

Dear Chavraya,

I spent much of yesterday sitting and speaking with an interviewer from Victoria, British Columbia. He is a historian at the University of Victoria whose research focus is the nature of hate and the way of response to the persecution of others by those who have been persecuted. He works primarily with the Japanese community in Canada, who faced similar persecution to the Japanese community in the states during the Second World War. He is currently engaged in a project to look at whether and how Jewish remembrance of the Holocaust inspires Jewish response to hate directed at others.

It was a deeply emotional day; one that brought me back to an earlier part of my life that was deeply influential to the journeys that have unfolded since. We spent much time talking about people who had been in Victoria during my time as rabbi there, mostly about survivors. The capital of British Columbia, set at the southern tip of Vancouver Island where the waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Georgia Strait meet beneath the snow-capped Olympic Mountains, Victoria seemed to be a magnet for Holocaust survivors. There were probably a few dozen in my early years there, almost all having now journeyed to the next world, *Gan Eden* itself no more beautiful than their last abode in this world.

Some of the survivors came following children, who themselves had sought peace in a far off place among the forests and farms, the mountains and the seas. Others had sought peace for themselves, seeking ease from the memories, solace for the scars they carried of body and soul. They were all so important to me. I sought them out as beloved elders, sitting with many of them and hearing their stories over time. Through the years, I have come to feel their stories so deeply that sometimes they feel like my own and I have to shake myself from reverie, to get up and move about, to remember that they are not mine, and yet, in a way, they are. It becomes a question of how we carry the sacred stories of others and insure their transmission, in word, in spirit, and in deed.

Some of these dear ones spoke at Holocaust gatherings, some refusing to even be in the room if there was talk about the Holocaust. Willie Jacobs, of blessed memory, sought out opportunities to speak in schools and to share his story especially with young people. His wife, Helen, of blessed memory, refused to hear or speak of the hell she had endured. Their dear friend, Rysia, of blessed memory, she and Helen having miraculously stayed together through some half a dozen camps, would not speak in the early years of my time in Victoria. Soon after Willie died, and then Helen, only six weeks after Willie, Rysia responded to my gentle urging and began to share her story, perhaps as her way of honoring her dear friends.

As I sat in my study yesterday and responded to questions about those years and the people whose stories I have tried to honor, we opened files that I have kept through the years. I took out the first talk that Rysia gave after Willie and Helen's death, words that I had transcribed and typed from a conversation at Rysia's kitchen table. We looked at a photograph of the Holocaust memorial in Victoria's Jewish cemetery for whose creation Willie had been the inspiration. Willie stands with his back to the camera in that picture, and just to the side Rysia. Helen

would not have been there, unable to hear the words that would be said at that gathering to honor Yom Ha'Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

There were two primary times of Holocaust remembrance each year in Victoria. One was on Yom Ha'Shoah in the spring. The other was on November 9th, the anniversary of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass that recalls the mass destruction of synagogues and Jewish homes and businesses throughout Germany and Austria on the night of November 9-10, 1938. As flames leapt skyward, charring the very heavens, glass crashing to the ground shattering illusion, the Holocaust began in earnest on that night. The question still hangs as lament and challenge in the pungent night air, how could firefighters and police just stand by and neighbors do nothing as others ransacked and burned?

In the early years, there were many survivors to hear and to honor at these gatherings. At Kristallnacht commemorations, there were several witnesses to the events of that night alone, enough Jews from Germany and Austria to stand with a young person and together light six candles in memory of the places from where they had come, Breslau, Erfurt, Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Vienna. Now, they are all gone, the afterglow of those candles continuing to reflect the light of their souls and of all the other souls.

In the interplay of memory and its imperatives, of mourning and its meaning, the Yom Ha'Shoah memorial was entirely for the Jewish community, gathering among our own, to listen, to grieve, to cry, to sing, transmitting memory, uplifting the souls of the dead. As to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose..., there are times to grieve only among ourselves, to share only within the family, with those closest, with those who carry the same psychic scars of a particular suffering and its legacy. There are times to turn inward, stepping back from the world and into our selves.

And if to everything there is a season, there is a time for outward turning, a time to share our pain with others, to allow it to be held in universal embrace, and a time to speak to the pain of others from the depths of our own. The Kristallnacht commemoration in Victoria was quite different from that of Yom Ha'Shoah. Turning outward, the Kristallnacht observance was held as a very public event, as the events of that night in 1938 had happened in the public square for all to see. Invitation was made to the interfaith community of Victoria. There came to be an annual proclamation from the mayor that honored the event as a time of remembrance and of recognizing the horrifying endpoint to which hate and bigotry can lead. Of many communities gathered in the synagogue as one, the public observance of Kristallnacht became a public expression of commitment to stand together in the face of hate directed to anyone. In those years, Holocaust denial was rife in Canada and the hate from which it comes was frightening. Standing together with our neighbors, we offered witness in the public square to the way of neighborly love that had been consigned to the flames in Germany and Austria on that night when neighbors stood idly by and watched synagogues burn.

As we gather in the low light of Tisha B'Av evening, day of fasting and mourning for the destruction of the Temples, litanies of sorrows, the world itself hanging in the balance, chanting together the mournful trop of *Eicha/Lamentations*, I think of that tension we sought to balance in Victoria, when and how we enter into our own place of mourning and when and how we stand with others. It is not only about standing with others to remember and share our own sorrows, but about when and how we stand with others in the face of their sorrow and suffering now, helping to hold their burdens. Part of the challenge of remembering is to insure that we do not become like those who stood idly by then. In remembering and holding our own experience of suffering, we are meant to see through the prism of our tears the many facets of God's image in every human being and to respond to their tears. In the painful debates today as to whether we dare speak of concentration camps that hold migrants at the southern border, we risk forgetting one of the essential elements of remembering. We remember in order to honor. We remember in order to live in relation to others in a way that none shall ever suffer the horrors we have known.

The Torah itself makes clear that our own experience of suffering is meant to be the basis for protecting all who are vulnerable. Thirty-six times the Torah commands that we not oppress the stranger, the immigrant. Each time, the reason is meant to pierce our hearts and remind, *for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. We have a sacred obligation as Jews to remember our own. So too, we have a sacred obligation to draw from our own experience of suffering a way of compassion and a voice from which to respond to the suffering and brutalization of others.

On the evening of Tisha B'Av we turn inward, sitting on the floor as mourners, lights dimmed, chanting words of lament, weeping for the horrors described from long ago, remembering horrors of times closer to our own from which words of witness are still fresh in the air. On the afternoon of Tisha B'Av at 5:00 o'clock we turn outward, gathering in the public square at the JFK Plaza of the Federal Building downtown to cry out for the horrors visited on migrants at our southern border, to lament the hunting and hounding of so many who are most vulnerable in our land. Immediately preceding Tisha B'Av, this week's Torah portion is *Parashat D'varim* (Deut. 1:1-3:22). It is the first portion in the fifth book of Torah, *Sefer D'varim*. Understood literally, the name of the fifth book is the Book of Words, a reminder to consider how we use words, whether to join or to separate, to uplift or demean, to trivialize or to sanctify. This Shabbos before Tisha B'Av is also called *Shabbat Chazon/Shabbos of Vision* from the first word of the Haftorah from the prophet Isaiah. What shall our vision be, of destruction of which we are warned, or of justice for which we are challenged?

Time-worn file folders open before me that tell of journeys in time and worlds between, words and visions of those who would speak and those who would not, inward turning and outward, in the echo of the shattering a silent plea to remember and never to stand idly by.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor