for the sake of a higher good. Many have sought to limit the scope of the neighbor whom we are to love. So we are reminded that as God's embrace is wide, the expanse of sea and sky and all within, so is ours to be. That is what it means to be holy in the way that God is holy. Whether cynically or fearfully, the sensitivity some would disparage as simply being politically correct, is the very sensitivity that will embrace them as well, as we try to create together a more just and caring society for all.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor