

Dear Chavraya,

The scene repeated itself on many a fine sunlit day, “come on Noa, it’s a beautiful day for a hike.” Especially by her adolescent years, if finally cajoled, it was hardly with a smile that my oldest daughter joined me on a wooded trail. Given the unique ability of adolescents to exact a mood-altering price when acceding to parental desires, I would generally end up wondering why I had ever bothered trying to convince Noa to come along. Usually wearing footwear designed to get even because they were impossible to hike in, every trail seemed to be about the same length, a short walk back to the car.

I don’t know whether my perseverance had any long-term time-release influence or not. Nevertheless, I have taken great comfort recently in a retroactive sense of purpose for those many truncated hikes and trails not taken. Writing these thoughts on an airplane while traveling to Los Angeles to visit Noa, her husband Josh, and my son Yossi, I have packed into my luggage hiking shoes for the hikes that Noa has planned for us. I thought wryly of offering some initial resistance, but I couldn’t conceal my excitement. Noa has become quite a hiker. Explaining to me the unique challenges of hiking in the canyons of southern California, she spoke recently about a shortened hike, wisely now, due to rattlesnake warnings. Teasing a bit, I assured her that I would have cut that one short too.

In this week of *Parashat No’ach* and its tale of flood waters and an ark filled with animals, I smiled upon the long ago insight of a seven year old Noa, of a time when rattlesnakes were not to be feared. Discussing together this Torah portion during a year’s sabbatical in Jerusalem, we reflected on what life must have been like on the ark. In this portion of violence and destruction, Noa saw the hope and renewal that is also present. “They all had to share the same food,” she said, “and the rattlesnakes didn’t bite everyone.” The ark is a symbol of sharing, and of harmony and peace, a vision of the way the world should be. Sailing toward the world renewed, the ark is its own destination. In the diversity of this strange ship’s manifest, there is a foreshadowing of Isaiah’s vision of the wolf and the lamb lying down together, and indeed of a little child leading them.

Ever since that moment in Jerusalem, I have cherished Noa’s insight, heard forever in the voice of a seven year old. As it was in the ark, so it had earlier been in the Garden of Eden, and it shall yet be in the end of days, people and animals feasting from the same menu, and not of each other. Emerging from a world consumed in a flood of its own violence, the ark represents a bridge of hope and possibility, the pointing of its compass to a time and place so gentle that even rattlesnakes need not be feared.

As Noa and I hike, I shall nevertheless be wary, not only on the trails of a California visit to my children, but of venom spewed and poison in the world, awaiting cleansing in waters of life not death, and on then to the wellsprings that await at trail’s end.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor