

Dear Chavraya,

At this time of year that marks endings and beginnings, looking back and looking ahead, we come to the end of *Sefer B'reishit*, the book of Genesis, the book of beginnings. I always feel a bit of sadness, perhaps wistfulness is better, as we come to the end of this first book of the Torah. With the death of Ya'akov, last of the mothers and fathers of Israel, in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi*, an era ends and we are left to look ahead. The Torah itself seems to understand that from a place of ending we need a way to look forward to new beginnings, reminding us that we are part of the great circle of life. Indeed the name of the *parasha*, *Vayechi*, means "and he lived," referring to Ya'akov at the outset of the portion that concerns his death.

On his deathbed, Ya'akov calls together his children, ostensibly to bless them, more importantly to encourage them to look ahead beyond his passing. Through his words he imparts meaning and purpose to their lives, and a sense of direction to each one in relation to the other, all of them together in the hearing of each one's blessing. Ya'akov calls for the family to gather and says, *hikabtzu v'shim'u b'nei Ya'akov v'shimu el Yisra'el avichem/join together and listen, O children of Ya'akov! And listen to your father Yisra'el!* Using the name *Yisra'el/Israel*, the call to join together goes beyond the immediate family gathered there, echoing through the generations, calling to us as well to listen. It is in that call to us to join together and listen that a nineteenth century Chassidic rebbe finds the source of meaning that empowers each generation to make the transition from past to future.

In a beautiful teaching of the *Ma'or v'Shemesh*, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Epstein, the call of Ya'akov to gather and listen is an active call whose hearing we are to renew continually. The rebbe is not speaking metaphorically, perhaps suggesting that we listen in on the long-ago conversation in the Torah. He is speaking of real words to be heard from the source. As *Yisra'el*, Ya'akov becomes each one of us. We are each a source of wisdom and meaning, and we are each a recipient to hear and receive the wisdom that comes from the words of another. The *Ma'or v'Shemesh* writes: *the essence of such gathering is that all will be joined together in complete unity/b'achdut echad.... V'chol echad v'echad yishma l'chavero/and each and every one will listen to their friend. And each one will diminish her or himself a little bit in their own eyes because they will want to hear a unique word from their friend, a unique way of how to serve the Holy One, of how to find God. V'chen kulam yihiyu kach/and so it shall be for everyone.*

As we come to the end of *B'reishit*, this beautiful teaching is also for us, the *chavraya* of *Nehar Shalom*. At this time of transition, of endings and beginnings, it is a good time to reflect on who we are and how to give and receive from the diverse gifts and wisdom we each bring to our being a community. We can each do some thinking about the gifts of self we might share and ways of sharing. Stepping out of a certain comfort zone, perhaps we could each take a look at the ever-expanding *Nehar Shalom* members' list and call or send a note to someone we don't know, maybe starting with someone who lives relatively near by. In addition to an array of skills to be shared, if you have synagogue skills such as Torah/Haftarah reading or leading davenning, I invite you and urge you to please come forward and share in these holy tasks that uplift yourself as well as

others. If you have some skills that you would like to dust off and renew, or if there is something you would like to learn, beginning with basic Hebrew reading, please let me know and we will do our best to meet your own need and interest. You could also put out a request for help directly among us on the members' email list. Similarly, if you have a skill or an interest you would like to or could teach and share, please also put word out on the Nehar Shalom email list. Toward responding in the spirit of the *Ma'or v'Shemesh* to Ya'akov's call, *hikabtzu v'shim'u*, to gather together and listen to each other, there will be a Nehar Shalom community meeting on Sunday afternoon, January 24th at 5:00. Please hold the date and watch for more information that will come soon.

Encouraged to look ahead, we come to the end of the Torah's book of beginnings. As with the completion of each of the five books of Moses, we shall lift the Torah up high after the last reading this Shabbos morning and sing out, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek/be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another*. In our giving and receiving, every person a teacher and a learner, so may we be strengthened, each one of us and all together as a community.

Shabbat shalom and "Shannah tovah/a good year,"
Rabbi Victor