

Dear Chavraya,

I write from the turmoil of my heart. Mieke and I returned from Israel yesterday. It is good to be home and it is hard to be home. I struggle to find the place called home. I feel alone at times in the struggle to balance the swirl of emotions and feelings. I asked so many people, "how do you hold it all together, where do you find hope?" I ask myself the same questions, and I am not sure. Of how do you hold it all together, the woman of a couple with whom we had Shabbos dinner last week said, "barely." Finding hope was in fact easier for her, in the details of day to day, mostly in caring for their little grandchild, changing diapers, walking, shopping. Over Shabbos lunch, my friend, Rabbi Arik Ascherman of Rabbis for Human Rights, answered my questions with the prophetic resolve with which he lives and faces down despair, "we just have to keep going." He is convinced that in the struggle for justice and peace, every act of goodness makes a difference.

In a strange and eerie way, it was easy to feel at home in a shelter when the sirens wailed, gathered with people of all views, where one's politics and opinions didn't matter, only one's presence. I find it much harder here. I feel alone, no sense of home or belonging in gatherings that would only praise and defend Israel, and so too at gatherings that would only condemn and decry Israel. We have been here so many times before, lessons unlearned and then the question that churns of what to do in the midst of crisis. The crisis is real for Israel, as it is real for the people of Gaza. I feel sick with the worry of Israeli friends who are sick with worry for their children, young ones who wet their beds with the sound of the sirens, bundled off to safe rooms and shelters. I feel the worry of friends who dread to know where their soldier sons are and what they are doing, and who are beside themselves in not knowing. Feeling the worry of our own, how can we not feel as our own as well the terror wrought on Palestinians? More than the wail of sirens, how dare we not feel their horror as the bombs fall and houses cave in?

I am afraid for the narratives of hate and denial that each side creates. Every rocket fired into Israel denies its right to be, its place among the nations. Every time the mantra is uttered by Jews that we value our children more than they, they become less human. It is a dangerous illusion that cuts us off from the very ones we need to embrace. From a new found Palestinian friend in Ramallah came words from her friend in Gaza: "We don't know where and when and who? I'm spending my time trying to assure my 2 kids, ages 5 and 7...; I have to maintain strength all the time. Can't let the family collapse. Don't know how much longer I can take it...; we spend our time anxiously waiting for the next shower of bombs, it's sickening..." From Ramallah, my friend herself wrote: "The helplessness is great. I've been silently detached from news. Don't want the masters of wars to decide my feelings and reactions. Don't want them to poison my soul with hate..."

In Laila's words, I find hope, sentiments felt by many Jews. We are one in fear and in hope, fear beneath the bombs and rockets, fear for our children, fear that we not lose our humanity. Knowing the fear we feel for Israel

should open our hearts all the more to feel the unimaginable fear for those of Gaza who live beneath the bombs. All of the children are our own, all of them and all of us joined as branches on the tree of life. That is the message in the name of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Matot*. It is a portion of great violence and vengeance, a reflection of the worst that we can be, the worst that we can do. And in that is its warning and its hope of transcendence, that in seeing the violence of which we are capable, we shall recoil with horror. It is the mirror of Torah in which we see ourselves and rise up to be who we are meant to be. The word *mateh / tribe* can also mean *branch, rod, staff*. We are all as branches on the same tree and we are all each other's staff with which to guide and support on the journey of life.

These terrible days unfolding come as we enter the three weeks that lead to *Tisha B'Av*, day of fasting and mourning for the destruction of the Temples and so much brokenness in the world. Of these three weeks, called the *Three Weeks of Reproach / Sh'losha d'Puranuta*, or the *Bayn Ham'tzarim / Between the Straits*, the Slonimer Rebbe says, *they are the furrowed ground from which shall begin to blossom the great light revealed*. May that be the hope of this time, that seeing the horror of so much violence we shall see a new light and a new way arise.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor