

Dear Chavraya,

I have just returned from El Paso, so much in the news lately. The emergency at the border is the emergency faced by so many suffering human beings fleeing violence and poverty, desperately seeking refuge. My mind is flooded with images that come on a flow of tears. My heart is breaking from what I saw in just a few days, traveling to witness and to bear witness with T'ruah, the rabbinic call for human rights, and HIAS, the venerable organization that was founded to help Jewish refugees when no one else would, now an organization that is acting from that memory to help all refugees. Our dear friend, Rabbi Salem, did a magnificent job as the T'ruah facilitator.

I feel overwhelmed and exhausted, at times unable to stop crying. I will share for now what I can of images and vignettes that come to me, fragments of thoughts that swirl, some of the heartache and some of the hope. Going forward, I will share more, planning to send out in the coming week ways that people can help those who suffer and those righteous ones who are helping them. In the brokenness of my heart there is a silent space from which I seek to hold and to hope, to search out the ways in which we are called to act in response to a moral emergency.

As in the way of the Haggadah, we begin the telling from the place of shame and move toward the praiseworthy. So we began with a visit to the Otero County Processing Center, a privately contracted prison in New Mexico. The very idea is scandalous and revolting, that a corporation is profiting from the misery of human beings. We were led on a tour of the prison by the warden herself, along with a Protestant chaplain and an ICE agent, all clearly wanting to show us how well they do in caring for those incarcerated there, clearly wanting to show their professionalism. We could see men in chains being processed. The warden simply opened the door to dormitory rooms, no knock, of course, no regard for the dignity of those inside. Before leaving one room, I asked the warden to please say in Spanish to the men we had intruded upon that we thank them. She looked at me quizzically, but she did say it to them. We waved to the men we passed, giving thumbs up. I tried to make eye contact with as many as I could, touching my heart, extending my hand. The motto of Otero is "BIONIC," for "Believe It Or Not, I Care." I don't believe it, not for a moment. I was filled with the awful sense of Hannah Arendt's description of the work done for the Nazi state by "good Germans," the banality of evil.

I thought again, and so many times over, of the Haggadah, of our own story of degradation and liberation when we came to a privately run children's home. There seemed to be a genuine sense of caring for the children among the staff, but how to balance caring and the policies that have resulted in children essentially incarcerated, without parents, trauma on their faces, not free to leave, not free to be children? I keep seeing the face of one child, a boy of perhaps fourteen, sitting in the back of a classroom, soft, shy eyes, short, curly black hair, an unformed question on his lightly pursed lips, as though asking so many more than four questions, why, a hundred times, why? As I try to hold this child's face, it merges and becomes one for me with the face of a Holocaust child that stares at me weekly from a page in a small book of Shabbos table songs and

blessings. I imagined his longing for his parents, of his parents for him, wondering of their whereabouts, wondering if and when they shall be reunited. I wondered if he would be for me this year the simple child or the child who does not know how to ask.

There are the righteous human beings, among the most righteous I have ever encountered, those with little time to ask of why or when, but only to do all in their human power to lovingly assist the thousands upon thousands of people who come seeking asylum, seeking shelter, most of whom will never find a place in America to call home, but who now need a roof, a bed, food, and comfort. The finest of Catholic faith is expressed by saints, by those who struggle daily to meet overwhelming human needs. We would call them *tzadikim/the righteous ones*, people such as Reuben Garcia, who has directed Annunciation House for more than forty years. On the wall of the room in which we met with Reuben is a large crucifix formed of wire boxes. In each box that forms the cross is a pair of dusty shoes. They are shoes worn by migrants as they made their way through the desert. Staring at the shoes, I could only think of the piles of shoes stacked in the concentration camps, there where the journey ended for so many of our people.

At the Hope Border Institute, encountering more of the *tzadikim*, we were told of how the border has been a “laboratory of injustice,” but for them it is a “landscape of hope.” Our guide into Mexico was a young man named Diego, someone whose life represents the hope waiting to flower from that place. He grew up in Juarez, just over the border from El Paso. As a child, he would go back and forth for school, as so many did, for school, for work, to shop. He spoke of his hope for the area, for the “borderlands,” a place that is one community on both sides of the border. He spoke of the gash formed by the wall that cuts through the region, dividing human beings from each other, people who are meant to be as one in the borderlands. It is a beautiful image for the whole world. That is part of the teaching that rises from the “landscape of hope.”

As we made our way on foot back across the bridge between Juarez and El Paso, we encountered US guards just before reaching the border itself. They are standing illegally on the Mexican side of the border, cynically placed there to prevent migrants from stepping onto US soil, from which legally they are entitled to ask for asylum. From the bridge we could look down through steel grating and see migrants who had been arrested being herded into a makeshift camp, there beneath the bridge. In that moment I so wished that I had superhero powers, my body and soul aching to swoop down and carry them all to safety. I sang the words of Rebbe Nachman to myself as I cried, *kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar m'od v'ha'ikar lo l'fached k'lal/the whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is not to be afraid at all*. I hoped that somehow my singing might help the people below to find courage and not be afraid, even the children.

Standing at the wall that cuts through the heart of the borderlands, I searched for hope in the eyes of the children of Juarez with whom we spoke through the steel slats. With the help of others who could translate for me, I responded to one bright-eyed boy of eleven who asked me my name. When I told him that my name is Victor, he laughed and said, “no, it can't be, that's my name.” We

laughed and joked for some time. Diego was standing beside me and he explained that there is a special relationship between people with the same name. In Spanish, he explained, each partner of the same name is called a "tokayo" in relation to the other. I extended my hand through the slats and kept saying to little Victor, "tokayo, tokayo."

Just to the side of where I stood with Victor there were photographs taped to the cold steel, pictures of two other children, Jakelin and Felipe, the two children who died while in detention, their memories blessing the borderlands that it might yet become the landscape of hope it is meant to be. Her fingers gently curled around the steel edges of the slats, touching the photographs, a girl-woman of sixteen spoke with us, telling us of her coming marriage. A child-bride, her words carried wisdom beyond her years, words of lament for the suffering of so many, for those who had died, for those who struggle to find hope as they make their way through the borderlands.

In her shy smile, this girl about to be thrust into womanhood, motherhood undoubtedly not far off, I saw the face of Our Lady of Guadalupe as depicted in brilliant colors on a wall of Casa del Migrante, a shelter that we visited in Juarez. We were introduced there to a woman whose arm was in a cast. She had traveled some two thousand miles on foot from Honduras to Juarez with a broken arm, receiving medical attention only once she arrived in the shelter.

In the silent space amid the cracks of my broken heart, I am seeking, searching out the lessons of this journey to the borderlands. It is the silent space from which God calls to us. It is the silent space that we are called to enter in the very middle of the Torah, in the heart of the Torah, the silent space of the borderlands between the beginning and the end, the place where journeys meet as one. It is in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'mini*, that we come as migrants to the very middle of the Torah, the silent space that lies between the two words *darosh* | | *darash* and *Moses diligently searched*. So it is for us to search, to seek, to hear God's call from the very middle of the journey as we seek our way across the narrow bridge. At the very end of the parsha, God tells us as we make our way through the desert, *ki ani ha'shem ha'ma'aleh etchem me'eretz mitzrayim* / for I, God, am the One Who leads you up from out of the land of Egypt. We are one with those who seek the way up from the all the lands of their suffering, seeking refuge among us. I pray that we shall be as God's angels, like the *tzadikim* of the borderlands, helping them to make their way to safety, traversing what might yet be a landscape of hope.

As we davened *Mincha* right alongside the border wall, song and prayer wafting through the slats to our young friends, I heard my name called as had never happened before in prayer. My eyes were closed as I prayed the *Amidah*, touched by fervor, by yearning. In the midst of prayer, I heard my name called by an angelic voice, gentle but insistent, calling over and over again, *Veector, Veector, Veector*. I began to smile, bursting with emotion, joy and sorrow all rolled together. It was God's voice calling through little Victor, my *tokayo*, my friend. So may God's voice of love and support be heard in human key, heard by all who make their way through the borderlands.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor