

Dear Chavraya,

It was one of those moments of complete clarity when the notice came late in the day yesterday, suddenly the important giving way to the urgent. I knew that I needed to be there, at the Bethel AME church in Jamaica Plain, to join with others, with our neighbors, to comfort and to mourn. If I hesitated for a moment, weighing what I needed to put aside, it was then so clear. It is a mitzvah to comfort the mourner. It was to be a prayer vigil to remember the nine people, all African Americans, brutally murdered at the "Mother" Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. These were people engaged in Bible study and prayer, not so different than our gathering to learn Torah that morning, the same nature of collective seeking, encountering God's word and each other. The killer had been welcomed among them, given sanctuary from the torment of hate, and then he slaughtered them.

In truth, I was not going only to comfort the mourner with my presence. Though hoping that just being there would express solidarity, presence proclaiming that you are not alone, I also did not want to be alone with my own grief. I did not want to be separate from, but joined with in sorrow and heartache. And so I went to be with those of the same faith and family as the murdered. The church was set up in an unusual configuration, rows and rows of tables and chairs rather than pews. As I stood and surveyed the sanctuary, gauging where to sit, one of the coordinating ministers approached me and asked if I was a rabbi. As I hesitantly said yes, I knew what was coming. "Yes," I said, "I would be honored to offer a prayer." Among various prayers to be offered, he then asked if I would direct my prayer to mental illness. I stammered for a moment, almost asking if I could offer a different prayer. There was almost a comic irony in my hesitation to offer the prayer that was needed of me, that was to be the expression of comfort for which I had come. All happening in a moment, perhaps my hesitation only apparent to me, I took the man's hand and said, "yes, of course, I will be happy to."

The sense of faith and family expanded as I found a place to sit, African American and white, a Native American elder at my table. Each table became its own familial setting, hands held in prayerful offering, as though around the table before a meal, each one's presence affirmed as we said Amen, each one at home, belonging to the whole as one sacred part. As I held the hand of the elder of the Peaquot nation, I could feel my hand trembling and wondered what he thought, why was this rabbi so nervous? In part, I was feeling quite hypoglycemic, having run out so quickly and not eaten anything. More deeply, I was still thinking about my hesitation and beginning to formulate my prayer. I realized that of course I could offer a prayer for those suffering with mental illness, whose lives are affected in so many ways by emotional burdens and chemical imbalance, and yet who valiantly strive and contribute in magnificent ways. So few who suffer along the great spectrum of mental illness are people who would commit violence. While anyone who would commit such horrific violence as that of the Charleston killer must be of sick mind, I realized that my hesitation was out of a concern not to reduce such violence to mental illness. Racism and hate are a sickness in the soul of America, and its manifestation in racially motivated violence is not simply an expression of the mental state of one individual.

Carried on the beat of a choir's song, so filled with hope amidst the heartache, I found myself reflecting on one of God's names as it comes from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Korach*. It is a portion of strife and conflict, of revolt fomented by Korach against Moses and Aaron. Korach is complicated, his motives quickly associated by the rabbis with greed and overreaching. But there seems to be something deeper, more complex, perhaps bearing on mental state, struggling to be and become, for Korach and for our selves. Never finding the right path, the right balance between individual and community, self and others, the consequences are cataclysmic. Pleading with God not to lump everyone together, the guilty and the innocent, not to allow destruction to rule, Moses addresses God as *Elohei ha'ruchot l'chol basar/God of the spirits of all flesh*. This was the link I needed, to pray not only for shattered hearts and bodies, but for the spirit within every body, within all flesh, a spirit so tortured at times.

When my turn came, I made my way to the podium, soft music playing behind my words, offering a peaceful calm. As each person before me had prayed from their own tradition, so I gave thanks for the open doors and hearts in that sanctuary, for the opportunity given to each one to pray in the way of their own people and faith. I began in Hebrew with the words of the *MiShe'berach* for healing, pleading with God who blessed and healed our ancestors to bless and heal us. Not of body now, but of the spirit within each body, please, God, heal, *Elohei ha'ruchot l'chol basar/God of the spirits of all flesh*, heal the psyche and soul of all who are so filled with hate, heal the spirit within the collective body of our country, the racism and hate imbibed by troubled souls, and remove the guns, the guns, the guns.

Not to be separate, that is why I had gone to the church, not to grieve alone, but to be part of the spirit that breathes hope in the greater body of people gathered together. This morning I received an email that asked, "Will we stand on the sideline or will we join the struggle?" It is a challenge that comes through *Parashat Korach*, from the very first word, *va'yikach Korach/and Korach took*. In the Aramaic interpretive translation of Onkelos, it becomes *it'p'leg Korach/and Korach divided*. As Rashi explains, Korach became divided, cut off, from the rest of the community, *n'chalek me'sh'ar ha'edah*. We learn not to be as Korach, even as we seek to embrace him in his own struggles of psyche and soul, but to join with the community as it embraces and includes the spirits of all flesh. Knowing that we need to be there, we answer the call.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor