

Dear Chavraya,

Two experiences, two encounters this week that spoke to me of family, of our connections one with another, as of sisters and brothers, generations unfolding in time. I had just finished a meeting at the ISBCC, the great mosque in Roxbury. As we got up to leave, I stood talking with my friend Mohamed. A woman standing near by shyly approached. Her smile as her introduction, she sought words in English to ask of our meeting, asking if we were Jews and Muslims at the table. She said that in Morocco she had a Jewish friend. Mohamed, also from Morocco, began to speak with her in Arabic. Back and forth between languages, pausing to bring me into the conversation, the woman wondered why we needed to meet to learn about each other. "Aren't we all the same," she asked, as though to say if we are all the same don't we already know about each other, indeed as sisters and brothers of one family? Ah, I thought, if it were only so simple. And even if we did already know each other so well, how nice to get together just to catch up in the way of relatives sharing family news, the comings and goings of the generations. As we said goodbye, the woman smiled her all-encompassing sunshine smile. She said words that at first I assumed to be Arabic, yet they sounded strangely familiar. Seeing my confusion, she said the words again, more slowly, more clearly, *Baruch atah adonai/Blessed are You, God Amen, Ameen*, I laughed, as I realized what she had said, my turn now to bring Mohamed into the strands of extended family, strands that joined her and me, generations removed, yet so close, Hebrew and Arabic. I mused on the words she had asked at first, "aren't we all the same?"

Sitting in a local coffee shop, I had come to meet with another member of the extended family, a young minister, new to town, just beginning his first pulpit following ordination. We had met each other a number of times at meetings, at vigils, not times to really talk. Now we had arranged to meet, the older rabbi, the young minister, Christian and Jew, white and black, across generations and time, needing to catch up on family news, of who and where and what. He grew up in Oklahoma City, his memory seared with images of the 1995 bombing that shook his pre-school. He had just delivered his first sermon, preaching on the Book of Joshua, struggling with the violence. I smiled at the common thread of concern through the generations, feeling as family in our shared sensitivity, wrestling then together with text and context. As we spoke of Biblical themes and ways of understanding, he referred in his excitement to the "Old Testament." I picked up the reference, as I always do, perhaps too sensitive, but nevertheless, always feeling an inner wince, even now, with this very innocent expression of "supersessionism." And then to my surprise, what almost never happens in such exchanges happened. As though in the way of family, of relatives who know of ancient hurts and slights and do their best to help each other heal, he stopped himself and said, "I'm sorry, I should have said, the "Hebrew Scriptures." I smiled and said, "wow, thank you."

It is the week of *Parashat Toldot*. The portion begins telling of lineage, of generations unfolding, from Avraham to Yitzchak, and then to Esav and Ya'akov, *v'eleh toldot yitzchak ben avraham avraham holid et yitzchak/and now these are the generations of Yitzchak ben Avraham Avraham had fathered Yitzchak....* The word *toldot* conveys a sense of biology, of mothers and fathers begetting,

generating new life, generations unfolding through time. It is the same word that is used at the end of *Parashat B'reishit* (5:1), soon after creation, as generations of humanity spread out upon the earth, *zeh sefer toldot adam b'yom b'roh elokim adam bid'mut elokim asah oto*/this is the Book of the generations of Adam on the day that God created Adam, God created the human in the likeness of God. In all the variegated ways that God's image is refracted in the light of the human soul, as bearers of God's image, we are in our essence all the same.

We are all of one family from the very beginning, all one part the same tree, all part of the same holy book, the Book of the Generations of Humanity, each one called *Adam/Human/Mortal*. The question of one sister lingers, "aren't we all the same?" Yes, as part of one family we are all the same. And yet we are so different. Our paths have taken us through Morocco, through Oklahoma City, through Boston, connections carried to all the places where the four winds blow. At times we forget our connections and so we sit down and talk, catching up, sharing news of relatives far and near, learning about each other. And at times we slip and then correct, realizing that we are not so far apart after all when we can be sensitive to each other's needs and feelings, the realities of each one's experience. The sister smiles and says, *Baruch Atah Adonai/Blessed are You, God*. And God smiles back upon the generations, on the whole extended family and on our striving, "*Amen/Ameen, you can do it.*"

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor