

Dear Chavraya,

I did not think I would write about it again this year, so much to address, so much that challenges our sensibilities, that cries out for redress. So too, glimmers of light, of hope, that shine through the cracks of so many broken hearts. Every glimmer of light that shines through a broken heart illumines a path beyond, so many paths to follow, so many sparks of hope to respond to, to say yes to. For many years I have been participating in a memorial service for the homeless, always held at the Church on the Hill across from the State House. It always takes place on December 21st, the shortest day and the longest night of the year..., "the longest night to be un-housed." Every year I am moved by the experience. Every year I feel somewhat as a voyeur, an interloper who has no business being there. I come to comfort, to listen, to be touched by stories so different than my own. And every year I come away feeling comforted, given a sense of place in the close bonds of community as it forms in the streets and shelters of our city, so near and so far.

There was something different this year that at first gave me pause, helping me then to see and feel more deeply the presence of each one remembered. Through the years, there has always been a representation of a grave stone for each one remembered, every rounded, cardboard "stone," bearing a holy name. There were so many to remember this year. Every name was carefully said through the service, a candle lit to tell of each flickering soul hovering among us, reminding, "God's candle is the human soul." Not looking around to see the names, I listened more deeply, taking each name in as it was said.

In the front of the sanctuary this year was a simple bench that became a focal point, perhaps meant to be a park bench, someone's place to rest. On the bench were a worn pair of boots and draped over the back was a blanket. A minister whom I know from Old South Church came up to tell the story of the blanket. There was a hush, some quiet sobbing as he told of the morning when a body lay on the front steps of the church. It was the body of a man who had spent the night on those steps, who had died there before the morning light. After an ambulance took away the man's body, the police were about to take the blanket and a sheet and throw them away, the only possessions, along with the boots, that had been left by the man who died. The minister and others saw the holiness in these simple things and asked to keep them. The sheet was cut into squares, each one becoming the canvass for loving depictions of life, each painting then appliquéd onto the blanket.

On one square, a plea from people so easily missed, their humanity hidden, words crying out to take note, "our lives matter." On another square, a mother holding two children, perhaps a memory of childhood shelter and support. An image, perhaps of those remembered, gone to the world above, free-floating bodies among the stars. On another square was a bridge, dark against a red, sunset sky, spanning worlds. There was one of a child's handprints, and another of an adult's handprints, palms turned out as in prayerful plea. And on another, the stump of a tree, lives cut short, still rooted among us as we remember them. The blanket was then raised up on pulley and line, as though to follow its

owner's soul in Heavenly ascent, become then a focal point as names were read and candles lit.

In this congregation of the homeless, names brought tears. Some spoke and offered eulogies, breaking down and needing to pause, word pictures of real people, people who are sorely missed. "So many we've lost," one speaker said, "they all had stories, they all touched our lives...; George, Dane, Risa, Diane, Kayla...." We learned of Danny, a United States soldier and true friend; and of Patrice, "my good friend," the speaker said, "whom I miss terribly." Sobbing, another speaker told us of Fabrina, sharing of his heartbreak, "We were falling in love."

In this week of remembering those without a place in which to dwell, the Torah portion is *Vayeshev*. In one verbal form *vayeshev* means *and he dwelled*. In another form the word becomes *va'y'yashev/and he made peace*. That is our challenge, to create wholeness, a place of peaceful dwelling for all. As the portion opens, Yosef is alone among his brothers, mistreated and cast aside. Though at home, he is homeless. He dreams and his dreams express his longing to be embraced, not to be cast aside. He and his brothers are harvesting sheaves in the field. His sheaf stands upright, encircled by his brothers' sheaves that bow to him. The word for "upright" is *nitzavah*. In an exquisitely beautiful teaching, the nineteenth century Chassidic rebbe, Rebbe Kalonimus Kalman Shapira sees in the word *nitzavah* an acronym formed of each of its letters, *nun, tzadee, beyt, heh*, standing for *nishmatam tz'rurah bitzror ha'chayyim/may their souls be bound up in the bond of life*. Offered as a prayer, these are the letters that appear traditionally at the bottom of a Jewish gravestone.

In that spirit, I chanted *Keyl Molei Rachamim*, explaining that it is a Jewish memorial prayer. I felt a depth of *kavannah* and connection, the blanket suspended just to my right, so many soul candles flickering. After chanting the Hebrew, I shared my own prayer in the spirit of the Hebrew. May their memories be a blessing, their souls be bound up in the bond of life....

O God, exalted and full of compassion, grant perfect peace in Your sheltering Presence, among the holy and pure, to the souls of all those whom we remember today, who have gone to their eternal home. Welcome them home, please, with open arms. Show to them the love and acceptance denied to them in life. Knowing that You have given us the resources, help us to create a just society in which everyone has a place to call home. In Your embrace of their souls, please show to them the meaning their lives held for You. Be a mirror, God, in which they may see Your image in their eternal selves. Please forgive us for the times we did not see Your image in them, and help us to open our eyes to the holiness of every single life. Master of mercy, we beseech You, remember all the worthy and righteous deeds that they performed in the land of the living, deeds of infinite meaning in Your eyes, however small, whether for family and friends, whether on the streets or in shelters, for each other and for others. May their souls be bound up in the bond of life. You are their portion. May they rest in peace. Let us say: Amen.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor