

Dear Chavraya,

I continue to reflect deeply and to feel deeply as I process all that was experienced in my journey to the borderlands, as I wrote about more fully last week. I am amazed at how easily tears come as I read the news, taking in the hateful words, taking in illogical and immoral policy suggestions. I continue to write, in part as a way to contain emotions and thoughts that so easily spill over their banks. I have expanded what I wrote last week and share some of that now in relation to this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tazria*. Hidden amidst details in this parsha, as in much of the third book of Torah, *Sefer Vayikra*, there are glowing sparks of humanity, lessons in human goodness that wait to be lifted up and fanned into flame. We saw so much goodness, goodness that was palpable. And we saw evil, an encompassing evil that flows as the sludge from inhumane policies, from hardened hearts that seem inured even to the cries of babies. Hardly a new question, I wondered about those who carry out the cruel policies, the jailers, the judges, the border guards. I wondered how they sleep at night, how they hug their own children. I wondered how deep within themselves is the spark of their own goodness that waits to be called forth. I wondered when they shall finally cry out in the night.

We saw among ordinary people, presumably otherwise good people, such as prison staff and border guards, an amorphous allegiance to the state that blinds eyes and heart to the desperate needs of human beings standing before their very eyes, placed by circumstance into their control. At the same time, in its cynical manipulation of language and policy, referring to "illegal" migrants, illegally moving U.S. border guards onto Mexican soil, we saw how the government itself shows no allegiance to the very laws that are meant to reflect the more humane principles upon which this country's moral survival depends. I thought often of the challenge set forth by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century Germany) in his Torah commentary to Exodus chapter 23, verse 9 and the Torah's oft repeated exhortation not to mistreat or oppress the stranger: "The treatment accorded by a state to the aliens living within its jurisdiction is the most accurate indication of the extent to which justice and humanity prevail in that state."

Just before God's promise to lead us up, at the end of *Parashat Sh'mini* (Lev. 11:44), we are told, *sanctify yourselves and then you will become holy/v'hit'kadishtem vi'h'yi'tem k'doshim*. In a very simple comment that goes to the essence of what it means to be holy, the modern Chassidic Rebbe, the Slonimer Rebbe, known as the *N'tivot Shalom/Paths of Peace*, draws on the classic teaching of the Talmudic sage, Hillel. Offered as a summary statement of all of Torah, Hillel taught: "what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow" (Tractate Shabbat 31a). We need to imagine ourselves at the border, each as a refugee, asking of how we would wish to be treated.

As Jews, we know what that has to mean. We know the ultimate consequence for us of doors closed to refugees. We see the shoes, the piles of shoes; so reminded as we saw in a run-down shelter so filled with love a crucifix formed of wire boxes, in each box a pair of shoes covered with dust from the desert journey. We know to what ends the "banality of evil" can lead. Olfactory memories fill us with nausea, knowing still as though we were there the stench of burning flesh,

feeling in our souls and psyches the horror of bodies turned to smoke and ash. So upon arriving for the start of this journey to the border, I walked to the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center. Simply standing in front of the small, closed building, I wanted to affirm at the start of our journey the Torah's reminder not to oppress the stranger, meant to be felt within each one's soul, repeated some thirty-six times, ...*for you know the soul of the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt / v'atem y'datem et nefesh ha'ger ki gerim he'yi'tem b'erezt mitz'rayim*. What would it mean in the way of knowing the soul of the stranger, and what would be its impact on policy, if we could see in every refugee at the southern border our shared humanity?

At the heart of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tazria*, wandering in search of belonging, seeking human connection, is the leper. The quintessential pariah, the one who is banished, representing all who are rejected, how many borders does the leper need to cross until finding love? The very first word in the chapter that tells of the leper is the word *adam/human*. It is the word used at the outset to describe the leper, not *ish/man*, but a word that reminds that this person who suffers, who is likely disfigured, whose body may be covered with sores and oozings, one from whom we might prefer to keep our distance, this person is a human being, *adam*. So for all who are easily cast off, banished and rejected, each one is created in the image of God. These mothers and fathers and children are the murderers and rapists from whom we are warned away.

That is how the Torah's words concerning the leper are often read, words of warning to stay away. Near the end of the chapter that unfolds from the Torah's teaching of our common humanity, we are told of the leper, *v'tamai | tamei yikra*. Most often these words are translated as, *He shall cry out: impure! impure!* The word *tamei/impure*, however, can simply be read as a noun referring to the unfortunate person them self. The vertical line between the two words indicates a pause, a moment in which to reflect, thus the words can be read, indeed are properly read, as *the impure | the impure shall cry out*. So in this way did the rabbis read the teaching of the leper as offering a model for all who suffer. They read it as a prayer that no one should suffer alone, that none should be rejected as less human, less of an *adam* than anyone else. These three words, said the rabbis, *teach that one needs to make known their pain to the many and the many will seek compassion for them* (Mo'ed Katan 5a).

As such beautiful teaching of love and compassion emerges from what at first seems to be an arid landscape of Torah, so may love and compassion emerge all along the arid landscape of the borderlands, as they become a landscape of hope.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor