

Dear Chavraya,

There are those of effervescent spirit whose laughter and light seem able to raise us up, however low we feel beneath our own burdens of spirit. It is not that such people of blessing to themselves and others never feel the stresses and sorrows of life. It is impossible to live fully and not at times feel the weight of what that means. It is to live with joy for the very gift of life, to be joyful “nevertheless,” as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the verse in Deuteronomy (16:15), *v'hayita ach same'ach*. This is very different than the theologically difficult challenge to see the good in everything. Recognizing and weeping for the full horror of so much that besets humanity in all of its frail beauty, our challenge is to be joyful “nevertheless,” joyful in our very presence as a thread in the weave of life, grateful for the gift of life and creation of which we are a part.

Last night, I spoke on a panel as part of a program sponsored by the Refugee Immigration Ministry (RIM), An Interfaith Symposium on Trauma Recovery. Speaking of the ways their own tradition offers response to trauma, the members of the panel included a Muslim, an Armenian Christian, a Sikh, a Protestant, a psychologist who framed the nature of trauma, while also looking to the Buddhist context of Sri Lanka, and myself as the Jewish voice. Painfully aware that I was speaking in the presence of refugees who had witnessed and suffered unspeakable horrors, I asked forgiveness for presuming to speak of trauma at all as one who has known only the “ordinary” traumas that come with life.

Even as I spoke, I learned from the presence of the people whose forgiveness I sought. As I tried to draw from wellsprings of Jewish teaching that might offer response to trauma, I realized that I was drawing on Jewish wisdom for the living of life itself. What allows for survival against all odds is the very way of life on whose path we are guided at all times, whose way enriches the day-to-day, making the ordinary holy. Needing to be built over time, the path of life as a way of affirmation does not appear in one terrible moment, though in the squinting to see a way ahead, we may see what had been there all along. The path of life wends its way through the day-to-day details of living, through the beautifully mundane and recurring. It is in our ability to demarcate the ordinary flow of time that we become part of time's greater unfolding, part of something that is greater than ourselves, yet rooted within our selves. In celebrating the flow of time, finding respite in the oases along the stream, we transcend time and realize the ultimate meaning of our own lives.

The healing challenge in response to trauma, and one of the great challenges for living a life of wholeness, is to live with awareness of being part of a greater whole in which one's life matters ultimately. That is what the oppressor, the abuser, the tyrant, the bully seeks to take away, reducing a human being to insignificance, to being nothing more than a fleeting presence whose pain and suffering and absence will pass without notice, without consequence or concern, our lives snuffed out as even that of an insect should not be.

Remaining part of and joined to rhythms of time, of nature, of community as marked by one's people, we learn lessons for survival in facing the extreme in the lessons of day-to-day living. However far or cut off one may be from life

freely flowing, whether the stream be blocked by the external cruelty of another, or by demons that would destroy from within, we are still able to connect, to be held in the very mystery of time's flow. Aware of time's simplest markers as reminders of the sacred, noticing the turnings of night to day and day to night, we remain rooted, aware that we are part of something greater than ourselves. We know with surety that we are more than flotsam upon an amorphous flow. In all of the ways of our being on this earth, amidst all the horror and the beauty of the human condition, we each have an inalienable place in the cycle of days, of weeks, of months, of years. We each have a place that is ours in the unfolding of time toward a vision of wholeness in which all shall be free and none abused. Of human sorrows that will yet happen, nevertheless, the greater light of kindness will shine more brightly in a world of greater wholeness.

Of time demarcated, of purpose nevertheless, I shared a story of spiritual resistance, of daily Torah learning in the face of utter brutality. It was in a death camp in the "Kingdom of Night," a father and son at the moment of separation, a "selection," the father sent in one direction to his death, the son, still able to work, sent in the other direction. In that moment of being torn from each other, the father called to the son, *heint is daf... / today is page....* A program of daily Talmud study throughout the Jewish world, these were the pages of Daf Yomi, a numbering of days, helping us to go on, requiring us to go on, *Talmud Torah*, the learning and teaching of Torah, is an affirmation of life.

The challenge is to see light in the midst of darkness, to raise up light in the way of our living every day, to be the smile as upon the faces of those whose presence brings such light. It is the simple teaching of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat T'tzaveh*, as it begins with the command to bring pure olive oil for the menorah in the desert sanctuary. Unusual words for lighting come to be for each of us, *l'ha'alot ner tamid/you shall cause light to go up continually*. The trope by which we sing Torah and make it sweet upon our tongues joins the words *l'ha'alot* and *ner, you shall cause light to go up...*, and then the word *tamid/continually*. Unlike the light in the synagogue that is called the *ner tamid/eternal light*, the ancient menorah burned only from dusk to dawn, not eternally, but continually.

Our challenge is not to let the light go out, but to cause light to go up continually as a way of life. To live with hope and recognize that we are part of a greater flow of light, even when we are burdened, and, God forbid, even in the midst of trauma, we raise light even if unable to see its full glow in every moment. It is not about always, but continually, as a process and a way. That is the gift of those whose smile raises light, reminding others of the light within themselves. Offering our hands and hearts to those who have known unspeakable trauma, and in responding to the lesser traumas of life, no less real in the moment, may our lives be in their living an affirmation of life itself. In the glow of Shabbos candles and in the glow of every soul, may we see the light of life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor