

Dear Chavraya,

I met this week with an elder friend at his home. At ninety-five years, he is still an indefatigable activist for peace and justice. As I was about to leave, we stood at the door for a moment. Looking at me intently, my friend asked, "Have you given up?" I was a bit startled by the question, the very thought of giving up anathema to me. Somewhere between tears and a shout, I said with unexpected passion, "No, of course not, we have no right to give up!" Then, with equal conviction, my friend said, "That's good, anyone who has given up is not welcome here."

I have been thinking through the week about that parting question, both so troubling and inspiring to me. I could not imagine giving up the struggle for a better world, a more just and peaceful society. It has been a struggle that has called me for what seems to be my whole life, a call to engage for as long as I can remember. However engaged we are in the world and its needs, there are times for all of us when we need to step back, times when we feel soul-tired, times when we need a place to cry as we look out upon so much destruction in the world. There are times when we need the support of others, times when we need the support of our own convictions, times when we need God's support, to take God's hand and walk quietly together.

It is the week of *Parashat Vayera* (Gen. 18:1-22:24). I have been filtering my friend's question through this packed and beautiful, this devastating and powerfully challenging and uplifting Torah portion. It is filled with life in all of its raw beauty and complexity, people in conflict, people in love, people struggling toward wholeness, at times reaching great heights, at times failing miserably. At the outset, Avraham and Sarah teach the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim/welcoming of guests*, becoming a model for all time of graciousness to the stranger, the passerby, the one in need. The absurdly improbable flowering of love comes to be with Sarah's pregnancy at ninety years, her husband at one hundred. The jealousy of Sarah for Hagar plays out in bitter tones that still reverberate through time, the sending away of a mother and child, the separating of brothers. God debates in poignant soliloquy whether to tell Avraham of the thought to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities so filled with violence and cruelty they cannot stand. God does tell Avraham, part of setting forth the mission to be given to Avraham's descendants. Our task shall therefore be *to keep the way of God, to do righteousness and justice/la'asot tz'dakah u'mishpat* (Gen. 18:19). And so Avraham rises to God's challenge and argues on behalf of the people of these violent cities. From the heights to the depths, we rise and fall with our ancestor as he fails to say a word on behalf of his own son, putting a knife to the throat of his own flesh. By what right do we think our children are ours to do with whatever we would? We scream and cry and try to keep going. The portion continues, from heights to depths, ways of war and ways of peace, domestic tensions and modeling of *sholom bayis/peace in the home*.

The journey through *Vayera* is wearing, exhausting us by its end. And yet we stay with it because that is what Torah trains us to do. A scroll of life unfolding through time, we are challenged to think, to feel, to wrestle and struggle with Torah as with life, with life as with Torah. In the way of reading and wrestling

with Torah we are trained to never give up. We make mistakes, we triumph in the way of moral accomplishment, we fall and fail, we grieve and we celebrate, and we keep going because that is the way and nature of life. It is anathema to give up. The challenge of Torah at its end is there from the beginning, *Choose life, so that you may live, you and your children...* (Deut. 30:19). We keep going, we keep walking, we keep on keeping on, as Pete Seeger, of blessed memory, encouraged us with song and a smile, and in the way of the old freedom song, “gonna keep on walkin’, gonna keep on talkin’ on to the freedom land.”

It is the way of our walking that plays out in two models of Torah, the way of No’ach and the way of Avraham. Of No’ach, we are told before the great flood, *et ha’elo’him hithalech No’ach/No’ach walked with God* (Gen. 6:9). To Avraham, God says, *hithalech l’fanei ve’h’yeh tamim/walk before Me and become whole...* (Gen. 17:1). From these ways of walking, with God and before God, No’ach comes often to be seen as the more passive one and Avraham as the more active one. No’ach is seen to do what he is told, not arguing or trying to reason. Avraham is seen as the activist, going out in front, arguing. And yet there are times when Avraham doesn’t argue, times when he fails to act, as on behalf of his own son, Isaac, unthinkingly and unthinkably taking him up the mountain to offer him there upon an altar. And there are times when No’ach steps forward, quiet passion welling up, as imagined by rabbis not satisfied with paradigmatic dichotomies, whether those limiting Avraham and No’ach or those limiting ourselves. A powerful *midrashic* telling in the *Zohar* is set in the moment that No’ach emerges from the ark, eyes blinking, bewildered by what he sees, overwhelmed with emotion: *when No’ach went out from the ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world destroyed/kol ha’olam kulo charav, he began to weep for the world/hit’chil bocheh al ha’olam; he said, ‘Master of the Universe, if on account of sin or on account of those who stray You would destroy Your world, why did You create them? Either this or this, is it for You to destroy? O d’lo tavri enash, o d’lo tavri alma/either do not create the human or do not create the world...* (Torah Sh’laymah, Midrash Ha’ne’e’lam, Noach 22b).

If we would not give up, is it enough at times simply to weep and then to cry out? Is it enough at times to walk with God and tell of our weariness and ask for strength? Is it enough at times simply to keep speaking, even to the wind, in order to remind ourselves why we can’t give up? There is a powerful *midrash* said to have been told by Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory:

A person came to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to plead with the people to turn from their violence, to stop their killing. This person walked the streets of the city day after day talking and pleading, but alas to no avail; the people continued in their violent ways. One day, as the person walked through the streets of the city, a child came up and asked, ‘why do you continue to talk to them, you see that they don’t listen to you?’ And the answer came gently to the child, ‘When I came here, I talked to them in order to change them, now I continue to talk to prevent them from changing me.’

There are times when our activism may be just to “keep on talkin’” in order to remind ourselves of what we believe, a way to insure that we do not give up, that we shall yet overcome and someday reach the freedom land. We need both ways, the way of Avraham and the way of No’ach, each part of one whole.

Continuing to do righteousness and justice as a way of life, we keep going, walking at times with God and at times before God, needing each other. We keep on walkin' and we keep on talkin', at times even to ourselves. At times it may be the challenging question of an elder, at times the innocent question of a child, at times a "voice within me talkin'," each to remind that we are morally bound to never give up; that in my friend's home become the world, we shall all be welcome, affirming with our presence that we have not given up.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor