

Dear Chavraya,

It was an unusually hot night during a heat wave in Belgium as we walked along the strand by the North Sea. We were walking with another couple, old friends of Mieke who have become friends of mine over a growing number of years. Too hot to sit outside for dinner, we sought the relative shade inside a restaurant, away from the direct heat. We spoke of many things as we caught up. Getting beyond children and aging parents, Rene asked me of my work and interests. Somehow, though hardly surprising in regard to an honest sharing of my work and interests, we came to discuss matters of religion. Rene and Bea are unobservant Catholics, though having grown up imbibing Church teaching and its lingering pre-Vatican II theology. I spoke passionately of my efforts to draw out strands and streams of nonviolence from within the Torah. Startled, I heard Rene's tone shift as he offered with some pontification his view of the God of the "Old Testament" as a God of wrath in relation to the Christian God of love. I was taken aback, the heat having found its way to our place of shade.

In that moment of confusion my head spun, as though heat-struck, as I tried to integrate elements of discourse that didn't fit, attitudes that I know were innocent as carried on the words of the speaker, yet rooted in classical anti-Jewish church roots. I tried to broaden the context, to expand the palette to include all the brilliant streaks of late night sunset over the ocean just beyond. Suddenly I realized just how much broader the context needed to be, how much was unknown of Jewish life, of the nature of our sacred way of text and its learning, and, most painfully, how foreign I am in my essence to my friend across the table. And then I was silent, turning back to my dinner, a certain awkwardness setting in, subtle but clearly present, like the drops of sweat forming on my upper lip.

I found myself returning to the matter as we walked in the still air, drained only slightly of its heat, wanting to set things a little more right, to leave things a little more comfortable. We parted amiably, laughing and looking ahead to next time. I don't know how much of that discussion stayed with Rene, whether he was disturbed by it. I do know how much it has stayed with me, how much I have thought about it and wrestled with it, what I might have said, or not. Thoughts turn and swirl unformed and forming, as in the incomplete sentences and words cast as seeds to the wind, written quickly after the conversation as a first effort to sort out, to vent, to clarify. I hesitantly share unedited thoughts, sharing a process that can become each one's toward seeking their own clarity.

God of love versus God of wrath...; the discussion with Rene, increasingly disturbing.... What of the God of love if no impact upon the people gathered in faith, or upon the church so founded...? Where was their God of love in the crusades, in innumerable pogroms, in the Holocaust...? Or even the God of wrath to act against them...? Or is it about God at all, rather than about us, people choosing to act in accord with what we know to be God's universal essence? We learn to struggle through Torah with all of the realities, all of the vicissitudes of life, struggling with God's failures as well as our own. Rene paused for a moment in his indignation, surprised, even taken aback at the thought of

challenging God, of God being wrong.... But so we know from Abraham, from Jacob, the possibility that God can be wrong, that God is in need of human challenge...; such is the way of a Jewish relationship with God, teaching us also about relationship with people. And what of all the expressions of love and compassion in the Torah, of God's and people's...; thirty-six times reminded that we were slaves in Egypt, so to care for the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the most vulnerable among us, love given form in law.

Only in needing to confront violence do we learn to overcome it. The violence in the Torah offers context for the struggle, a structured encounter with violence, with evil, to prepare us for such encounter in life, to teach through encountering violence ways of countering violence, preparing us for life in all of its ways and moods. We learn to hold it all and engage the struggle unflinching. For all of the streams of nonviolence that well up in Torah and offer counter to the violence, all is not resolved...; it cannot be, that is part of the lesson of Torah and of life.... We keep going, holding all of the fragments, incomplete, but more whole for the struggle..., more sure of the essence as we know it to be, of Torah, of life....

We cannot separate or neatly distinguish the God of love from the God of wrath, as though there is such distinction...; such terms rendering incomplete and diminishing the fullness of God and all of the moods and modes of human life as reflected in the multifaceted realities of God and in the human paradigms of Torah. The effort to distinguish such realms of God, of love, of wrath, reflects a human struggle with contradiction (and conflict) in life itself.... Both terms reflect a triumphal Christian effort to replace the old with the new, as in Testament, as in Covenant, as in chosen one, as though chosen need be only one.... (such is supercessionist theology...) (It was that night a deeply imbibed anti-Jewishness more than anti-Semitism...) Visiting the new Holocaust museum in Mechelen, teaching is offered on the roots of anti-Semitism, reference made to Christian iconography that depicts two women, one resplendent with crown, the Church, the other without, the fallen crown of Israel...."

In this week of Parashat Pinchas, we encounter violence carried over from last week, ages of violence carried over and awaiting resolution. In his zealotry, Pinchas kills Zimri and Cozbi, an Israelite prince and a Midianite princess. Though human violence here, it is exactly the wrath that Rene saw as making our holy book subserviant to his. Yet in the way of sacred learning that defines our way as a people, it is precisely from the fury of Pinchas that the rabbis teach another way, that weapons, for instance, are not allowed to be brought into a shul or *beis medresh/house of study*. Precisely from this portion, teachings of peace emerge, contexts of struggle set before us. God makes a *B'rit Shalom/Covenant of Peace* with Pinchas. Why with Pinchas, of all people? It is given to Pinchas explains the *Ha'emek Davar*, so that he will not be severe and not rage..., and because the deed Pinchas has done has caused there to remain in his heart the feeling of power even afterward/*hayah noten l'hashir b'lev ha'regesh oz gam achar kach....* It is given to Pinchas because Pinchas needs a *B'rit Shalom*, precisely because he has killed,

even in the way of soldiers returning from battle, needing to be guided to another way. The letter “vav” in shalom is broken in two, an orthographic anomaly, the only such appearance in the Torah, a challenge to all of us to make the “vav” and the *b’rit/convenant* whole.

In the way of Jewish learning we encounter the world as it is in the context of sacred text and we are challenged in the same text to fulfill God’s hope for what the world might be. I am not sure how I might have shared all of this in the heavy air by the North Sea that night. But that is our challenge, more than to explain, it is to live the way of transformation as learned through engagement with Torah as the context of life. Learning to transcend wrath by engaging with it, the Torah teaches the way of love.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor