

Dear Chavraya,

As we approach this Shabbos of *Parashat Bamidbar*, beginning of the fourth book of Torah, gateway to Shavuous, to Sinai, the Shabbos that is called *Shabbos Kallah / Shabbos of the Bride*, I pause for a moment before entering, before singing and dancing with children to greet Shabbos. In the *desert/midbar*, God *speaks/m'daber* and God's *word/davar* remains. Shavuous celebrates the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai. We were all one in that moment, more than at any other time in our journeys in time and space, all of us, the soul of every Jew who would ever be, all who would be born a Jew or choose to become a Jew.

I have been preparing today for what I will teach tomorrow night at the community-wide Tikkun, the all night learning to celebrate the gift of Torah. Drawing together strands that I give much thought to, my teaching is called: "Receiving the whole Torah, Even the Parts We Wish Weren't There."

That we might come to Sinai more whole in receiving the whole Torah, I share with you reflections on what it means in regard to Torah to draw wholeness out of brokenness. As shared at other times along the way, but still in very much in process, I also share a guide to navigating what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel so helpfully calls the "harsh passages."

Shabbat shalom and Chag same'ach,
Rabbi Victor

Reflections on Receiving the whole Torah, Even the Parts We Wish Weren't There:

Only in entering the "harsh passages" of Torah, as Rabbeinu/our teacher Heschel so aptly calls them, do we learn to wrestle with violence and learn how to transcend violence, first in Torah, and then in life. Bravely entering the places we would prefer not to go, we encounter others who struggle, learning from their wrestlings, joining ours with theirs across time and space, becoming a timeless movement for justice, peace, wholeness, and gentleness, finding with their help our own voice with which to cry out, to challenge - in Torah and in life.

We scream, we cry out, and we ask where to go from here and how do we get there? The Torah is a context for struggle. It is called *Torat Chayyim / Living Torah*, Torah of Life. It is real and often as seamy and sordid as it is sublime, a reflection of life in all realms of life. Receiving the whole Torah, even the parts we wish weren't there, we are meant to wrestle and to struggle with life as it is reflected in Torah in order to learn how to struggle with life as it happens around us. The challenge is to learn ways of redirecting the violence, of transcending and transforming the seamy and the sordid, of text and of life.

That is why we engage with texts, to learn about life and how to live. The Torah is holy because it challenges us to be holy, not only through exhortation, but through engagement in real time with the profane as well as the sacred, all part of life. Moved by the beauty of creation as it is in the world around us and by the words of *B'reishit / Genesis* that describe the world's coming to be, moved by the laughter of children and by the flowers that sway in a summer's breeze, we know that it is "the compassion, justice, and wisdom" that are meant to abide for all time, the vision and the way until we get there, when the harsh passages shall be but a memory of a long and arduous journey.

A Guide (in process) to Navigating the Harsh Passages of Torah and Life

- 1) First is to stop and be horrified, to breathe deeply, to feel the pain that there are such passages in our holy Torah
- 2) The challenge is to pause, to acknowledge and to stay in that place, to bravely pass through the "harsh passage," not to ignore, to skip over or otherwise pretend it is not there.
- 3) It neither helps to engage in apologetics, to explain in the context of time and history, as though our world is any less violent, nor to slam the book shut and refuse to open it.
- 4) We engage and question -- is the violence the message or is it in conflict with the message of Torah?
- 5) What other values, teachings, and mitzvot of the Torah can I draw on that challenge the violence of the harsh passage I am facing?
- 6) What other incident or encounter in the Torah can I draw on that contains the potential for violence but offers a different outcome and way of resolution? It may be a situation of potential conflict and violence precipitated by people, as between Isaac and the Philistine chieftain, Phichol, or God's readiness to destroy the people of Israel after the incident of the golden calf. In each case, talking and engagement made the difference.
- 7) If a different way worked there and then, what would another way of response be here and now? And so for us today, in this here and now...? In text and in life...
- 8) Look carefully..., do I see anything in the text itself that counters the violence...?
- 9) Go back to the very beginning, read the first lines of Torah, remember that this is the essence (of Torah), source and starting point, feel the beauty, be filled with God's breath, hold the vision of creation as God meant it to be, the world birthed gently and so to become...
- 10) Consider the larger context of Torah, beyond the harsh passages...; drawing out, engaging the teachings of nonviolence that flow as a stream from the very beginning, from God's gentle breath upon the water.... Draw on explicit teachings that counter the harsh passages, and seek out brave figures of nonviolent resistance, the midwives, Pharaoh's daughter; those who do righteousness and justice, who argue with God. Consider why a lengthy midrash on peace following the peace offerings...; Consider the compassionate response to the leper that pleads from beneath the surface of the text...; and write your own midrash that emerges from your wrestling with Torah and life....