

Dear Chavraya,

If..., such a small word of such great consequence. It is a word that we most often hear and think of specifically in regard to consequence, more often than not in regard to negative consequence. How sad the image most of us probably hold, from both sides of the wagging finger, “if you do that....” And so the threat of a “consequence.” *If* is also garbed so often with the sigh of regret, “ah, if only...,” whether looking backward to the road not taken, or stepping forward with uncertainty, un-buoyed by faith. *If* rarely expresses optimism, or satisfaction with where along life’s path one is in the moment.

This is also the common way of reading this week’s Torah portion, with all the heaviness of a warning carried upon the heart, of fear instilled. We read a double portion this week, *Parashat B’har-B’chukotai*. *B’chukotai* begins with the word *im/if* – *im b’chukotai taylechu/if you will walk in My statutes*. The first verses speak of the good that will come if we would walk in God’s ways, the preponderance of verses that follow speaking to the consequences of not walking in God’s ways. In a beautiful volume open on my desk, a collection of *midrash* called *Sifra*, the little word *im* sits alone at the top of the page, bold Hebrew letters surrounded by vines. As though giving shape to a garden of possibility, are the vines meant to be weeds bearing thorns, or do they grow upon an arbor, in time bearing fruit?

There is a different way of reading this portion and of reading our portion in life, as reflected in the words that flow from the garden of *if*. The painful imagery of harsh consequence encountered along the way of our reading represents the harsh realities of life. The thorns are real and unavoidable. But whether we walk from out of the garden with fear and regret or faith and hope is up to us. In the midrash that grows just beyond the vines, tendrils of the arbor rising, *im* becomes a word of possibility, of yearning and encouragement, of reaching and relationship. God’s hand reaches out, not to wag a finger as it were, but to take our own and walk together.

As God asks us to walk along the path of God’s ways, *im b’chukotai taylechu*, so the Holy One meets us where we are, *v’hit’halachti b’tocha’chem/I will walk among you*, the worthiness of being human so affirmed. In touching, earthy tones, given voice through Rashi and the midrash, God says to us: *I will stroll with you in the Garden of Eden together as one, and you shall not tremble before Me, able to be and not to fear before Me*. If the garden is of possibility, to make of it what we will, God waits for us there. Of the vine-encircled word, the rabbis say, *im she’hu lashon bakashah/im is the language of seeking*. Walking together in the Garden, not as once before to scold, but there to meet and work together, *im b’chukotai taylechu/if you will walk in My statutes* – this teaches, the rabbis say, *that Hamakom/the One Who is All Place longs for Israel to labor in Torah/amilim baTorah*.

That is the garden, the Torah of life, a way of going /*halichah*, details to mark the path amidst the thorns, not to lose the way, its spirit to ennoble and to remind us in the choices that we make that we are God’s partners with whom God seeks to walk. *Im b’chukotai taylechu/you shall walk in My statutes*, this the Slonimer says is *about going in the way and spirit of the Torah*. And what does that mean? – *that we are to raise up all the ways of the world to the Holy One*. How great is God’s faith in

us, not the *if/then* of fear and trembling and its consequence, but so much possibility if we would but extend our hand to meet the hand extended, that of God and of people.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor