

Dear Chavraya,

Mieke and I have just returned home from Brazil, a fascinating and challenging trip. As I shared somewhat last week in writing from Rio de Janeiro, I found it hard to hold the contrasts in a place of overwhelming natural beauty and great human misery. It is not so different, though, than the contrasts to behold and to be held in so many places. The challenge is to see both, the beauty and the misery, letting each inspire us toward a way of living and being in the world that strives to bring the beauty to touch the misery and kiss it away through human love and its imperatives.

My thoughts flit about as a bird searching for place, unsure of where to alight, the swirl of journeys seeking resolution, home but not quite. Memories may come more easily when tired, when more vulnerable. As I slept upon our return, intermittent deep and fitful sleep, I dreamed of a long dead beloved auntie last night, and so we called her, Auntie. She was thrilled to see me, and I her. She owned a dress shop in Winthrop center. The family would often gather at her house on Sunday afternoons. She was an intellectual, a lover of ideas, of music, and art. There was a very large painting in her living room in stark black and white, a copy made by her son, Leon, of Picasso's Guernica, telling of the horrors of war, of human brutality, set in the Spanish Civil War, German proving ground for horrors soon to come.

Of those who came before, I think of my grandparents on this Shabbos of *Parashat Balak* (Numb. 22:2-25:9), particularly of my grandfather. It is my Bar Mitzvah parsha. The old shul where I celebrated my becoming Bar Mitzvah closed recently, a place where many moments in the life of my family were marked, most recently my father's funeral. As part of the closing rituals for a beloved building, people were invited to come and retrieve various memorial plaques. I have a small leaf from a "tree of life" that was on a rear wall of the social hall, the vestry as it was called, a term seeming un-shul like. It is a simple piece of brass engraved with black letters all in caps, "IN MEMORY JOSEPH AND REBECCA RABINOVITZ." As I walked into the "vestry" on that recent Sunday morning, I paused at the bottom of a set of stairs. My eyes filled with tears as I remembered a moment I have so often longed to do over. As I came down those stairs filled with relief following the service of my Bar Mitzvah, my grandfather was standing there, just to the side of the stairs. He reached for me, saying my name so lovingly in his Yiddish accent, wanting to hug and kiss me. I felt his whiskered face upon my smooth adolescent cheeks and I pushed him away and fled into the vestry to celebrate. My grandfather died a year later. How I have yearned through the years for that hug and kiss.

Of hubris and humility as these two strands play out in *Parashat Balak*, my grandfather was the epitome of humility, so gentle and unassuming. His way is reflected in the verse of this week's Haftorah from the Prophet Micah that has been a beacon for me throughout my life: *higid l'cha adam mah tov u'mah ha'shem doresh mim'cha...lit has been told to you, O mortal, what is good and what God seeks of you, only to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8). These words are meant to be a mirror for us, to look into and see ourselves as we are meant to be, and so to see each other. We are each meant to be an answer to

God's seeking, challenged to be the way we would like God to see us, so to be and to see ourselves.

Seeing, what we see and how we see, is a central motif in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Balak*. Some form of words for "seeing" and for "eyes" appear some thirty times in the parsha by my count. We are challenged to see all the beauty and all the misery in this world, there to behold and to be held in all the places where our journeys take us. To bring the beauty to kiss away the misery, the kiss of a grandfather's whiskered face upon a the cheek of a man-child, so the way has been given, *only to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*, and so too, as my mother asked me to add in my Bar Mitzvah talk, "to walk humbly with people."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor