

Dear Chavraya,

There are moments of encounter that come as gifts unbidden and unanticipated, moments that we could not have prepared for but that take our breath away. These are truly blessed moments in which we know we have been touched by something of meaning and beauty, even if we cannot find the words and way to express just what happened. It was such a moment on Tuesday night in our shared encounter with Mr. Courtney Grey, our teacher and guide that evening in the setting of the Social Justice Beit Midrash. It was clear in our closing circle of antiphonal African song as it filled the shtibl that something special had happened. That something special happened is clear in all that I have heard from others who were present. For those who could not be with us, we will share more over time, and will strive to come together again with Courtney. So too, that something special happened has been clear from Courtney, who sent several strands of text messages today, threads strung together, "still reflecting on the blessed time we spent together. Thank you so much." I told him of our depth of feeling and the many reflections among us. To that he wrote back, "Capture them somehow. They must be beautiful."

Courtney Grey is the director of Trauma Response and Recovery of the Boston Public Health Commission and is often one of the first on the scene at the time of a shooting. It is in that role that we had invited Courtney to come to speak with us about the human face of gun violence. As the evening began we sat in a large learning circle to prepare for what we would hear by engaging with words of Torah. Before us were seven words from Vayikra, chapter 19, verse 16, *Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor, I God/lo ta'amod al dam rey'echa ani HaShem*. We explored what it means to be responsible for each other, to act for the sake of each other's wellbeing, that we not be complicit in the suffering and harm brought to others. Mr. Grey had come in during our learning. He asked if he could just sit and listen, and so he did, never removing his coat or his pack, just being, eyes closed, taking in our the sounds of our learning and the caring and concern they carried. And then we paused and he leaned forward. He thanked us for the peaceful space, the opportunity simply to be, telling us that he felt healing in that moment.

We had assumed that Courtney would share with us the human face of gun violence as he encounters it every day on the streets of Boston, perhaps offering thoughts on what we might do to help to stop the plague. There was something startling as he quietly began to speak, suggesting that we need to start by asking why violence occurs, whether with guns, with knives, or in any other of the multitude of ways that violence is expressed. He spoke about people dying from illness and asked about the pain of loss, regardless of how people are taken from us. He wove a web of compassion that expressed as much about him as about the painful realities of which he spoke. Reflecting on so many of those he works with, those who are victims of violence and those who are perpetrators of violence, he said so simply, "people who are hurt, hurt people." He asked us of our own areas of concern and tried to weave some our thoughts and questions into his own searching and sharing. So clearly affected by the pain and horror that he sees, he exudes an equanimity that seems to come from a place of his own inner peace. He asked at one point, as though to remind himself, "How can we

do this work without faith?" He emphasized the need to "show up," as in being present for each other. We thought about a Hebrew word that might express that way of "showing up," perhaps as in the readiness to say, *hineni/here I am*.

This week's Torah portion, *Ki Tissa*, opens with a census, a counting of people, reminding in the counting that each one counts. In the context of the census we are taught the law of the half shekel. Each one is to give half a shekel, initially as atonement for killing, to ward off the plague of death. Perhaps it is for us a reminder not to stand idly by the plague of gun violence, of all violence. Courtney asked at one point, "do I have to see it happening, what if I know it is happening?" Over time, the half shekel became a contribution from each one for the upkeep of the Sanctuary, for the sake of the community. That each one is to give but a half comes to be a teaching on the importance of each one, each one needed if all are to be whole, a reminder that each one counts. The community is represented by *minyan*, which literally means a *counting*, but the minyan is counted by ones. Of our being joined with each other through the half-shekel, the great Torah commentator known as the Malbim teaches, *each individual is but a half/kol yachid hu rak machatzit and not a complete unit, needing, therefore, to be joined with another until becoming a complete unit/ad ya'aseh k'davar shalem*.

In a moment of receiving a gift unbidden and unanticipated, we were joined as one with Courtney and with each other, finding a sense of wholeness that had not been there before. I share with you below, words that I shared with Courtney later that night. I look forward to continuing to draw insight into the learning and dynamics of that evening as we strive together to stem the plague of violence, creating from so much brokenness, from so many scattered halves, a society in which each one counts toward a greater wholeness.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

Dear Courtney,
It was a powerful evening, something touching all of us in ways unanticipated. Thank you for bringing your presence so fully and honestly among us. Your own graciousness of spirit allowed all of us to be present within ourselves and with each other without artifice or barriers. It was clear how deeply all were moved. There was something intangible in why we were all so moved, something beyond words spoken, something of a spiritual connection. We had assumed we would talk about the realities of gun violence and what to do about it. You brought us to a deeper place, helping us to reframe the questions and to recognize answers in unasked questions. Without minimizing the need to acknowledge and work with the violent realities of guns all around, new possibilities emerge from the deeper context you guided us to. It was a deeply meaningful evening for us, and I am grateful and humbled that you found a place of peaceful pause among us.

To the degree that you are able to and wish to, we would love to follow up in whatever ways make sense. In the realm of giving of ourselves in service,

"showing up," I think there would be desire to volunteer with the Trauma Response Center, as you suggested. Coming together again to share culturally and spiritually and bringing in some of the people you work with would be beautiful. Sharing in song would be powerful. Joining in the song of your soul tonight touched all of our souls and joined them as one. I hadn't asked, but I wondered if the words to the song you shared have specific meaning, though so meaningful beyond the meaning of words. Sharing teachings and ways of redirecting violence could be a focus as well, over time, over time. In my own teaching and study I put much effort into drawing out teachings of nonviolence from sacred texts, showing how a deeper spirit counters the violence in texts and in life....

For now, I wish you safe travels and meaningful teaching and learning. As we were blessed by your presence tonight, may our appreciation be a blessing upon you and on your journeys.

In friendship,
Victor