

Dear Chavraya,

The same feeling came over me twice this week, on two successive days. Each time, I needed to stop, to pause, as with the saying of *amen/ameen* to acknowledge to others what I felt within as it came unbidden, unexpected. I would describe it as a welling up of my soul, of tears, a feeling of deep connection with those with whom I conversed and studied, God's presence palpable among us.

The first time it was at a meeting of the planning committee for Building Bridges through Learning, a simple effort to bring together imams and rabbis to explore issues of meaning and concern through the lens of each other's texts. The most important texts, of course, are the texts of self, each one's own story through which we encounter the reality of another's life. As part of the planning process for a program to take place next month, we engaged in learning the texts we have chosen, that we are seeking to refine, texts that we would offer to others as their own bridge of connection across the study table, Muslim to Jew, Jew to Muslim, holy words to join. Our study topic for this gathering is fraught, Jerusalem / Al-Quds..., Beyond the Headlines, Holiness and Hope. It is our hope that indeed we shall be able to get beyond and above the headlines as we seek to understand the meaning of the Holy City in each one's tradition and consciousness.

As we engaged in our own learning, hardly to simply try out the texts, softening our souls, coming together beyond the fear and tension of a divide that could widen if not well navigated, suddenly a gate opened and we entered the holy courtyards, Jerusalem / al-Quds. The Arabic name means *the Holy One*, as in the Hebrew *Ir Ha'Kodesh/the Holy City*. As we sought simply to listen to each one tell of their connection to the place, to read holy words of holy places, to open up to new possibilities, while drawing from our own roots and connections, branches expanding, as we hoped would be for others. We encountered in the Muslim text before us the term *beit al-maqdas* and immediately recognized it as *beit ha'mikdash*, in each case the *Holy House*, whether of ancient temple or of the *masjid/mosque* that stands in the very place where our ancestors once walked. In that moment of realization, of common language, of common ground, however elusive, yet joined so deeply, the welling of my soul, of tears, needing to stop, to acknowledge, joined across the chasm, able to talk and to share, as we hoped others would as well, beyond the headlines, holiness and hope.

And then again, sitting with Rev. Mariama before the gathering of this week's Social Justice Beit Midrash at which she spoke and sang and shared of herself. The ostensible and immediate focus of our learning that night, so much of our community's efforts, so much of her fiber and being, would be sanctuary, opening hearts and doors, as her church as done, as we and others have done and are doing together. And so we shared, not as the program, not what we imagined would be later, and yet it was now. I shared the texts that I would teach, from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*, the Exodus verses that remind us of who we are, that we were strangers in the land of Egypt and that we therefore know the soul of the stranger, how then dare we to mistreat the stranger. I has asked if she might teach a Christian text that moves her, that gives her succor to keep going in doing this work. She smiled and said, "I would teach

the same text as you..." That is when I felt the welling up again, as I had the day before in sharing Jewish and Muslim texts. Rev. Mariama spoke of the meaning of the Exodus verses for African Americans, the light that illumined freedom road, that helped them to both raise their eyes to look beyond slavery and now reminds them, as for us, that we were slaves, how dare we not open hearts and doors to all who are oppressed, the hunted and hounded of earth, of our time and place.

In that welling up of soul, of tears, we are joined. It is in that joining that we enter the Holy City wherever we are, Jerusalem / al-Quds. Opening our hearts and doors to others, we open them to ourselves as well. In building bridges, we too are able to cross over, to meet along the way. Realizing that we do indeed know the soul of the stranger, we come to know more fully who we are within ourselves, able to draw more deeply from the wellsprings of our own soul, tears of joy, of recognition, of yearning for what might be.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor