

Dear Chavraya,

In the top drawer of the filing cabinet that is inside the closet just to the right of my desk, there is a folder for each week's Torah portion throughout the year. Many of the folders are a bit dog-eared now, the tabs at the top bent and crinkled, the penciled names of some *parshiot* quite faded, identified more easily by their place in the sequence of portions than by name. So too, some of the papers in the overstuffed folders have yellowed a bit, corners turned inward, as though to read themselves, to reflect on the years that have passed. For more than thirty years, I have recorded notes for every Torah portion, week after week, year after year. Each week's writing becomes a reflection not only on the Torah portion, but on myself, on where I am with that year's reading one Torah cycle later. It is the same portion, but read through eyes a year older, eyes and heart that have been witness to another year of life experience.

There are times when I look back through the years of weeks and their pages, recalling what was happening in my life or in the world that might have given rise to a particular thought or way of engagement with that Torah portion at that time. I sigh frequently when I look back over the years of a given portion, its place in each year's Torah cycle marking the passage of time. Sometimes I laugh and sometimes I cry, so much of life recorded there, a record of learning and of living. Tucked into the back of some folders are the *divrei Torah* given by a Bar or Bas Mitzvah whose *simcha* was on the week of that portion, names recalling faces ever young in the embrace of their portion's folder. I cringe and delight at their irreverent humor and deliciously sophomoric wisdom unfettered by life experience. I am tempted to correct mistakes that my younger self made, whether in matters of grammar or thought, but generally I don't, letting life stand as it was in that time, perhaps with an asterisk added. Sometimes my heart aches for my own innocence, even as I wish to hold on to it, however tempered by events held in turnings of parchment on wood, of years and weeks, of portions in Torah and in life.

Meandering through the pages of years in the folder for this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, I paused in 1993/5753. The blue ink is a bit faded, as is the hope, and what was for some, the premature euphoria that accompanied the signing of the Oslo Accords. My heart ached, even as tears come now, as I read the words I wrote then of what I had spoken about in shul on that Shabbos twenty-one years ago:

During the previous week the news came that Israel and the PLO were close to negotiating the first phase of a peace agreement. I spoke about this in the context of Ki Tavo – when you come into the new land..., a land of peace. I looked at the declaration to be recited on bringing the first fruits to the Temple and pointed out how it referred, even at a time of joy, to sad and painful memories of the past, to our enslavement in Egypt. So at this time, it is not a matter of forgetting the pain in relation to the PLO, but of seeking to bring the first fruits of a new reality. The full harvest cannot come until the first fruits are brought as an offering, and there can be no first fruits without the courage to prepare the soil and nurture the tender shoots of new growth. May the new year we are about to enter be the beginning of a new reality of peace.

In the context of *Parashat Ki Tavo*, and its elaborate ritual for the bringing of *bikurim/first fruits*, I prefer to see the brave efforts of Oslo, not as false steps but as first steps. That should be the way we look back at all of our earlier thoughts and strivings, as steps along the way to our becoming who we are in our ever-emerging fullness. As easy as it is to feel despair on reading my own words from that time, so painfully aware of how far we are from the land of peace, I prefer to nurture the hope carried as first fruits in all their innocence toward the full harvest.

As *Ki Tavo* begins with the bringing of first fruits of the soil, there is teaching at the end of the portion on what come to be the first fruits of our souls and their ripening, the maturation of our ability to know, to see, and to hear as we journey through the weeks and years of our lives. For all that we have seen and known through forty years of the desert journey, for all that we have experienced of God's care and in the blessings and challenges of each other's constant company, we now come to a deeper place of knowing that only comes of living. For all that has been, Moses our teacher now says, *God did not give you a heart to know/lev lada'at, eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day/ad ha'yom ha'zeh.*

This day is every day. Every day we are a little further along toward the ripening of our years. Every day of living life we gain a little more wisdom that comes of the heart's way of knowing, able to behold visions that we have not envisioned before, to hear a new song that we have not heard or sung before. I believe too, that among peoples the wisdom of peaceful ways shall yet be known in its fullness, ripening from first fruits bravely offered. In the Torah cycle of each week's turning, years unfolding, is the telling of our own lives. Whether as held on yellowing pages in the folders of a filing cabinet, or as wellsprings of memory held in the vessels of our hearts, may our own words come back to us and remind us of the first fruits and their becoming in the journeys of our lives.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor