

Dear Chavraya,

In a song both melancholy and triumphant that derives from the teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, there comes a fierce challenge. Out of the terrible suffering and torment of his own life, Rebbe Nachman fairly shouts, *lo l'hitya'esh, asur l'hitya'esh, rak lismo'ach yesh/do not despair, it is forbidden to despair, there is only to rejoice*. While it is not for any of us to judge the response of another to her or his own suffering, there remains for all of us the challenge to believe it possible that from the darkness of despair we shall yet again see light. Often from the midst of depression and gloom, Rebbe Nachman challenged himself to look beyond the moment.

There are times when each of us struggles to rise from the grip of despair. Sometimes it is the shadows in our own lives that cloud the valley and the vision. At other times, the darkness that touches our souls descends from the world beyond our selves, from events that breed collective despair. There is both darkness and light in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo*. Moses and Aaron continue to come before Pharaoh with their call for freedom. With heart hardened through the calcifying of his will to oppress, Pharaoh cannot hear their plea or the cry of a people enslaved. Clinging to the self-brutalizing power to control others, even as his stubbornness brings destruction upon his own people, Pharaoh brings down a curtain of darkness. The ninth plague is of darkness so deep that vision disappears and people cannot see each other. People in close proximity become hidden one from another.

At times it feels that such a darkness has come upon us, bringing numbness of spirit, sowing despair not even recognized. People are hidden from each other, not to be seen for the real needs they share with all as human beings. In this country, the endless struggle to deny, even to take back the little gained, of health care for all. Of jobs and homes lost, the human toll hidden and unseen, of wars that rage out of sight, whose costs could pay for so much of the human needs unmet. The vicious and the vile that poison public discourse, and more frightening the question of from whence it comes. As Jews, events in Israel leave us shaken for a character emerging among too many that threatens the essence of our being and of the ties that bind. Of rabbis in government employ forbidding rental of property to Arabs, of Israelis who criticize being called germs and traitors on the Knesset floor, peace remaining but a word as settlement and blockade continue to deny its possibility and reality as known by the other. Yet we are joined to each other, and it is forbidden to despair.

Throughout our journey as a people, Jews are bidden to look to the night sky, to be moon watchers. The cycle of the moon becomes a reminder of light emerging from darkness. In *Parashat Bo* is the commandment to mark the new moon. It is given while we are yet slaves in Egypt, on the eve of the exodus. While yet bent over beneath the slave's burdens, we are told to look up, to raise our eyes from the ground to the heavens. In the cycle of the moon, from darkness to light, ever knowing that in time the moon's light shall again become full, is the mirror of life in which we have seen ourselves. Reminding us of our own responsibility to bring the renewal of light, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes of Rosh Chodesh, *Even as the moon renews itself by the law of nature, so you, too, should renew*

yourselves, but of your own free will. Not to despair needs to be a conscious act, an act of will. In the face of all that can bring us down, before it can become hope, the opposite of despair is action.

Yesterday was *Rosh Chodesh*, the new moon of *Shevat*, itself a month of renewal, of *Rosh Hashannah Ha'ilanot*, the new year of the trees, *Tu B'shevat*, a celebration of buds and blossoms, of possibility. Barely visible last night, the thin crescent of the new moon's light will appear with more confidence tonight, waxing to fullness on the night of *Tu B'shevat*. There is a long way to go, many cycles to come of darkness to light and back again. And so we light the Shabbos candles....

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor