

Dear Chavraya,

A comforting image comes to me on this Shabbos, a tune forming in my heart, words rising to my lips to sing of a moment. Many years ago on this Shabbos of Comfort, *Shabbos Nachamu*, I asked my congregation in Victoria, British Columbia, as I would ask you now, a simple and elusive question, where do you find comfort? As the question hovered in the air of the sanctuary, rising up to the high vaulted domes above, my then two year-old daughter Noa, now a mother of three, toddled down the center aisle and without a word reached up her little arm and handed me a single sprig of lavender.

I weep for the loss of innocence that somewhere seeks to abide. I weep for the loss of compassion in the collective expression of who we are as a nation. I weep for the hate and violence that tears us asunder, for the bigotry and bravado that shouts to the world the worst of who we are. I cry out, screaming through tears, "how dare you!" to those who would steal away the fragile sources of our comfort, who would stomp as with jackboots on little sprigs of lavender, and even on the tiny hands that hold them, those who would put children in cages.

For all the horrors that have come to beset us, afraid each day in waking of what the news will bring, I found myself reeling this week, feeling personally assaulted, unable to breathe, "how dare you, how dare you," words that have come to me again and again. In this week following the horrors remembered on Tisha B'Av, day of mourning and fasting, laments and dirges for our own sufferings, of exile and wandering; Jews gathering around the country to speak from our own experience as refugees to the pain of those suffering today at our southern border, so the insult that twisted the words of a Jewish poet. Tempest-tossed in the sea of my own emotions, the gall of one more who would tear the shreds of our decency with Orwellian inversion of the precious words of Emma Lazarus. I thought of the opening of Franz Kafka's "Amerika," a young man standing at the rail of a ship entering New York Harbor, gazing out, "...as though in an intenser sunlight. The sword in her hand seemed only just to have been raised aloft, and the unchained winds blew about her form..." (Amerika, p. 3).

I felt insulted and kicked as a Jew this week with this brazen attack on a Jewish poet whose words have offered hope to so many millions, that have proclaimed the best of who we are, of what America is meant to be, words that have offered a sacred challenge and reminder in the face of all that would deny them. As though taking a hammer and chisel to the base of this towering woman, the statue and the poet, who in her presence speaks truth to power, an obscenity in the words of the director of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, "give me your tired and your poor who can stand on their own two feet and not become a public charge..." I thought of my grandparents, poor, unskilled, uneducated, seeking a new life in the *goldene medina/the golden land*.

In the poem, "The New Colossus," the statue is also called "Mother of Exiles," her lamp clearly raised to those who wander in search of shelter, those fleeing hunger and persecution. They are not the well off who can stand on their own two feet, not yet, but in time. Emma Lazarus wrote her poem in part in response

to the horror she felt for the suffering of fellow Jews in the Russian pogroms of the late nineteenth-century. From the suffering of her own people, she reached out to all people, kindling with her words the light of hope that would shine from the “beacon-hand” of the Mother of Exiles.”

It is the week of *Parashat Va'etchanan* (Deut. 4:23-7:11), in which Moses pours out his heart as he recalls to the people how he beseeched God to let him enter the Land, which alas was not to be. That others might enter this, our American land, the word *va'etchanan* tells of prayer as supplication, prayer that pleads from a shattered heart, prayer that purifies the land on a torrent of tears. Please God, help us to find comfort, to restore decency, to dry the tears upon the face of the Mother of Exiles and upon the faces of all the children for whom she weeps. This Shabbos of Comfort begins a seven-week journey that brings us to the edge of a new year and its renewal. These seven weeks are called the *Sheva d'N'chemta/the Seven of Comfort*, so describing each of the seven prophetic readings of these Shabbatot, seven Haftoras from the Prophet Isaiah that offer comfort after the horrors recalled on Tisha B'Av. On this *Shabbos Nachamu*, the Shabbos of Comfort that begins the seven, an answer is given to our seeking of comfort, a hint of the source from which it comes. We are to be the comforters. As God inspires us to do likewise in kissing away our tears, it is ultimately for each of us to be the comforter, God calling to us through the Prophet Isaiah: *nachamu nachamu ami yomar elokeychem/“comfort, comfort My people,” says your God* (Isaiah 40:1). One who would comfort is one who can love, who offers the hope of wholeness from out of the midst of brokenness. Of those who suffer most, the innocence of children in its discomfoting impels us to act, and in acting for their sake a measure of comfort to find.

As its own offering of comfort, of prayer and protest, please read below the poem of Emma Lazarus, speaking her words as supplication, words to know in their truth, words to hold and protect that they not be abused, nor the people to whom the lamp is raised. As did a little child so long ago, so it is for each of us, ever so gently, to offer to each other a sprig of lavender. A tune forming in my heart, words fluttering on my lips, the memory of a moment still brings comfort: *Little girl with a sprig of lavender, gentle be, gentle she, comfort ye my people; comfort ye, comfort ye with a sprig of lavender.*

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

The New Colossus
BY [EMMA LAZARUS](#)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"