

Dear Chavraya,

The greatest challenge that I have felt in beginning our Social Justice Beit Midrash, which met for its second session this week, has been in setting our issues agenda, those matters of concern to be addressed through learning and action. It seems overwhelming as we look at the world around us, how not to include everything that cries for redress, matters of justice and injustice, of violence near and far, of a world burning with fever. How not to direct our efforts toward insuring that Black lives matter, that the epidemic of gun violence is stemmed, that earth is healed, and on and on through such a lengthy list of sacred concerns that plead for our learning and doing? As each person offered issues for our list that is in formation, their pain and passion could be felt. At first it seemed best to just take one issue and address it fully, perhaps two or three issues over an agreed amount of time. But then, what about all the others, all the other needs? As our list unfolds, so we feel our way, realizing that all that comes to mind, all that haunts us in wake and in sleep are part of the ongoing challenge of being human in this world. To be human is to be concerned. It doesn't mean that all that should be addressed needs to be or can be addressed immediately. One of the great blessings of people working together in shared commitment is that each one's passion at one time or another becomes the *shammash* by which to ignite action by others.

And so we begin, feeling our way, learning and doing. The rabbinic teaching in *Pirke Avot* comes to mind: *lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor/it is not upon you to complete the task, but you are not free to exempt yourself from it.* The epidemic of gun violence calls us to act now, immediately, this week, as more lives are snuffed out from Hyde Square in Jamaica Plain, to Colorado Springs, to San Bernardino. The fact of our coming together, of our joining to learn and to do in a coordinated way means that we have a ready cohort through which to act. So too a wellspring is opened from which to draw faith, hope, and comfort, finding strength in each other's presence. In that presence is an open invitation to all to come in and join as able, to enter a *beit midrash* that is open and flexible, warm and welcoming. We need each other to repair and heal the world, little by little, step by step, issue by issue, together over time, incrementally, back and forth as issues call, each one's passion and expertise offering address in one area, one person's here, another's there. Playfully translated, *beit midrash* is a "house of seeking." We seek the way together, unable to sit back in the face of so much need, but also needing pause to be inspired through encounter with text of page and person, invigorated by the excitement of learning.

Not able to avoid the world's pain, we enter it and in its midst we are empowered to bring change. It is all in the first word of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayeshev*, *vayeshev Ya'akov/and Ya'akov settled....* The same word can mean *settled* as in settle upon the land, to feel settled within..., or, re-vocalized as *va'y'yashev* to settle an argument, to make peace. Our ancestor Ya'akov lost the tension in the word, settling down but not fostering peace where he dwelled, succumbing to the delusion that all was well when it was so wrong, so much strife surrounding him, within him. The holy RIM, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Rothenberg, teaches that Ya'akov sought to dwell in tranquility in this world as it is, as though the *tikkun ha'shalem/the complete repair* had already been

realized, as though the future had already come. The RIM then counsels that we should not try to flee from the pain, *rather within the burden itself one needs to find a place/eleh mitoch ha'sevel atzmo harei hu tzarich limtzo lo makom.*

And yet we do need times of pause, not as avoidance, but as renewal. That is the nature and the gift of Shabbos, to pause and renew, to experience the possibility of wholeness, to taste of the world as it might be, to realize in the making of Shabbos that it is possible to remake the world, to make the day that is all Shabbos, *yom she'kulo Shabbos*. There are times when the pain of the world follows us to our doorsteps in time and space, entering with us as a chill wind unbidden. We light candles and are warmed, creating a sacred space in which to hold it all, knowing that over time all shall be addressed. So too, in our effort to learn and to do, warmed by the learning we are strengthened for the doing. It is time to light candles.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor