

Dear Chavraya,

As the sun begins its descent in the southern hemisphere's winter sky, I send greetings from Rio de Janeiro as Shabbos beckons. Though winter, the temperature has been in the seventies and eighties, not dissimilar to summer weather along the North Sea, where our summer travels usually take us. There it is not until late at night that the Shabbos Queen arrives. In a place that feels very foreign to me, walking along the beach, I breathed the universal essence of sea-salt air and felt a certain sense of belonging in the universe. I am struck by the harsh juxtaposition all around of overwhelming natural beauty and equally overwhelming human misery. So too, I feel sadly at home with a universal reality that waits for redress everywhere.

In the course of our traveling to and arriving in Rio, I have experienced details of essential themes of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chukkat*. Our travel from Boston to Rio took some thirty-six hours due to missed connections and cancelled flights. As we raced from one gate in Miami to another, we arrived at the gate for our departure to Rio just as the gate closed, the plane still at the end of the ramp. With a rather cold response from the gate attendants and little more than a shrug as we asked what to do, I am ashamed to say that I lost my temper and yelled a profanity. My greatest frustration was not for wear and tear, but in the realization that I would not be able to say Kaddish on my father's first yohrzeit the next day. I had carefully made arrangements to get to shul soon after our arrival in Rio, plans which now would be for naught. As frustration bubbled forth, I had channeled the worst of my father, his anger that I had sought so hard through life to distance myself from. So I remembered my father and marked his yohrzeit after all, taking time to reflect on anger and its legacy, and on ways to redirect its negative force into constructive possibility.

Parashat Chukkat is the portion in which Moses strikes the rock rather than speak to it, as God had told him to do to bring forth water. Moses' frustration with the people had bubbled forth in raw anger. He yelled at them and referred to them as *ha'morim/the rebels, the rebellious ones*, hardly as a positive reference to those who would change the status quo for a greater good. The painful and insensitive play on words is unmistakable, *morim* spelled with the same letters as beloved Miriam, *Mir'yam*, who has just died, and with whose death Miriam's well of living water ceased to accompany the people.

As in water and its absence, life and death interweave through the parsha. The portion opens with the ritual of the red heifer as a way of purification following contact with death. So prepared, we encounter Miriam's death and then Aaron's. Our response to death in Jewish tradition remains for us as a way of affirming life. It was brought home to me, the parsha lived in the unfolding of a journey far from home. Mieke and I had arranged with a guide to take us on a tour of Jewish Rio. The guide's own story was fascinating, a weaving together of the Ashkenazic and S'fardic strands of Brazil's Jewish community.

Alberto / Avraham Yosef asked us about our own Jewish lives. In sharing, I mentioned my work with the Chevra Kaddisha. He quickly called the director of the Rio Chevra Kaddisha. Quite unexpectedly, our visit to the building that houses this holy work became the primary part of our tour.

The director, Mair, was delighted to have someone to “talk shop” with. He took us to the *tahara* room, where the dead are lovingly cared for, sharing of local procedures and customs and asking of ours in Boston. With Alberto’s help, we spoke in three languages, Hebrew, English, and Portuguese. There was something both deeply moving and very sad. Unlike our chevra kaddisha, there are no young people involved. Three elderly women serve as volunteers for women. Men are cared for by the staff of the chevra kaddisha and by *chazzanim* from local synagogues. Mair spoke of his various roles in the community, a *chazzan* in one of the shuls, a teacher, a *m’sader kiddushin/one who officiates weddings*, and a *klezmer* musician.

A song of life in all of its seasons, so at the end of *Parashat Chukkat*, Israel is able to sing, *az yashir yisra’el et ha’shira ha’zot/then Israel sang this song*. From Boston to Rio, we are joined with our people in common song. Of beauty and misery the song of others is joined with our own in human symphony, and of sympathy one for another if we would sing from heart to heart. The sun is lower now upon the azure sea and the song of Shabbos begins to rise.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor