

Dear Chavraya,

I closed my eyes and listened to the beautiful music, images of the art on the surrounding gallery walls imprinted on my eyelids. Feeling a semblance of being relaxed, I mused on the strange question that turned in my head of what it could mean to feel “forced” to relax. It was a gathering at a downtown art gallery hosted by the German consulate. Several rabbis who had been part of last summer’s journey to Germany, *A Journey of Remembrance and Hope*, were there. After the concert, people mingled and spoke. There were consular officials and diplomats from other countries as well, the air heavy with questions of what is happening to America, so much hanging in the balance.

That was the theme of the art exhibit, titled “Just Is,” all of the works seeming to convey elements of life hanging in the balance, recent work of Samuel Bak. It was a gathering hosted by the German consulate, on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the gallery walls featuring the work of a Holocaust survivor. As with all of his other works, these paintings are rich and deep in color and image, fantastic, wild, intricately detailed, and utterly disorienting. A thematic focal point, central to this series is a scale, a hand-held balance in each of the paintings. In some of the works the scale is right there in front of us, in others it is hidden and waiting to be found, life’s elusive quest for balance, not waiting to be forced to relax, but choosing to set a better balance. In some of the paintings the arms of the balance are a person’s arms, in others the arms of a tree, in some held high, in others shattered on the ground, the quest for balance having come to naught. Whether the scales of justice, of moral choices, of life’s possibilities, all hangs in the balance, as though it “just is.”

I had been reflecting on moral choices, the challenge of how to balance outrage and activism in the face of all that is happening across the land with compassion and openness of heart for other human beings and even the perpetrator of hate. On the bus downtown I had been reading a small work of commentary. I had first encountered the small *sefer kodesh/holy book* while standing in the Munich Art Museum looking with two other rabbis at Rembrandt’s depiction of the *Akedah/the Binding of Isaac*. In the terror of Isaac’s face, his eyes covered by his father’s hand, the knife raised, all of life hung in the balance. In that moment Rabbi Joe Polak, one of the youngest of child Holocaust survivors, told me of the book I was now reading, *Chanukat Ha’Torah/the Dedication of Torah*. It was written by a rabbi whose name I knew well, but of whom I had never heard, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of Krakow, a sixteenth century ancestor of our Rabbi Heschel.

As the bus bumped and rolled along, ancient questions were shaken off the page, disturbing any illusion of equilibrium. This elder Rabbi Heschel wrestled with a Talmudic debate between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan. Rooted in this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Va’era*, and in next week’s *Parashat Bo*, the focus is Moses’ engagement with Pharaoh, back and forth through the plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own heart after each of the earlier plagues are lifted, finally becoming so habituated to his callous ways that he can no longer change. After the ninth plague, the all-encompassing darkness, when Pharaoh still refused to let the people go, we are told that Moses *went away from Pharaoh in hot*

anger/ba'chari af. Musing on what Moses did in that moment, Reish Lakish says that Moses slapped Pharaoh on the cheek and left, *s'taro v'yatza*. Some say that it was Rabbi Yochanan who says that Moses slapped Pharaoh. As the debate unfolds, two different views are expressed as to what God told Moses in that moment. One view is that God said, *Pharaoh is a king/melech hu, so accord him respect.v'hasbir lo fanim*. The other view is that God said, *Pharaoh is a wicked person/rasha hu, so act defiantly toward him/v'ha'eyz panecha bo*. The rabbis add that whenever anger is mentioned in the Torah, there is within the anger a mark or residue, *roshem*. Anger leaves its mark, its residue.

That becomes the challenge in these days, how to direct our anger that it not leave a permanent blot, that it not leave residue on the new page toward which we turn. So too, how to direct our energy fiercely enough to insure that a permanent blot is not left on the pages of this nation's story through the madness of the new pharaoh. Most of all, how to balance our own anger with compassion for all of those with whom we must in the end shape a path of decency and justice. In the rabbinic debate between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan the question that remains is how to act effectively, righteous anger honored but so too the image of God in each person.

Pausing at times to listen to beautiful music, not because we are forced to relax, but in the way of Shabbos, to pause with intention, to consider the equilibrium toward which we strive. Upon the scales held in our own hands, may we find the balance between anger and compassion that will leave a residue only of love.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor