

Dear Chavraya,

I had come to the meeting feeling somewhat wary, but eager and open to hearing a scholar's presentation on the life and work of Rabbi Menachem Froman. Rabbi Froman was an entirely unique Israeli rabbi who died in 2013. He was a "settler rabbi," which would make him immediately suspect to me. At the same time, the contradictions that made him controversial in very diverse settings have fascinated me. He believed passionately that Jews should be able to live in any part of the West Bank. Yet, he sought accommodation with his Palestinian neighbors and condemned the often brutal and racist behavior of many of his fellow settlers. He felt that Arabs and Jews of the region shared a natural bond through a common attachment to the land. Most significantly, though not formally engaged in politics, he suggested that as part of a two-state solution, Jews should be able to remain on the West Bank as citizens of Palestine, not of Israel. The great question, of course, is how such a conversation about the land and its peoples can take place in the midst of such an inherent inequity and imbalance of power, the occupation remaining for now the backdrop for any such discussion. In the shadow of that question, I sat quietly, gauging when and what I wanted to say as the question and discussion period began following the talk.

As discussion unfolded, from wary but open, I began to feel weary and alone. Not surprisingly, there was much discussion about Zionism, both in theory and in practice. The conversation then turned more broadly to discussion of land and nations, of nationality and nationalism. There was in one comment a tone of disdain for those who eschew nationalism. The thread was clear, from nationalism to Zionism. I could feel within myself an uncharacteristic sense of retreat, as I turned inward. Feeling soul-tired, I realized that it was not so much retreat as weariness. As one who eschews nationalism, I began to feel a sense of personal attack, of not having a place there where we dwelled in conversation. Feeling a deep attachment to what is best in America's elusive image of itself, so too I recognize the gifts of other nations and peoples, and the equality of all among the family of nations. Similarly, I would never identify as a "patriot," a word and notion that too often comes to express exclusivity in which the interdependence of nations is shunned. I fear the over emphasis of what is seen to be exceptional in regard to one's own nation and people, even one's own group within that nation, that too often comes to be at the expense of the place and rights of others. When we are able to hold in healthy tension the falsely competing needs of both independence and interdependence, we are then able to give due consideration to the commonweal of a common world.

I realized the irony in the timing of this conversation, in the same week as the president's executive order emphasizing Jewish nationality. There is irony, as well, in an order that cynically expands and distorts the meaning of anti-Semitism in relation to the very issues of place and belonging that were at the heart of the conversation from which I had withdrawn in weariness. So too, I realized that it was the week of *Parashat Vayeshuv* (Gen. 37:1-40:23). I have long been drawn to the very first word of *Vayeshuv*, the word itself that gives its name to the portion. As the portion opens, *Vayeshuv Ya'akov/and Ya'akov settled down*, a strange comment is offered in the Talumd by Rabbi Yochanan, *in every place*

where it says *'vayeshev, /leyno eleh lashon tzar/ it is only the language of pain* (Sanhedrin 106a). We struggle to understand, and then we realize that the struggle to understand is not so much with Rabbi Yochanan's words, but with the word *vayeshev* itself and the consequences of not understanding what it means in truth to settle, to live in a place, to truly dwell.

I have long been fascinated with the possibility of a slight grammatical shift in the simple word with which the portion opens, a shift that speaks to a shift in human understanding that is not at all slight. With a shift from *vayeshev* to the more active verbal form of *piel*, we have *va'y'yashev/and he made peace*. Referring to Ya'akov in this case, the teaching is for all of us, to truly dwell is to make peace where we dwell. The word *yishuv* can refer to a community of people, as it specifically refers to the pre-state Jewish community that dwelled in the Land of Israel. In a powerful teaching beyond grammar, *yishuv* can also mean to resolve or settle conflict, as in *yishuv sichsuch*, It was this that Ya'akov failed to do, failing to see the discord among his children, discord that he himself had sown in showing favoritism to one child, to his beloved Yosef, forgetting then the commonweal.

As one family becomes all families, the human family, all struggling to learn the way of making peace where we dwell, I realized with this year's reading of *Vayeshev* a powerful teaching in the words of the portion's first line beyond its first word. It is a line of seven words in the Hebrew in which five of those words are about place and dwelling, and Ya'akov *settled down in the land of his father's sojourning, in the land of Canaan/va'y'eshev ya'akov b'erezt m'gurei aviv b'erezt c'na'an* (Gen. 37:1). Ya'akov's failure, as seen by many commentators, is that he sought to settle down as though all was fine in the world around him, rather than fulfilling the deeper meaning of what it means to settle. In a powerfully moving comment on Ya'akov's failure to make peace where he dwelled, the *Torah T'mimah*, addressing all who would be righteous, offers challenge from the nineteenth century to all of us in whatever time and place we dwell: *for their complete tranquility is not in this world, because it is their duty only to repair the world and fill its deficiencies/l'taken et ha'olam u'l'malei ches'ro'no'teha....*

As we approach Chanukkah and its gentle challenge to raise up light, may the flickering of candles call us forth from weariness to the renewal of voice and spirit. Each one as a *shammes* helping to enkindle another's light, the way of lighting Chanukkah candles is itself a simple affirmation of interdependence. Beyond the narrowness of nationalism, so may it be for nations and peoples, all realizing that we need each other's light if our own would truly shine, all learning together to make peace where we dwell.

Shabbat shalom and Happy chanukkah,
Rabbi Victor