

Dear Chavraya,

I could feel my back going up as someone approached me at the vigil this week for farm worker justice. Standing in front of a Wendy's in downtown Boston, calling on ownership to cooperate with the Fair Food Program to insure the safety, dignity, and wellbeing of migrant workers, I sensed criticism in the one who approached. Reminded of previous encounters and of other associations, I could feel a negative response welling within me in spite of myself. All in a matter of seconds, feeling first my own embarrassment and hypocrisy, my own disconnect from lessons of Torah I had taught earlier that morning, something began to ease, my heart beating a little more easily. While in retrospect, I wish there had been more time, more opportunity to pause and to breathe, I responded graciously, but not with the fullness of heart that I would like to have offered.

A thread makes its way through these weeks as we watch Pharaoh's descent into the abyss. We witness the hardening of his heart as it makes him oblivious to the suffering of his own people, let alone to the suffering of the slaves. As the plagues multiply, at first brought on by Pharaoh's own arrogance, his own hardness of heart, the Egyptians themselves plead for him to notice the destruction that threatens them all. Waiting for promised deliverance, the slaves who arrived once as migrants, without benefit of citizenship or protection of law, continue to labor beneath their burdens. Holding our breath, each year as though the first reading, as though we haven't told the story at the Pesach Seder each year for as long as we can remember, we hold our breath as all of life seems to hang in the balance.

The lesson becomes clear as we follow the thread into this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo*, the suffering brought by oppression comes to include the oppressor as well. While wary of equivalence, for there is no simple equation, we are nevertheless warned of the destruction that comes to the oppressor, of the suffering that comes to the people of a nation that oppresses, that hardens its heart to the weak and vulnerable. We are reminded of the suffering that comes to a nation that does not recognize the humanity of every person, regardless of where they have come from and of how they live and be in this world. The enslaved Israelites are our ancestors, the story our own. So too, we are reminded in this *parasha* of how fine the line over time, when once the upper hand is gained, how easily the story may be forgotten, whether subtly over time or with sudden change of fortune, how the once oppressed can become the oppressor.

At times it is too easy to see the larger framework, to nod with recognition at the obvious connections and warnings that need to be made, warnings that we dare not ignore. At the same time, there is a warning to each of us in the way the Torah teaches, lessons playing out on multiple levels, the grand and the small, the collective, whether nation or people, and the individual. The Torah continually brings home the urgency of personal responsibility. The *minyan* is counted by ones, a reminder that each person is needed, that each one counts, and that each one is responsible.

All of this came to me both in the moment and as I reflected later on the person who approached me at the vigil. As much as we work to soften the hard heart of our nation, the Torah holds a mirror before us and asks a question we might prefer to avoid. What shall we do to keep our own hearts from becoming hard? We are given moments, even in the midst of challenging Pharaoh, as given to me at the vigil, when we are challenged to exercise our heart's moral tissue and temper our response to another human being. Even as we engage with the big issues, the ones that tear us apart with worry and fear, in the gentle way of the Torah's teaching we are called to bring the same passion and concern to the ordinary interactions of day-to-day encounters, to be aware of our own behavior. As we stand for justice in the face of all oppressions, may we free ourselves, as well, softening our hearts to extend a hand to those who may yet stand with us on the long walk to freedom.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor