

Dear Chavraya,

Many years ago, as a rabbinical student, I would travel from New York several times a week to teach Hebrew school in a suburban synagogue. In all honesty, it was not one of my more positive Jewish experiences. One incident, disorienting and deflating at the time, has continued to offer an important teaching story for me. At the start of the school year, approaching Simchas Torah, I was excitedly explaining to a class of sixth graders how during the same service we would complete the past year's Torah reading cycle, and then, without losing a beat, we would go all the way back to the beginning and right away begin the new year's Torah reading cycle. In the requisite way of adolescence, making it clear from his slouch and tone that this is not where he chose to be, a boy spoke out from his seat with dry disdain, "we read it last year."

Asked with all the challenge of the "wicked son," somewhere down deep a desire to know and connect, there is an implicit question in the boy's statement that begs to be answered. Why *do* we read the same thing over and over again, year after year? Yes, it is a mitzvah, it is what we do, the reading of Torah joining us together as a people across time and space, a path of parchment traversing the generations. Lessons that remain unlearned we wrestle with again, perhaps to gain new understanding, to embrace more fully. Challenged by law and narrative to engage with life in all of its grandeur and degradation, the text not as history, but as the context of our own lives, a mirror held up in which to see our selves and our time, and in that seeing to know that we are responsible if a way shall be found that leads back to the garden. Whether hearing the story told once again through ancient chant, or read in the quiet warmth of Shabbos at home, it is the family album, telling from whence we have come, of belonging and identity, affirming our own place in the golden chain. If I had then the clarity and presence that comes with years, I might have said to that student long ago, "yes, we did read it last year, but we are different this year and will read the same words and the same stories through different eyes. And then I might have asked, what are some ways that you have changed since last year?"

The Torah is the same, year after year unchanging, but we are different, reading it through the lens of new experience and new understanding. Read from a different vantage point in our own lives, we see things in the Torah and in ourselves that we could not have seen before. As we encounter Torah according to our own need and experience of life at a given time, so in the same way do we encounter God at different times in our lives. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Lech L'cha*, God speaks to Avram and Sarai as *El Shaddai*, meaning "God of the Breast." Their need is for children, and so they encounter God as nurturer, the One who suckles and gives promise of a future. Much later, in the unfolding life of our people, Moses encounters God according to God's name of Being and Becoming, *Ehiyeh Asher Ehiyeh/I Will Be That Which I Will Be*. Moses' need is to see his people free to be and become a people. In the image of God as *Being and Becoming*, so the journey of our lives is dynamic, ever being and becoming.

The way of reading Torah as an ever-renewing journey of self-discovery begins with the very first steps in the journey of our people. That journey begins with *Parashat Lech L'cha*, with the first words that God speaks to Avram and Sarai,

words in Hebrew of powerful cadence, *Lech l'cha me'artz'cha, u'mi'moladit'cha, u'mi'beit avicha el ha'aretz asher areka/Go forth from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your parental home, to the land that I will show you.* Read literally, the words *lech l'cha* mean "go to yourself." Particularly in Chassidic tradition, these words are read as being addressed to each one of us. We do not know the end-point of our journey, the destination toward which our days unfold, but we know that we need to go forth toward becoming who we are meant to be. Of each person's journey, the Slonimer Rebbe writes, *There is no person who is just like another person from the creation of the first human and onward. And there is not one person who is able to repair that which is for another to repair. Thus, there is to every person a unique purpose and task through which to bring repair during her or his lifetime...; lech l'cha/go toward yourself, that is, toward your purpose..., that which you need to repair in this world.*

That we each have our own unique purpose and task in this world is a thread that runs through the writing and teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe. From the first steps of our journey, as it was with Avram and Sarai, our task is to discover the purpose for our being in the world, that which we are uniquely called to do that no one else can do. Yes, my friend of long ago, we did read it last year. For you and for all of us, I would offer a blessing that with each year's reading of Torah we come to know more clearly the purpose of our journey and find much joy in the way of repair that is uniquely our own to share.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor