

Dear Chavraya,

It had been a gathering of great meaning and depth, soulful in the connections formed among participants, imams and rabbis, Jews and Muslims. There was a tenor of seriousness, a sense of purpose and immediacy that was palpable. As evening descended and we settled in, we acknowledged the travel ban directed primarily at Muslims that had just been promulgated. We spoke of the evacuation that morning of two Boston area Jewish day schools in the face of a bomb threat. With a very full program, the time together marked by personal conversation, small group learning, sharing of a meal, prayer, and a large group closing discussion, we weighed whether, in spite of all the planning, to cut short our gathering to join the nearby demonstration in Harvard Square in support of Muslims. We remained together in the mosque, realizing that our gathering expressed and made real the very solidarity the demonstration was meant to encourage and affirm.

For all of the fun that touched our interactions, many of the participants having come to a place of ease with each other over years of such gatherings, it was not a context that I would describe as joyful. All that we did brought to each of us an effusion of "soul pleasure," *nachas* or *nachas ru'ach*. It was not the joy of laughter and levity, but of souls touched by a deep joy in the awareness of offering and experiencing the way of love in the world, even, especially, in the face of so much hate. At the very end of the program, after the formal closing, almost as an afterthought, we announced that it was on that day the birthday of one of the rabbis. The entire room began to sing happy birthday with great fullness of voice and clapping. As the words familiar to all of us in English lingered, the rabbis all began to sing, as if on cue, *yom huledet same'ach*. Not to be outdone, as the Hebrew words hovered in the air, our Muslim colleagues picked up the tune and began to sing in Arabic. As the third recitation of heartfelt blessings for a good day and year wafted into the air, words in Arabic, Hebrew, and English dancing with each other, all of the singers in whatever language they had sung began to laugh and clap, themselves now lingering in place long after the program had officially ended, perhaps in truth having now just begun in this moment of true joy.

I have been thinking about joy, about how we find and experience joy in the midst of hard times. It often feels hard to laugh, to just let go in the face of so much seriousness, to laugh when we are more inclined to rail and wail. Following a meeting this week at the Baptist church on Centre Street I was walking home when a police officer at a construction site jumped from his post and seemed to just land on the sidewalk in front of me. I was startled as he put his hand out and laughed, such a twinkle in his eye above his red beard. "How are you, Rabbi? It's so good to see you!" I immediately recognized him as the officer who is always at the polling station where I vote. We had met at neighborhood meeting held at *Nehar Shalom* several years ago. In that moment of our meeting on the street we were like old friends. It was such a moment of human connection, each of us touched by a genuine joy in seeing each other.

As we prepare to enter *Shabbos Zachor*, the *Shabbat of Remembrance*, gateway to Purim we enter a context in which we need to reach toward the light, seeking joy

in the midst of struggle. It doesn't come easily, not in Purim, not in life. *Shabbat Zachor* itself is hard, remembering what Amalek did to us, how the desert chieftain attacked the weakest of our people at the end of the long line of march as we left Egypt and began the journey to freedom. I am thinking this year about how Purim offers a context in which we learn to reach for joy in the midst of struggle. The story of Purim is complex, and so too the ways of its observance, not easy to characterize. There is misogyny and brutality, hatred of Jews, a murderous hatred that is meant to spin out of control in a paroxysm of slaughter. Miraculously it doesn't happen, but it does, or it doesn't. The Jews for once are saved, which is the good part of the story. As part of our salvation, the sword is put into our hands and we are given license to kill, and kill we do, the paroxysm of slaughter now laid at our feet.

The customs of Purim are meant to counteract the violence and remind us of what joy is to be, not a celebration of destruction, but only to be found in full when we are weaned of destructive instincts. We are to fast before letting go, to be serious before entering a place of levity, to give *tzedakah*, gifts for the poor, portions for friends. We are to dress in costume and even to drink, turning reality upside down, including the reality of the story, seeking its true ending in making an end of the very violence in its telling. The names of Haman's sons are to be chanted in one breath, reminding us not to gloat at the destruction of any human beings, even those who would destroy us, much in the way of pouring off drops of wine at the Seder when telling of the plagues. Near the end of the Megillah we read the words, *la'y'hudim hayta orah v'simcha v'sason vi'ykar*/for the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor. These words are drawn from the Megillah to be said at *Havdallah* as we mark the end of every Shabbos. As we step from Shabbos into the days of the coming week, however, three words are added, *ken ti'hi'yeh lanu*/so may it be for us.

As light and joy was found long ago amidst all that would deny joy and block out the light, so it is for us to create a world in which light and gladness, joy and honor is really possible for all people, when it is not in spite of violence but because we have removed violence itself as through the swirling of the *groggers* and with our singing and dancing. It is a much deeper light that we seek to raise up than the light of day, but rather of a day that has not yet been. So begins this week's Torah portion, *Parashat T'tzaveh*, a commandment given to take *pure olive oil, pressed, for lighting, to make light spring up continually*/l'ha'alot ner tamid. It is the light of every soul that is free to joyfully rise, each of us as the *shammas* to help inspire the light of another to rise. In the midst of so much seriousness, in the Megillah and in the world around us, joy itself becomes an act of resistance and affirmation. As in the joyful singing of happy birthday, words in many languages dancing, so we may offer good wishes to strangers and friends alike. In joyfully marking the turning of years, the light of every soul to illumine the path, the scroll unwinding, may we soon come to the day that is all Shabbos.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor