

Dear Chavraya,

With our community meeting on Sunday, I am drawn to teachings about community that emerge from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo*. It would appear at first to be an unlikely place in the Torah to turn for teaching about community. At this stage we are not a community or a people. We are an oppressed group of slaves who have had little opportunity or initiative to coalesce for the sake of common cause. Moses and Aaron come before Pharaoh yet again to speak the cause of freedom, saying they must take the people out into the desert to serve God. With his own advisors pleading with him to see that Egypt is lost, crumbling under the weight of the plagues, to let the children of Israel go already, Pharaoh continues to negotiate in an effort to maintain at least some part of his slave economy.

Appearing to relent, Pharaoh tells Moses and Aaron to go serve God. Then, in an effort to limit those who shall leave to the men, he slyly asks, *mi va'mi ha'holchim/Who, and who are the ones that are to go?* It is a fascinating phrase that offers profound teaching about community, teaching which perhaps on some level Pharaoh knew and feared. Because it would have been enough to ask *mi ha'holchim/who are the ones that are to go*, we have to ask why the repetition? It is understood that there are no extraneous words in the Torah, so what may appear to be extraneous simply awaits our understanding. One comment suggests that the two words refer to Caleb and Joshua, the only two of the slave generation who will enter the Promised Land. So they are rewarded for their perseverance and courage, for urging the people on when they wanted to turn back. More importantly, the two words are about each of us, of each needing the other in order to be a community and move forward together.

Of needing each other is the meaning that is born out in Moses' response to Pharaoh. With beautifully inclusive words that offer a motto for community, Moses says, *bi'n'areynu u'vizkeyneynu neylech/We will go with our young and with our old*. Amplifying his insistence on freedom for all, not just some, that all are needed to serve God, even with all of their material goods, Moses continues, *with our sons and with our daughters, with our sheep and with our cattle, for we have a festival of God*. Playing on the root meaning of *chag* as both festival and circle, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch expands on Moses' words and offers a paean to community: *With our young and with our old...; If we are to go, we must all go; the tiniest baby in the cradle, the last sheep of our possessions. Each and all are integral parts of our community. None and nothing may remain, for we are all to form a "chag Hashem/a circle about God."*

Pharaoh's refusal to let all the people go brings the ninth plague, the plague of darkness. From here too, in this portion that would seem to be an unlikely source for teaching about community, such teaching is drawn. Caring for each other is the light that illumines the way of community. That is the light that is absent during the ninth plague; *there was an all-enveloping darkness..., they did not see one another and no one rose up from their place for three days....* Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Rothenberg warns of the plague that we can bring upon ourselves, God forbid; *The greatest darkness is when a person does not see her or his neighbor, and does not participate in another person's pain.*

As in a sacred circle dance, which *chag* also comes to mean, may we be a circle of light, present for each other in both joy and sorrow. *Chavraya* refers to those who are joined together for a common purpose. Being and becoming the community that is Nehar Shalom, we are the *chavraya*, each one needed and each one important, circling all together, joining hands with circles of humanity, dancing toward freedom, serving God.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor