

Dear Chavraya,

As I looked into my closet this morning, I saw the red zippered cardigan and thought “of course,” as I reached for it with a smile, “this is the right day to wear it.” As I put it on and paused for a moment, already feeling the swirling emotions I knew this day would hold, I felt warmed by Mister Rogers’ spirit, as though emanating from the place in which it was nurtured, his real life neighborhood of Pittsburgh. There is such horrifying irony and painful dissonance between Mister Rogers’ essential theme and what happened in that place one year ago this weekend. Expressed both as an offering of comfort and as a hope and goal, so he sang each day, “it is a beautiful day in this neighborhood.”

A year has passed since the horrifying Shabbos attack on Jews at prayer in the Tree of Life Synagogue. We remember the eleven lives torn away by the bullets of hate, holding their souls among us as a blessing. So many more shootings have happened since that Shabbos, so many more dead. Guns still proliferate, so many empty words said, hate given place and play among us, walls both of steel and of spirit continuing to be built and raised ever higher. As one human organism, the parts of our interconnected body are cut and bleeding. Looking out through tears to see the oneness of sisters and brothers, siblings all, the goodness of so many hearts seeks to comfort and to heal, to bind up our wounds and make us whole.

In earlier times of national stress, Mister Rogers would look into the eyes of all his children beyond the screen and he would share the words that his mother said to him when he was a child, “look for the helpers.” They were words meant to both comfort and to encourage, a reminder that there are people who care for you and who are concerned for you, but they were also and continue to be words to empower, words that point toward action. There is a certainty in those simple words that there are helpers, there are people who step into the breach to do what is needed. These are the activists who come forward to look after the needs of others, whether in times of crisis or amidst the ordinary stresses and needs of life. To help, to do good is the most basic way and underlying motivation of all activism, simply to open one’s eyes and be moved by the image of God in another, in every other, until there are no others, all joined together as one by the very differences that once had served to divide.

On this Shabbos, we are honoring “the helpers,” the Community Safety Volunteers who surrounded us with love on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, providing steady presence in ones and twos and threes and fours and more during all the times of our gathering. They stood outside in the rain and in the dark, they welcomed us as we came to pray and they watched to be sure we were safe. I cry as I imagine the thought of non-Jews protecting Jews at prayer in a synagogue. Images come of times in our history when we were besieged as our synagogues were attacked by hateful mobs; times when our bodies were burned along with Torah scrolls and holy books as flames engulfed the synagogues in which we had gathered.

I am grateful to these, our beautiful neighbors, who show the hope and the depth of what it can mean to “look for the helpers.” It is not only to find comfort in the midst of immediate crisis, but as a way to see the nature of change and its gentle emergence even as so much violence still proliferates. Such love is the antidote and the hope in the face of the violence and hate. Remembering the horror that engulfed us one year ago with the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue, our own Community Safety Volunteers are the helpers to whom we look to help us see beyond the horror. So too we honor and express gratitude to Kavod for pioneering an approach to communal safety and security that as part of its own process builds relationships among diverse communities so that we can all be there for each other, each of us keepers and protectors of the other’s wellbeing.

Turning back to the very beginning of the Torah reading cycle, coming this week to *Parashat B’reishit*, we encounter all of the beauty and brokenness of life. We feel the beauty of creation, breathing with God as the Holy One breathes the world into being with a gentle breath upon the water. We are touched by the wholeness of Eden, all creatures living peaceably with each other and with earth, each one eating of the same produce, none to hurt or to destroy. So quickly we come to that shattering moment, brother rising against brother when Cain kills Abel in the field. As from the first, so every death of one at the hand of another ever since has been fratricide. Almost plaintively, God calls out to Cain, *ey hevel achicha/where is Abel your brother...?* And then the answer, so painful in its failure to recognize connection, *I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper/ha’shomer achi anochi?”* The cynical failure of that answer echoes through time, the unmistakable clarity of the answer not given meant as God’s challenge to each of us, to every human being. God awaits from us the answer that did not come from Cain. God too is telling us to look for the helpers, and then to become one.

Putting on a red zippered cardigan, I feel the warmth of its association, its hope of a beautiful day in this neighborhood. One year ago, that very neighborhood was shattered by a hater’s attack on Jews at prayer. As we honor our own helpers, those who have surrounded us with their love, so may we also be there for them, all of us together being the helpers who are there for each other. Through such loving presence of one for another, we honor with hope those whom we remember in the turning of a year, their memories a blessing.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor