

Dear Chavraya,

I would never have planned for both events to take place at the same time, at the same meeting. It seemed like too much to hold, to focus on, to give each its due. It was at a Mass Board of Rabbis this week, long planned as primarily a learning session caring for the dead and to build support among rabbis for the Community Hevra Kaddisha. With great love for the material, I offered teaching by which to set the spiritual and emotional context for this holy work. In the way that time turns of its own accord, the Holy One smiling upon our efforts to adapt and find a foothold, so it came to be that we would also discuss and vote at this meeting on "A Statement on Jewish-Muslim Relations." The fruit of a lengthy process of engagement with each other and with Muslim leaders, it came to be that the vote on the statement would be at the same meeting as our learning and sharing on the nature of caring for the dead.

There was good discussion and the statement was affirmed, becoming an official policy statement of the Mass Board of Rabbis. As I began to speak, I shared both my gratitude and the sense of irony I felt in the confluence of these two matters at the same meeting. I shared also that it somehow seemed appropriate, that confluence offering its own teaching and segue from the statement to the focus on the Chevra Kaddisha and caring for the dead. The connection that drew on and then taught from is that in the *tahara room*, in the place where we lovingly tend to the dead, there are no divisions, no opinions to navigate between. Regardless of difference in any realm of life among those who serve, regardless of the ways and views of the one we care for on the table before us, we are all as one, human beings all, united in a sacred task.

In caring for the dead, transcending differences and embracing life, we are challenged to build bridges among the living, as reflected in the focus of the earlier part of the meeting. Also during the past week, a day after the Mass Board of Rabbis meeting, imams and rabbis gathered for one of our Building Bridges through Learning programs. The holy texts of each faith become the lens through which we explore difficult issues of our time and common realities of life. The focus of this gathering was challenging, "Jerusalem/Al-Quds – Beyond the Headlines, Holiness and Hope." It was a powerful and inspiring evening in which we embraced both difference and similarity. Stepping back from the intensity of our conversations, unfolding simultaneously at many tables, we paused for prayer. We all stepped into the sanctuary of the synagogue in which we gathered. Needing floor space in which to bow and bend to Allah, our Muslim partners prayed in a foyer just behind the synagogue benches. The Jewish participants moved forward, mostly standing alongside the benched to daven Ma'ariv. The sounds of Hebrew and Arabic mingled, soul tunes rising as one song to the Holy One. When we had all finished our prayers of evening, we gathered together at the front of the sanctuary to respond to questions and offer explanation to our friends about the synagogue and its ritual items. Sharing of our selves became its own expression of Amen/Ameen to the prayers each had just offered.

The group was drawn to a glass cabinet on a wall to the side of the Holy Ark. In the large display cabinet was an open Torah scroll, one of the Holocaust Torahs

that have been dispersed throughout the Jewish world, each telling of the community from which it came, of those who had once so levelingly chanted the words written by a long ago scribe. There was a hushed and holy sense in the air as questions were asked about the Holocaust, about the journey of the Jewish people, about the journey of this Torah. Some of us could feel that long ago scribe smiling down as attention was drawn to the convention he had followed in writing that scroll. It was written in a way that every single column of the Torah begins with the letter "vav." Every column therefore begins with the word "and," that simple expression of joining one to another.

In this week's Torah portion, a double portion, *Vayakhel-P'kudei*, the desert sanctuary, the *Mishkan*, is completed. As we read through all of the accountings that tell of the gifts the people brought, we read of the hooks that joined the grand tapestries of the tent together as one. It is such a simple and beautiful word, the name of a letter. Every hook is called a "vav," and in the plural the hooks are *vavim*. It is the letter *vav* that joins us together as one. Staring at that open Torah scroll, Jews and Muslims together, we were joined as human tapestries, all the more beautiful in our becoming one, joined by the *vavim* that tell of each one's importance in relation to another, this one *and* this one *and* this one, each one as the first letter of one column in a sacred telling. In hearing each other's stories, we transcend division and difference, learning to honor the sacredness of life.

As one effort to build bridges with our neighbors, I am honored to share with you the attached Statement on Jewish-Muslim Relations of the Mass Board of Rabbis.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor