

Dear Chavraya,

It is always true, but perhaps more so in these times, the need to “hold it all.” It has become somewhat of a mantra for me in recent years, a way of integrating all the facets of life and of the world that seem so uneasy in each other’s presence, as though canceling each other out in their seeming inability to dwell together.

Even as I write these words, an unintended metaphor emerges of its own, reminding that it is indeed about dwelling together. Holding it all is also about each other across the great divides of who we are, at least to allow for the possibility of encounter and embrace. Holding it all means to hold all the contradictions of life as part of one whole. So too it is our way of reading Torah, to hold the sublime and the sordid, to encounter the “harsh passages” of Torah, as of life, and yet to see the beauty in both. It is to hold our physical and spiritual selves, and our selves in relation to others. It is to hold the sorrow and sadness, and the joy and delight of being alive and human. It is to hold the fear and trepidation that comes of living in the world, of being alive and human, and also the courage and confidence that comes of knowing the great good of which we are capable, of knowing that we are created in God’s image and are just a little lower than the angels.

Holding it all requires frequent recalibration among all the realities that we hold, balance easily lost and needing to be restored. At times we realize that we have been holding too much in one arm, in one part of our consciousness, in one chamber of our hearts, needing then to shift focus so that one part of our being not tire and falter. We can lose the balance in either direction, too much, too little, feeling torn, knowing how much there is to do. The soul knows when it is time to recalibrate, waiting for us to listen. Sometimes we just need to cry and wail for all the sorrow and stress. We do as we need to, as long as at other times we remember to dance and sing.

Holding it all is also about what we look at and when, about what we choose to notice. There are times when we need a break from the news, even from reading certain sections of Torah. If needing a break at times, needing to be in the right frame of mind, we need to engage with the harsh passages in Torah, not to pretend they aren’t there. Engaging with them, we become more able to see beyond them, to come to deeper insight through struggle, realizing that Torah is a “life-laboratory,” a controlled context in which to engage with life in all of its moods and modes. Engaging with Torah in all of its facets, we are better able to then engage with life as it is lived in all of its fullness. There are days when we would slam the computer shut if we could and close out the news that screams from the screen. There are days we would tear up the newspaper and run from the place of our reading as though we could run from the world itself. But we can’t. We are called to read, and then to engage in whatever way we can. And if after reading and holding it all, then to sing, to go out and look for one thing of beauty, however great or small. It may be a butterfly alighting on a twig as it sways in the breeze, or a bird on the wing, a child laughing with glee, people of different backgrounds able to cry with each other, an act of kindness witnessed as it unfolds between strangers.

The week just past is one of the hardest in the Jewish calendar, the week of Tisha B'Av. Encountering so many sorrows, fasting and mourning, we are brought low in body and spirit. In that mode, I shared with you last week two instances in which I had recently encountered anti-Semitism. Seeking balance, remembering that to hold it all also means to see the good and be uplifted, I share two very different experiences of the past week that offer counterpoint to the seamy and sad.

On Shabbos evening last week, we hosted a group of Israeli Arab and Jewish high school students. They were a beautiful group of young people, clearly close with each other, and so articulate in the words they shared with us. When we came to the singing of *L'cha Dodi*, I spoke of Tisha B'Av, gently sharing of its tears and memories. I shared a thought, that if there is ever to be change, we need to be able to hear each other's pain and hold each other's tears. I had paused at *L'cha Dodi* because on Tisha B'Av it is a tradition to sing *L'cha Dodi* to the tune of *Eli Tziyon*, the most well known of the *kinnot/laments* of the sorrowful day. First we sang the *niggun*, just the tune a few times to bring everyone in, and then we began to sing the words. As voices rose, stronger and louder with each verse, I was overwhelmed with emotion. It was the most beautiful and moving singing of the tune to *Eli Tziyon* that I had ever heard. I imagined all the places and people of its singing through the ages, yearning carried on the tune that filled our shtibl that night. Here were Jewish and Arab young people singing together a tune that tells of Jewish sorrow and longing. I paused as we finished, in order to hold the echo of a tune I didn't want to end. And then I shared my gratitude and my hope that we can truly be the vessel to hold each other's tears, as they and all of us had become such a vessel in that moment. I especially honored the Arab students, who had so clearly risen above their own realities to honor ours. And now it is our turn, and the students knew and so they taught.

And another story, one so different, about a simple act of kindness. Late one evening, a day or two after Tisha B'Av, I went to the market. In the check out line, the cashier asked if I had a discount card. I had barely finished saying "no," when the man behind me reached over my shoulder and handed his card to the cashier to use for me. As a fresh breeze touching my brow, the stars above shining with hope, I turned to him and thanked him for his kindness. He said so simply, "that is what we need to do."

And so it is, the only way to hold it all and to be renewed in the process is to open our eyes to see acts of goodness, and our hearts that we might do them, even as we make our way through the harsh passages of Torah and life. As we come into this Shabbos, we have entered the seven weeks of comfort, the *Sheva d'n'chemta*, that follow Tish B'Av, a seven week journey that brings us to the edge of a new year. It is the week of *Parashat V'etchanan*. The word means supplication, a word of prayer, its root telling of compassion and graciousness. As we make our way through the *parsha*, the Torah teaches, *rak hi'shamer l'cha u'sh'mor naf'sh'cha m'od/only watch over yourself and watch over your soul...* (Deut. 4:9). And then we are told, *lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen....* We are to watch over ourselves, body and soul, and to go out into the world and see all that is, the beauty and the sorrow. Seeing injustice and violence, we are called

to act, to make right the wrongs that our eyes have seen, and of beauty rising in this world, learning to act in accord with it, to make its spirit real for the sake of earth and people, each holding the other as parts of one whole.

In the tensions held within one verse, *only watch over yourself and watch over your soul*, the verse itself an example of "holding it all," so we are challenged to look after ourselves in order to better engage with the needs all around us, of our community and people, of our country, of the world. Looking after ourselves is part of the dynamic and responsibility of looking after others, of learning to "hold it all..." body and soul, self and others. So may we sustain ourselves for the long haul, through these times and onward, in the journey toward a world of justice and peace.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor