

Dear Chavraya,

It was a difficult and beautiful meeting, one that could only happen in a context of trust and caring built over time. The planning committee of Building Bridges through Learning had been wrestling through two meetings with what the theme should be for the next study gathering of imams and rabbis. The primary goal, magnified over time, is to learn about each other as people, fostering understanding and respect through engagement with each other's sacred texts. We were debating whether to take on what we knew would be a frightening challenge, one that could produce as much pain and misunderstanding as insight and illumination. The focus would be the "harsh passages" in Quran and Torah. For us, these are the verses, so aptly called by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, that we wish weren't there, that cause pain to any sensitive soul when encountering them. They are the expressions of brutality and violence within our holiest of books, expressions that challenge the essence of what we know to be the way of God and Torah, the way we are to emulate.

Gathered around the table, both Muslims and Jews knew exactly what we were talking about, each knowing the pain of encountering these verses, each hesitant to speak of them in the presence of the other. One of our Muslim colleagues urged that we take on the challenge, expressing his desire to explain how they are interpreted, for others to know and not wonder. Another Muslim member of the committee worried that we would inevitably need to look at the vile distortions of sacred text and teaching through the bloody hands of ISIS and others, wondering if we really wanted to go there, to even have to utter such names among us. A rabbi then spoke quietly of the horrifying image emerging this week of young Israeli Jews dancing at a wedding and singing songs of vengeance. Giving fearsome reality to their words, many waved guns and knives in the air, one wearing a mask stabbing a picture of the murdered Palestinian toddler and his parents, victims of a summer firebombing. The Jews at the table were sick with horror at what some of our people are becoming. We understood viscerally what our Muslim friends must feel before the scale of horror they face. We had earlier discussed to what degree it is important to see all such violence as indeed growing from the seedbed of faith that we each share with our own extremists.

After many hours of deep and challenging discussion, we came to the decision not to take on the "harsh passages." It felt too threatening to do in the presence of each other with so many not part of the evolving trust that we shared. We agreed that it would be something for us to engage with as a small group in the context of our own trust and caring. Simply having this deliberative discussion as its own process was an affirmation of our ability to talk so deeply and openly with each other. It did not feel safe enough in the larger context to stand so bare before the other, to reveal the locus of some of our own deepest struggles with our sacred texts, fearful that those on the outside might be too quick to recoil and condemn. We need a respite from pain, one of our colleagues suggested.

I had come to the meeting ready to take on the challenge. I was filled with trepidation at the prospect, but also with hope that such engagement would facilitate a deeper understanding of each other and help to answer some of the

unspoken questions we have of each other's application of religion to life. I am both relieved and disappointed in our decision to shift the focus of our next study gathering. Most of all, I have deep respect for my colleagues and the process we engaged in. I am confident that at some point we will engage with the "harsh passages" in both of our foundational texts. We are both the people of the book, *ah'l al kitab/am ha'sefer*. Ultimately, I believe that through the centrality of the Book in the life of each of our peoples, the implicit challenge posed by the rabbis will be met, "where the sword is, the book is not, where the book is not, the sword is not."

I had come to the meeting planning to share some of our own "harsh passages." I had planned to share from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi*. The passage that stood as the backdrop in all of its harshness was encountered many weeks ago in *Parashat Vayishlach* (Gen. 34:30). Shechem, a local prince of the land, had raped Dina, though professing love for her and a desire to marry her, issues swirling in their complexity. Shechem is told that there could be no intermarriage with a people of uncircumcised men. Shechem readily complies, both for himself and his entire people, all of the men undergoing circumcision. When they are at their weakest in the midst of recovering, two sons of Jacob, Shimon and Levi, attack the defenseless people and slaughter all the males, plundering the city, taking the women and children captive. It is a horrifying incident, not a passage that offers itself for sharing.

It is precisely in the harsh passages of Torah, however, that I am drawn to seek antidotes to the very violence that sickens me. It is a process that I wish to share, both with Jews and others. Sometimes the challenge to such violence comes from within the Torah itself, continuing then beyond itself. Sometimes the challenge, as healing antidote, starts with Oral Torah and then leads us back into the Written Torah, helping us to find our footing again. The response to the terror wrought by Shimon and Levi comes in our portion, *Parashat Vayechi*. Bringing closure to his life and to the Book of B'reishit, Yakov speaks to his children as they gather around his deathbed. Surely not offering blessings in each case, Yakov speaks to who each of his children is. He addresses Shimon and Levi as brothers whose ways involve instruments of violence. Speaking carefully, he says, *a curse upon their anger/arur apam, for it is too fierce, and their outrage, because it was too cruel*. He then says, *I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel*.

Cursing their terrible deeds rather than his sons themselves, Yakov has left open the way of transformation. A beautiful midrashic tradition teaches that Shimon is to become a teacher of young children as a way that will soften his nature. Levi will serve God in the sanctuary of our people, devoting all of his energy to holy service. Their anger scattered among us as their descendants, the transcendence and transformation of violence becomes our challenge. In meeting that challenge, may we come to a time when there shall be no shame in sharing the harsh passages of our texts because they shall no longer bear any resemblance to life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor