

Dear Chavraya,

I could hear and feel from deep within myself the sound of my own breath in its rising and falling, held in a moment of reflective depth and then released in a great sigh. It was late Wednesday night as I sat with my dearly worn and tattered Hirsch *chumash* open before me, considering the thematic focus for our Thursday morning JP Licks learning. I realized that through the years of our early morning learning, a time beloved to me, I had avoided deep engagement with the beginning of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tazria*. Often read in conjunction with the following portion, *M'tzora*, the two joined as one in a non-leap year, most of the two portions concern skin afflictions and so too the molds and mildews that cling to the skin of objects, the walls of houses, the sides of vessels and containers, daily implements of human use. Deep moral teaching attaches to these at first unseemly threads of life. Much more than skin-deep, meaning emerges, beckoning, challenging us to look beyond the surface, beyond the impulse to avoid unpleasant realities, afflictions and flow that remind us of the majesty and mystery of the human body in its grandeur and its pain, so beautiful when whole, and, yet, no less beautiful in its essence when broken.

The thematic thread that runs throughout *Tazria* and *M'tzora* is the interplay of *tumah* and *tahara*, ritual categories of purity and impurity, most helpfully understood as ritual and sexual unavailability (*tumah*) and availability (*tahara*). With some realms of applicability extending through the generations in time and space, as with menstruation and contact with death, particularly for *kohanim*, the primary context of applicability in these Torah portions is the ancient Temple, the Beis Ha'Mikdosh in Jerusalem, where the cycle of life played out in sacred drama through offerings, song, and prayer, a dance of presence and absence. In the instructive naming of offerings to God as *korbanot*, from *karov/near, close*, that became the goal and the prayer, the vision and the way in the human sharing of sacred meals, to draw ever closer to each other and to God in the daily drama of life.

And so I sighed, whether to engage the beginning of *Parashat Tazria*, or not, knowing in the moment of my sigh that we would. Only eight verses, *Vayikra/Leviticus* chapter 12:1-8, the portion opens with childbirth and attendant offerings and separations. Different from all that follows, the beginning sets a backdrop, reminding of universal origins, that every person was once a beautiful child born, however afflicted in body or spirit later come to be, each one having once emerged from a mother's womb, conceived in the sacred, streaming flow of life.

I sighed again as we opened our *chumashim* at the gathered tables, one person reading aloud, all eight verses. I could feel the palpable silence, holding it for a moment, savoring it, wanting to stay there. I could feel the pain and confusion around the table, within myself. Perhaps I had made a mistake, perhaps at times better to avoid, but now it was here, all the weight upon the table of hurt and shame, of abuse and misunderstanding; all the weight of ignorance calcified and come to be called tradition, misogyny of men finding root and reason in the word of God, but as wormwood and gall for us to uproot. And so we began.

We began by taking a breath, as I had done the night before, now all together, finding comfort, trust and strength in each other. Then the dispelling of myths, of superstitions that would bar a woman from touching the Torah, citing the rabbinic teaching that the Torah is immune to impurity, in the way the word is commonly understood. We reminded again that the locus of all of these verses is the ancient Temple and not the synagogue, as we know it. We listened to the telling of hurt and struggle from around the table. Asking questions, why double the time of separation for a woman following the birth of a daughter than of a son? Why the terrible translation of *tumah* and *tahara* as unclean and clean? What is the invidious influence of such understanding upon the perception and treatment of women and women's bodies, upon gender, upon life itself in all of its miraculous ways of being and becoming? What of the hallowed Jewish view of all life as good, all the way back to God's exclamation on the creation of the first human, *tov m'od/very good*? We examined language and context, writings that emerge in response, ancient and modern. We sought depth of heart and mind, going deeper than facile interpretations that would limit a human being to the state and nature of their bodies. In texts of heart and page, we sought affirmation for the holiness of every person's coming to be, of birth as a time of wonder, and so too, as wondrous, life's unfolding in its ever becoming.

That is what is so easily forgotten, wonder, when a rigid way of reading and thinking is allowed to block the sun of real life possibilities for some. Early midrashic works celebrate the miracle of human life in response to these very verses, the miracle of every life. Building on the words *ki tazria/when a woman sows seed*, the rabbis marvel at a couple's sowing of seed in private and the appearance of new life into the world; *and the Holy One returns to them souls praiseworthy and complete in public, and is this not worthy of praise/v'ayn zeh shevch!?* (Vayikra Rabbah 14:2). Boldly merging male and female, transcending the divide in the text itself, commenting on these eight verses that lay heavy upon our study table, the rabbis tell of the first human who was created androgynous, then separated into two. How could elements of each one not then be present in the other, a reminder of origins as one, and in some yet remaining as one? Exploring *midrash*, we need to ask why a particular telling emerges from the place it does, what in the Torah gives rise to it there and then? Of longer time for mother and daughter to be with each other, a bonding some thought, a way of imparting women's wisdom. Of a son, brought into the covenant on the eighth day, we say at the b'ris, *b'damyich chayi, b'damyich chayi/by your blood shall you live, by your blood shall you live*. The holiness of blood, the fluid of life is affirmed, and so should it be for every child of God, nothing of shame or separation in all the ways and genders of our being human.

Tazria/when a woman sows seed..., pregnant with possibility, creating an opening for change, daring to hope. It takes courage to enter texts that cause pain. Our challenge as readers and lovers of Torah is to reclaim a text, the Text, to bring to bear in every place the compassion that we learn to be the way of God, even when God forgets. When the rabbis of the Talmud refer to a Torah verse, it is often introduced with the words, *k'tav Rachmanah/so wrote the Holy One*. Torah and God become as one, woven together with compassion. As a name for God and Torah, *Rachmanah/Compassionate One* makes clear the essential thread that we

are to weave through text and life. Compassion becomes the standard by which we are to judge words and deeds, our own and God's, in our reading and living of Torah and life.

The Torah trains us to be activists. The holy text itself offers context in which to learn how to question, to hone an argument, to wrestle and struggle, challenging us always to stay engaged, not to close the book and walk away. So too, we learn not to close the newspaper, the radio, or the computer, not to walk away from life, for all of the horrors encountered. At times the Torah challenges us with lofty ideals, holding before us a timeless mirror in which to see ourselves and take moral and spiritual stock. At other times, those very ideals, well-learned and taken to heart, infusing our very being, become the standard by which we challenge the Torah from within itself. We learn to engage through Torah with all realms of life, including with Torah. Seeking justice, wholeness, and equilibrium, offering of our selves, our insights, our stories, and our struggles, we draw near to each other and to God as part of the process. In our cooperative, interactive way of learning Torah, we encounter the sacred unfolding of life as lived experience.

The Torah is our life blood. So we can understand the words from the prophet Ezekiel (16:6) as spoken at a *b'ris*, *b'damayich chayi*, *b'damayich chayi/by your blood shall you live, by your blood shall you live*, physical and spiritual joined, each affirmed. We are given life through Torah, its rhythmic, pulsing flow coursing as the river of our people through each one's veins. We come to understand Torah most deeply through the process of wrestling together with the sacredness of the text and its readers. Unafraid of contradictions and challenges, we learn to hear the wholeness of a song in many parts, its harmony and its dissonance, as it rises from the womb of Torah. Breathing deeply, at times breath become song, at times a sigh, we are in our learning as midwives helping to birth new life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor