

Parashat Pinchas 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

It has been a week of swirling emotions, of so much human complexity, leaving God to wonder, bewildered. There have been moments of celebration, of decency and justice triumphant in the Supreme Court's decisions that affirm equal marriage, truly now a defense of marriage. And the same court eviscerated the Voting Rights Act of 1965, leaving us to wonder if so much accomplished in the long struggle toward civil rights shall be undone. I feel that fear in a deeply personal way. One of my first experiences with activism was to stand in a vigil of two during the year following my Bar Mitzvah, urging passage of the Voter Registration Bill. I stood with a local minister after school in front of the post office in Winthrop, holding signs and handing out leaflets. It was a year of shattered innocence, hearing the most ugly of epithets from passing cars, encountering the depths of racism and anti-Semitism.

Violence has flooded the pages of the newspaper this week. And the Torah portion this week is Parashat Pinchas, a portion rooted in violence, yet rising toward hope. That is the secret message of this parsha. It bids us to look, to look hard, affirming hope, teaching us of human solidarity in spite of all. There are a number of such teachings and hints in the portion, but I am drawn especially to one because we don't see it at first. It is hidden, as hope often is. Parashat Pinchas contains all of the additional passages of Torah that are read on holidays, short sections that tell primarily of the offerings to be made on each holiday. A scribe examining our own Torah scroll once explained to me that Parashat Pinchas is often the most worn section in a Torah because we read from it so many times in the cycle of a year, on every holiday. So we need to wear out the path toward hope and possibility, walking, searching, hand in hand until we shall overcome.

In the midst of these additional readings for the holidays, we are told of Rosh Hashannah and of sounding the shofar. In the intermingled themes of Rosh Hashannah, there is hope even in our tears. In the voice of the shofar, there is weeping and there is celebration for what might be, challenging us to bring the day that is neither day nor night, the time of swords turned to plowshares. One of the least known names for Rosh Hashannah, a name by linguistic association, is Yom Yabava/Day of Sobbing. It derives from a discussion among the rabbis concerning the weeping sound of the shofar notes and which one should be described as crying. They cite the Torah's description of Rosh Hashannah in Parashat Pinchas, as Yom T'ruah yihyeh l'chem/It shall be to you a day of sounding the shofar. Looking to the Targum, the Aramaic interpretive translation of the Torah, the rabbis bring us to a place of deeper association and human connection with what we are to hear in the voice of the shofar. So different, the Aramaic says, Yom yabava y'hey l'chon/It shall be to you a day of sobbing. How do we know that yabava means "sobbing," and whose sobbing is it? As told in the Book of Judges, it is the sobbing of the mother of Sisera who waits for her son to return from battle, knowing in her heart that he will never come. Sisera is a Canaanite general who gave Israel no peace. Fleeing the

battle, he sought safety in the tent of Ya'el and met a brutal death at her hand. His mother is reassured, comforted for his delay, that he is gathering women and the spoils of war, but she knows: B'ad hachalon nish'k'fa va't'yabev em Sisera/through the window peered the mother of Sisera and sobbed (Judges 5:28). In the broken notes of the shofar, it is simply the sobbing of a mother who has lost her son. That Sisera was an enemy of Israel is never mentioned. On a journey of hope, the shofar calls us to be rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors. And so we search and wear a path to the very source where change begins until we see a flowering in every heart, a welling up of compassion.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor