

Dear Chavraya,

As Shabbos offers a time of pause in the flow of days, a resting place along the way, so daily prayer offers "Shabbos moments" in the unfolding of a day. Three times of prayer mark the Jewish journey through the cycle of one day's turning. *Shacharis*, the prayer of morning, of day's beginning, from *shachar/dawn*, is by tradition associated with Abraham. *Mincha*, the afternoon prayer, a time of rest/*m'nucha* in the heat of the day, of weather or of frenetic pace, is associated with Isaac. *Ma'ariv*, the prayer of evening/*erev*, of day turning to night, is associated with Jacob.

The locus for *Mincha* is found in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, in the most beautiful verse, *va'yetze Yitzchak lasu'ach ba'sadeh/and Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field....* A word rich in nuance, *lasu'ach* can mean to walk, to journey, as well as to meditate, to pray, to speak. The word sings of nature, of opening one's heart and soul in the presence of Creation, to God, to oneself, to another. *Si'ach* is a shrub or bush, *sichah* being conversation. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov brought both aspects together, praying that it be his custom "to go out doors each day among the trees and grasses, among all growing things and there... be alone; and enter into prayer to talk with the One that I belong to."

Mincha, a time to rest, is described by one commentator, the Torah T'mimah, as a time to rest upon one's arm, as though a worker pausing amidst the day's labor to catch a much needed breath. It is the root of comfort as well, *n'chamah*, and of *nachas*, soul pleasure, quietude, contentment. For all of its gifts, *Mincha* is often the most difficult time of prayer to engage. It is precisely in the midst of the workday, the least defined in its parameters, the easiest to overlook. That is its very gift, a call to remember our souls, our essence and to be refreshed along the way, in the midst of the day. We are told of Abraham in this portion, that he was old; that *he came through the days*. To come through all of our days, to find each one's meaning, at least to be aware that every day of our lives has meaning, so we need to come through each day. *Mincha* is the time to pause and remember that we are on a journey, that as we come through one day, so in the end shall it be that we *came through the days*, all the days of our lives.

For Muslims, five times of prayer mark their journey through one day's cycle. Following a recent meeting of Jews and Muslims in which we wrestled with questions of prayer, of its challenges for each among ourselves and for all of us together, Mohamed and I lingered. He poignantly shared something of his own prayer life. His parents are visiting from Morocco. He told of rising each morning to greet the dawn alongside his father; of the deep soul pleasure, what we call *nachas*, when during Ramadan his children too rose in the lingering dark to pray with them, generations joined in prayer. The glow of Mohamed's smile said all that needed to be said, *ken y'hi ratzon/so may it be....*

It is hard to pause during our busy days. It can also be hard to pray, to overcome self-consciousness. Prayer is an intimate act. With intimacy there comes awkwardness at first. The first intimacy of lovers can be delicious in its awkwardness, and so too intimacy with our souls and with God. Questions come quickly, of belief, of honesty and hypocrisy, of whether or not I do it right, and if

not, better perhaps not to bother. There is time for all the questions, over time, but not to delay the task at heart. I suggest not worrying about any of that in the moment, the barriers of mind and social context that conspire to prevent us from seeing the well so close at hand. When Hagar was in the desert with Yishma'el her son, their water spent, she placed him under one of the shrubs/ *tachat achad ha'sichim*. It is the same word, *si'ach*, in all the richness of its meaning, a song of that which grows, and as when Isaac goes out into the field, *lasu'ach*, to meditate, to journey, to pray. Hagar does not realize that she is in a place of prayer already rising from the natural setting around her, *and God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water/b'er mayyim*.

As Hagar's eyes were opened, it helps at first to close our eyes that we might come to see more clearly. Find a place in which to pause, in the field of where you are through which that day wends. Don't worry about the words of formal prayer if as yet you are unacquainted. Don't let them be a barrier. You can come to know them over time, each one a portal to its own garden. And if you know the ancient words, or when you do, don't forget to also form your own and to be still for a time in the silence of your heart. Begin, simply as in conversation, *sichah*. And may you be refreshed within each day, finding pause in Shabbos moments of renewal.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor