

Dear Chavraya,

One spoke of the cigar smoke that attached to letters that came from a grandfather, and another of the smells of a Bobi's kitchen. Bristly whiskers always remind me of my grandfather, of the moment following my Bar Mitzvah service, his face brushing mine as he tried to kiss me and I pushing him away. So often I have thought, if only I could have that moment back. The smell of coffee gave rise to reverie, random thoughts it seemed, shared with smiles across the table before we began our Thursday morning Torah learning at JP Licks.

As is so often the case, what appears to be random is really an arrangement of dots in beautiful design waiting to be connected by experience and association, the colors of life. So our sharing came to be the backdrop as we entered this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayigash*, meaning "and he drew near, approached, came close." The portion sings of human connection, weaving strands of association, signs of longing and belonging that join one to another. Did Yosef, viceroy of Egypt, try to communicate in signs with his father, who long ago mourned his beloved son's presumed death? Did Ya'akov sense that the great man in Egypt was his own son?

When Ya'akov sent his other sons back to Egypt to purchase food in the face of famine, he said to take with them dried nuts and fruit, produce of the Land of Israel. Using a strange and beautiful phrase, Ya'akov tells them, *k'chu mizimrat ha'aretz*, meaning literally, "take with you from the song of the Land." Responding to hints of deeper connection, perhaps Ya'akov hopes that if his sense is true the taste and melody of home will be reawakened in his son, who in turn will send a sign to him. Obscure to all but father and son, the rabbis see the yearned for sign in the wagons that Yosef sends to fetch his father and all the extended family. The word for wagon is *agalah*. In the delicate warmth of midrash, a play is made with *eglah*, meaning calf. From the world of their own discourse and association, the rabbis draw on the name of a chapter of Talmud containing the word *eglah*. The stuff of this chapter, the rabbis say, is what Yakov and Yosef had been learning together at the time of their separation. Of a time long ago, memory is awakened, connection renewed.

When far away from those we love, whether in time or space or even to the world beyond, what will be the spark of memory that calls us to mind? In the here and now we form the bonds that will endure, in the simple ways of day to day. Whether of cigar smoke or kitchen smells, of bristly whiskers or Torah shared, what are the threads of connection that in their weaving join our lives to others?

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor