

Dear Chavraya,

In one of his wondrously enigmatic teachings, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov speaks of *a new path that never was before; even though it is an old path from long ago, nevertheless it is completely new*. I am drawn to the mystery in his words, of old and new woven together to form one path. That is much the way that I have seen Nehar Shalom, old and new woven together. The *shtibl*, a prayer room in the rabbi's home, is a very old model that has fascinated me for years. I often wondered if it could be made new, transplanted to a path more open to the wide variety of flowers that might grow along the way if new seeds were planted. I never expected to find out.

We don't know where the untrod path will lead, neither the twists and turns through valley and plain, the places rough and smooth, nor the people to be encountered along the way. So it was for our mother and father, Sarah and Abraham, when as Avram and Sarai they took the first steps of the Jewish journey, leaving behind the safe and familiar to follow God's call, *lech l'cha/go forth*. Chassidic commentary is drawn to the literal meaning of these two words, *lech l'cha – go to your self*. So the words speak to each of us, the journey of our people recapitulated within each of our lives. We go forth, not knowing where the path shall lead. Of their destination, God told Avram and Sarai to go *el ha'aretz asher areka/to the land that I will show you*. Faith is our pillar of cloud by day and our pillar of fire by night.

So it was for our ancestors as they left Egypt, first encountered in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'shallach*, a pillar of cloud and of fire to guide, all along the path of their long journey. It was a circuitous path, the journey itself often seeming to be the destination, the place of learning what it means to be a people, the community of Israel. For the first time in the Torah, only when we are "free at last," is the people referred to in their journey, as *kol adat b'nei Yisra'el/the entire community of the children of Israel*, each one counted and each one needed. Circuitous, the inevitable way of life's path, of individual and community, of every community since that first to come out of Egypt, of whom it says at the beginning of *B'shallach*: *God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, because that was near...; God made the people take a roundabout path; that is, the way into the wilderness to the Sea of Reeds....* Expressed through a beautiful phrase in the Talmud, "the long shorter way," the path that is nearest is not necessarily the best path to take. When the way is longer and the destination not yet revealed, there is more time to sing and to plant.

Every Shabbos is uniquely special, and of that which makes this Shabbos so special, it is *Shabbat Shira*, the Shabbos of Song, and it is *Tu B'shevat*, the New Year of the Trees, and it is the fifth anniversary of Nehar Shalom. Our very first gathering, so appropriately, was a Tu B'shevat seder. Of song and of blossoms, that is our hope as we continue along the path of our seeking the way together. As our steps increase upon it, the path becomes stronger and the way clearer.

Turning to another beautiful teaching of Rebbe Nachman, that is his message. A teaching that has inspired and encouraged me, I realized only today, with great excitement, that its source is in this week's portion, *Parashat B'shallach: In the*

beginning of the going one is not able to make a strong road, for it is still but a delicate path upon which to tread.... It is like a child when it begins to walk.... When a person makes a particular new path to the Holy One, so at the beginning it is a delicate path..., but from one's footsteps the Holy One makes a strong road.... From footsteps that are at first only a delicate path, the Holy One sets them toward a wide and strong road.

There is a beautiful interplay between our own footsteps and the path itself. The path forms, the way opens, only as we walk. As our steps become more confident, the path becomes stronger, the way of our going clearer, bringing us in time to the place that God will show us. Each footstep along the way, links in time's unfolding, joins earlier to later, old to new, one to another. Walking together, we create the path that is very old and completely new.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor