

Dear Chavraya,

In the searing heat of a summer's mood that tests our own, shimmering haze blurs reality. What is real and what is a mirage, as of water upon the road? Where is summer's beauty, and how shall we understand pain in its midst, able yet to find solace? How quickly we thirst and tire, reaching then for the hand of another, and for a staff to hold and find support, realizing we are joined to each other as branches of a great tree, shelter from the heat both given and received.

Held in the intricate web of one word, these are the questions that emerge from the beginning of this week's Torah portion *Parashat Mattot*. The plural for "tribes," as in Moshe speaking to the heads of the tribes, *mattah* is the singular. It is a fascinating word that suggests much more than a gathering of people joined through bloodlines and history. *Mattah* also means branch, or staff, or rod. As for each person within the tribe, so for the tribe itself, all are part of a greater whole, each but a branch in a majestic tree, the tree of a people, of humanity, the tree of life. Each one as a branch becomes a staff to support another along the way. And from a common root, *natah*, come the verbs to stretch out, to extend, to incline: *she hu noteh shamayim/God stretches out the Heavens*, or *hineni noteh eleyha k'nehar shalom/ behold I extend to her as a river of peace*.

As *Parashat Mattot* unfolds, there is no tree to give of its shelter, no place to hide from the searing heat of violence and brutality. Moses is told to take vengeance upon the Midianites for leading Israel astray. We come back to the same root that offered shelter and support, realizing now that it can also mean to deviate, to distort, to turn aside, as from the true path. It is not that we are led astray, we turn aside, so easy to blame others. Turning to violence, wreaking vengeance, this is the turning aside that still waits for return in the world today. The very one we would harm is another branch in the same tree who is meant to be the rod and staff of our return to the path of life. It is not clear in context, and so the commentators wrestle, whose vengeance is it to be, God's or Israel's? In the space of ambiguity, is one or the other saying no, do not do it? Or, in the timelessness of Torah, is it about us, and never ending cycles of violence and revenge, the text a mirror in which to see and be horrified?

How could Moshe harm the Midianites, having found refuge among them when he fled for his life from Egypt? His wife, Tziporah, was a daughter of Midian, and her father, Jethro, a Midianite priest, was Moses' beloved mentor and guide. There is indication in the text that Moses stepped aside and did not join the battle against Midian. A beautiful teaching in the ethical tradition of *Musar* says, *it is not in the realm of justice for a person to bring distress upon someone who has done an act of goodness for them/she'y'hey maytzar l'mi she'asu lo tovah*, and surely, Moshe was raised in Midian.

So ubiquitous is the distress and pain brought by one person or people upon another. There is also so much goodness that shines through the darkness. In the Jewish calendar, we have entered a time of darkness amid the brilliant light of summer. With the seventeenth of the month of Tammuz this week, we have entered the period of three weeks that bring us to *Tisha B'Av*, day of mourning and fasting for tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people. Through the lens

of our own being and experience we look to the tragedies experienced by others, in the past and in the world around us now, reaching out and crying together. In the midst of summer, we strain not to lose sight of beauty and goodness. The period of the "Three Weeks," as they are called, is also referred to as *Beyn Ham'tzarim/Between the straits*. As at Pesach time, when we seek to come through the narrow places, the straits that hold us in, that is our challenge now as well. Not to cause pain, distress, *meytzar*, to one who has done an act of goodness for us, that was Moses' challenge. It is also our challenge, brought into focus during these weeks between the straits, not to look at the world with narrow vision, keeping others and ourselves in such narrow straights that there is no room to reach for or extend a hand, to be the staff to guide each other out into the light.

Of these summer days between the straits, the Slonimer Rebbe says, *they are as the furrowed ground from which shall begin to blossom the great light revealed*. Looking beyond the haze of summer's heat, may we see in that pure light, no longer a mirage upon the road, the tree of many branches that joins us all as one.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor