

Dear Chavraya,

Of journeys in time and space, Mieke and I are in Victoria, British Columbia, where I was the rabbi for sixteen years. I will be speaking on Shabbos morning in my old shul. With much opportunity for reunion with old friends, the primary purpose of the trip is a conference at which I will be speaking on Sunday. The name of the conference and its sponsoring project through the University of Victoria is called "Defying Hatred." The project has been studying responses to hate directed at others by communities and peoples who have been victims of hate.

During my time in Victoria there were many Holocaust survivors, just about all of whom are gone now. It is its own interesting question as to why so many found their way to the southern tip of Vancouver Island, thirty kilometers off the coast of mainland Canada. Working closely with the survivors, we started two Holocaust remembrance projects, both of which continue today. As part of his research, I have been corresponding through much of the past year with a history professor at UVIC who directs the "Defying Hatred" project. Last summer, he came to Boston to speak with me about the survivors I had known and to look through my files, bringing many of them back with him to be digitized.

In my talk, I will speak about many of the survivors I knew in those years. As I reflect on this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ve'era*, I have been thinking of one of them, Rysia Kraskin, a warm, smiling woman so filled with life. Looking in my files on the weekly Torah portions from decades ago, I found a note of something Rysia had shared in a Shabbos morning Torah discussion on *Va'era*. As is often the focus in this portion, we were discussing God's names and how each name reflects a different aspect of God. I asked people if they could remember when they first felt aware of God's presence. Remarkably, Rysia said that it was in the camps. I was stunned, and so I continue to be, moved to the core by her awareness of God in the midst of hell.

Parashat Va'era opens with God sharing with Moses the holiest of God's names, the four letter *Shem Havaya/Name of Being*. The same name is also referred to as the *Shem Ha'm'forash*, which can mean either the name that is separate or the name that is interpreted. God tells Moses that the earlier mothers and fathers of our people did not know God by that name, meaning that they did not understand that aspect of God, *u'sh'mi ha'shem lo nodati lahem/by my name ha'shem I was not known to them*. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch translates these words somewhat interpretively, God saying, *I had not become known to them as that which my Name Hashem implies*.

In reading these words this year, I was touched by a painful awareness that we don't understand either what God's most holy name implies. The deepest implication is in the letters themselves that form the *Shem M'forash*. Arranged vertically, the letters *yud hey vav hey* form the human figure. We are each God's name, the human created not only in the image of God, but in the image of God's name. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel brings this home in the title of his very first book, a small volume of Yiddish poetry called *Der Shem Ha'M'forash---*

Mentsch! The human is the *Shem Ha'M'forash*. That which God's name *Hashem* implies becomes very clear. If we would honor God's most holy name, it is every human being who is to be honored as the living embodiment of that name. It is that which Rysia understood in feeling God's presence in the camps. Raising up the holy human letters of God's name wherever they suffer is the implication that awaits our response.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor