

Dear Chavraya,

It is not generally the case that we are deeply moved by a course syllabus. It may be the teacher's words that move us in filling out the description of the class as carried in the syllabus. It may be the readings listed in the syllabus that bring to life the ideas to be conveyed through the course, that embroider the teacher's intention and purpose. It was the syllabus itself, however, for a class that I had the opportunity to participate in this week that moved me with its sense of purpose and hope.

I was invited to be a guest teacher in a class at Andover Newton Theological School for a class entitled, "Death and Dying: Cultural Perspectives and Pastoral Care" (or, "A Practical Theology of the Corpse"). I began my own teaching by sharing how moved I was by the words of the professor as conveyed in the syllabus, drawing on the course description itself as a text to engage with and to ask of its meaning. Among the course objectives, "students will develop pastoral and even prophetic perspectives on theological and ethical questions surrounding what we do with our bodies when we die... and will develop skills to pastorally accompany others through the human experience of death.... Students will be able to speak pastorally and theologically about the human experience of dying in caring and prophetic ways...; with the aim of furthering love, justice, and peace...."

To speak prophetically in regard to death is to recognize the wholeness of life, of which death is a part, to recognize death as a teacher offering guidance to the living. One of the great human challenges is to affirm life in the face of death, learning to weave these two strands of our humanity together into one great tapestry called life. Speaking of one word in the syllabus, I shared with the class that in the Jewish context of caring for the dead we never speak of a dead body as a "corpse." It is simply the *met* or *meta* / *the one who is dead*. The dead have not lost their personhood. The body remains a sacred vessel in death as in life. That is why that in the process of caring for the dead, as the bodily vessel is washed, verses are chanted from *Shir Ha'Shirim/Song of Songs*. Words that celebrate the physical beauty of the body would seem out of place in the moment, until we realize that it is not about that very body of which we sing, but of the beautiful miracle of the body, the beauty of such a vessel that has carried a soul through life, honored now for that beauty, the body resting at journey's end.

In moments raw with grief, when our hearts are broken, when the rent in our lives is much greater than a piece of torn fabric as external symbol of pain, words of theology and symbolic meaning can themselves be empty and cold. We need then the presence of another, of a community, to hold and to comfort. When we stand at the edge of a chasm, it is for others to draw us back and to remind that morning will come. That is the role as described in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Emor*, of the *kohanim* and most specifically of the *Kohen Gadol/the High priest* of ancient Temple days.

The *Kohen Gadol* was not to have direct contact with the dead, not to engage directly with the needs even of their own loved ones. Of the *kohanim*, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches, "When death summons other members of his

people to perform the final acts of loving kindness for the physical shell of a soul that has been called home to God, the “priests of God” must... keep aloft the banner of life beside the dead body, to make certain that the concept of life... is not overshadowed by thoughts of death....”

In our expression of loving-kindness for the dead we become in days beyond the Temple as the *kohanim*. In learning from the dead how we should care for the living, we hold up the banner of life. Each of our dead are cared for and treated each one as the *Kohen Gadol*. The garments of the dead are modeled exactly on the garments of the *High Priest*. If we would so treat the dead as one of such exalted standing, bathing each one in the living waters of kindness, then how shall we not treat the living with equivalent love.

As the *Kohen Gadol* held aloft the banner of life, so their role was to affirm life. As the *Kohen Gadol*, so does each of our people become in death an affirmation of life, reminding us of the holiness and miraculous beauty of the body as it carried us through life. Reminding us that we are to be as the disciples of Aaron, the first High Priest, the rabbis taught that as Aaron did, so are we to seek peace and pursue peace and draw people near to the Torah. As in the beautiful words of a syllabus for the course of life, it is the prophetic way of learning from the dead for the sake of “furthering love, justice, and peace.”

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor