

Dear Chavraya,

I share two recent experiences, each having challenged me to consider the nature of our engaging with others who are different than us, whether in ways great or small. Just before Shabbos last week, I received a note from the Talner community announcing an “emergency” Malaveh Malka. A *Melaveh Malka* is a gathering of learning, song, and food on Saturday evening meant to help carry the spirit of Shabbos into the week. The Talner shtibl had been in Brighton prior to its closing a few years ago, a Chassidic group that traces its line to Rebbe Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl. Locally, it is now a loosely organized community, remarkably open and accepting in its welcome to all. I had spent some six months davenning with them prior to starting Nehar Shalom, imbibing their spirit of learning, prayer, joy, and warmth. I was fascinated by the idea of an “emergency” Melaveh Malka, the invitation emphasizing the need to come together to sing and learn, most importantly just to be together in a time of such heartache. It was just following the murder of Ezra Schwartz, an eighteen year old from Sharon spending the year in Israel, just after the Paris attacks, and so much else that we had enumerated in our own shtibl that morning.

As much as I was drawn to attend, I hesitated, knowing that for all that joins me with that community, there would be very different assumptions and views of the world and of others underlying our presence at the table together. I decided to go, finding wholeness and affirmation in the presence of people I care for and in whose spirit I delight, whatever the differences between us may be. There were moments in which I felt discomfort and moments in which I felt comforted. I was asked to share a few words of Torah. Hesitant at first, I accepted the honor and was deeply moved by the response, underscoring in my own teaching that which every heart feels, that which is universal and beyond social or political views. We all know of heartache, however much our ways of responding to and expressing pain, and hearing the ache in another’s heart, may vary.

A few days prior to the Talner gathering, the very day on which Ezra was murdered, I had attended an inspiring interfaith gathering at Hebrew College. As part of the opening gathering, words of Torah were spoken that looked ahead slightly to this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Vayishlach*. Ya’akov is making his way back to Canaan after twenty years, having fled his brother Esau’s anger and his threat to kill him for stealing the blessing and birthright of the firstborn. Word comes that Esau is approaching with four hundred armed men. With an elaborate plan in place to placate Esau, successive rows of mothers and children, herds and flocks were to precede Ya’akov in the hope of softening Esau’s heart. Suddenly Ya’akov went ahead, putting aside the elaborate plan in favor of direct and spontaneous encounter. We are told that Esau reciprocated, that he *ran to meet him and embraced him, fell upon his neck and kissed him; and they wept* (Gen. 33:4).

A short time later comes the verse that was offered by way of introduction to the interfaith gathering. Ya’akov has asked Esau to accept his gifts, which Esau declines, saying, *I have plenty my brother/yesh li rav achi*. Ya’akov then says, *“I have seen your face as seeing the face of God/ra’iti fanecha kir’ot p’nei Elokim* (Gen. 33:10). Expressing the purpose of the day’s gathering and of interfaith dialogue in

general, the hope was offered that we strive to see the face of God in the other, especially in those who are different than us, those for whom we may feel unfamiliarity, and even some distrust.

It is a beautiful thought and one that I hold to. Much of the commentary to that verse, however, is not so hopeful or open, reflecting some of our people's struggle through time to find its place among the nations, the struggle that comes of being a minority, that comes in response to persecution. However real these dynamics are, the great challenge is to understand them and not be stunted by them. A classic rabbinic commentary sees Ya'akov's words as flattery for the sake of survival, suggesting that amidst the realities of this world *it is allowed to flatter the wicked/mutar l'hachnif l'r'sha'im ba'olam ha'zeh*. Sadly, this reflects an inability to hear Esau's tears or see the possibility of change or openings toward new possibility. Offering a different view, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes: *A kiss can be false but not tears that flow at such moments.... It is only when the strong, as here Esau, fall round the necks of the weak and cast the sword of violence far away, only then does it show that right and humaneness have made a conquest.*

Whether in relation to those of our own people whose Jewish path may be different than ours, or in relation to others of a different path to God and life entirely, our challenge is to see the face of God in the other, to receive their tears, and to seek a way forward together. When invitation is offered to sit and share, to gather and learn, a connection is made that waits to be affirmed. It is up to us to respond. It is in the Torah's own words, without need for commentary, that we learn the way of response from Ya'akov, words to be spoken with sincerity of heart to all whom we encounter on the way, *"I have seen your face as seeing the face of God."*

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor