

Dear Chavraya,

A long ago feeling, one that I seem to have repressed, came to me this morning as I read of the sickening racist behavior that greeted a group of African American students visiting the Museum of Fine Arts this week. The feeling suddenly emerged, pricked into consciousness by barbs of bigotry. It is a feeling of nausea and helplessness that I felt long ago for my mother. I imagine the pain felt by the parents of these students, the pain of not having been able to protect their children from the ingrained hatred that has seared their young lives.

As child pained for parent, I listened as my mother described what had happened in the school where she was teaching then. She was one of a handful of Jewish teachers in a Catholic girls school in South Boston. One day, clearly on cue, the students suddenly rolled pennies down the aisles between their desks toward their teacher. The Jewish woman who was standing in front of them would have done anything to help them make their way in life, to break out of the self-limiting parameters of the hate they had been fed. I was too embarrassed and pained on behalf of my mother to have asked too many questions, it seems to me now, hearing her words carried on tears over a long-distance phone line. It would have been hard for her not to cry in the moment the pennies rolled, not for her own shame and pain, but for her students, that her students would do such a thing, that they had been so poisoned.

These old feelings welled up as I read the newspaper articles describing the incident at the MFA, feeling the pain of the children and the pain of their parents and teachers as they sought to comfort and to explain realities they could not shield the children from, as I could not shield my mother from. Ingrained and institutional racism is everywhere, jumping out when least expected, as in a museum of culture and creativity, the spirit of each having been eclipsed and made a mockery of on that day when children were not safe to appreciate and delight, the message made clear that they were not welcome.

Perhaps you have read of the incident. Students from the Helen Y. Davis Leadership Academy, a Dorchester middle school whose students and staff are predominantly African American and Latino, arrived at the MFA on a field trip. Soon after arriving, a museum employee told them the rules, "no food, no drink, no watermelon." The blatant racism carried in the last item triggered for me a memory of the pennies. As if that was not enough, the group was then followed close at hand by security personnel, the message made clear that African American students were suspect and unwelcome. And if that was not enough, a museum patron said to one of the female students, "I hope you're paying attention so you don't become a stripper." To date, the MFA has issued empty words, words expressing sadness that the incident happened, never speaking of the racism that fueled the incident, that had infected the museum like so much else of American society and its venerable institutions, the holy places of America's civil religious expression. While representatives of the museum went to the school, it appears from reports that it was hardly to do penance, to seek forgiveness for an egregious wrong, or to seek partners in righting a wrong that continues to fester through time.

It is the matter of time and place and of liberation that makes a connection to this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'har*. The primary theme of the portion is the *Sh'mita/Sabbatical year* and the *Yovel/the Jubilee year*. Every seventh year there is to be a *Sh'mita* year, when the fields are to lie fallow, when all distinctions that divide people are to fall by the wayside. There is no planting and no harvesting, rich and poor to gather in the fields shoulder to shoulder, picking from that which grows of itself only enough for that day's bread. In the fiftieth year, after seven cycles of seven years, the *Yovel* is announced by great shofar sounds calling out into the night as Yom Kippur comes to an end. In the Jubilee year all who are bound are to go free and all are to return to their ancestral land, reminding that all the earth belongs to God.

In the Torah's call to sanctify the fiftieth year, we are told words familiar to virtually all Americans, the words that were placed upon the Liberty Bell, *Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants/u'kratem dror ba'aretz l'chol yosh'veha* (Lev. 25:10). Unable to bear the hypocrisy of uttering those words in a land that enslaved inhabitants brought in chains, the bell cracked, and so it remains. We learn from this portion and its cycles of seven that places are not inherently holy unless they are infused by holiness in time. The message of the seventh year, as the message of the seventh day, is that all are meant to be free and equal. Not even Mount Sinai or the Land of Israel are inherently holy. The holiness of place depends on the way the Torah's call to freedom comes to be rooted in time and over time in that place. In the way that the Liberty Bell cracked from the weight of hypocrisy, so too the institutions that are meant to give meaning to a land and its people, whether of great cathedrals of spirit, or halls of government, or museums. Of the *Sh'mita* year and its call for freedom, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches, *ki k'dushat ha'makom t'lu'ya bik'dushat ha'z'man shel sh'mita/for the holiness of the place depends on the holiness of the sh'mita time....*

On the same words, from the eighteenth century, Rabbi Ya'akov Y'hoshua Falk, known as the "P'nei Y'hoshua," emphasizes the phrase *kol yosh'veha/all its inhabitants* and teaches: *it does not say 'for all its slaves,' but 'for all its inhabitants,' for in a state where there is no freedom, even for a minority of its inhabitants, all its inhabitants are enslaved.... Therefore it says, 'proclaim liberty for all its inhabitants' – by freeing the slaves, all the inhabitants of a state become free.* The same challenge infuses the famous words of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., "no one is free until we are all free." Echoing through the ages, nearly one hundred years before Dr. King, her song of welcome meant to greet migrants to our shores, it is the spirit carried in the words of the Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus, "Until we are all free, we are none of us free."

As long as young students among us cannot enter a museum and be treated with greater dignity than the works of art they have come to see, then neither can any of us stand with dignity before God. When any of our children and any of our teachers are humiliated for who they are, we are all humiliated. The pain of African American parents unable to protect their children from the pain of racism, of a son unable to protect his mother from the pain of anti-Semitism can serve to remind that together none of us need be helpless. When liberty is proclaimed throughout the land in deed as well as word, the crack that divides

us from each other will be healed. The chiming of a great bell made whole will ring throughout the land, as it could not then for hypocrisy, sounding in freedom's chorus with the call of a great shofar rising in the night, free at last, free at last, each one and all of us.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor