

Dear Chavraya,

As trees around Jamaica Pond become bare in the coming fall, the presence of birds' nests will be revealed in all of their intricate weave. Most will have been vacated by then, their inhabitants having left before the coming winter. Of birds' nests offering shelter still, this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki-Tetze*, offers delicate instruction: *If a bird's nest happens to be before you on the way, in any tree or on the ground...; you shall not take the mother with the young...; you shall send the mother away free....* In this long ago context, all animals were "free range" and in seeking eggs, for instance, one might encounter the mother bird. Alighting upon a bird's nest is opportunity for the Torah to offer practical instruction whose purpose is to inculcate sensitivity. A bird's nest offers teaching for living with respect for all of God's creatures. As a full nest offers its teaching, so an empty nest. I offer below a teaching gleaned from an empty nest, not of children gone to college, but of birds who once made their home in a unique tree of life that is now the *shtender* in our *shtibl*. This is part of a series of descriptions I have written recently about the ritual items of *Nehar Shalom*.

A *shtender* is a prayer stand, upon which rests the *siddur*/prayerbook of the person leading the service or of whomever else is *davvening*/praying before it. The *Nehar Shalom shtender* comes from a small chapel that stood for many years in the Baker Street Cemetery in West Roxbury. Used for the funerals of its members, it had belonged to the long closed *Beis Hamidrash Hagadol* in Roxbury, known affectionately as the *Crawford Street Shul*. The story: In the summer before *Nehar Shalom* began, I received a call that this little cemetery chapel was about to be torn down. We were looking for an *Aron HaKodesh*/Holy Ark at the time. I was told I could take whatever I wanted from the chapel, but to get there quickly. I went early in the morning and entered the unlocked doors to a sickening sight. It was filthy, with seats turned over, grease and oil on the floor from machinery that had been stored there, light fixtures hung by their cords from the ceiling, birds were flying inside the building. There didn't appear to be anything of value. There was an ark, but it was massive and built into the wall without a back of its own. Unable to take the ark itself, I removed the large beautiful doors that upon opening had once revealed the Torah scrolls within. These are the doors that rest against the side rear wall of our *shtibl*.

Looking around, I noticed a *shtender* to the side of the *bimah*, the raised area before the ark. It was covered with bird droppings, so dirty that at first I had no interest in it. Something called me to it, so I went over to look. In its bottom right corner there was a bird's nest woven of twigs and bits of paper that I realized were the pages of a *siddur*. Fragments of these holy pages were strewn on the floor around the *shtender*. I gathered up the bird's nest and the fragments to bring to the *geniza*, a storage room in the cemetery for the safekeeping of worn out holy books and religious items until they can be buried. On top of the *shtender* rested the crumbling remains of the *siddur* itself. I was stunned as I looked at the page to which this tattered prayer book had probably been left open for decades. There in the cemetery it was open to a prayer from the earliest part of the morning prayers that plaintively asks, "What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? What is our righteousness? What is our help? What is our strength? What is our might? What can we say before You, God our God, and

God of our ancestors....?" There amidst the congregation of the dead, a *minyán* of souls, these are questions for the living, the questions by which to order the priorities of life. I carefully lifted up this page and placed it in a folder. Along with its own fragments and the bird's nest to which it had given of itself, I took the remains of the *siddur* to the *genizah*. Knowing now the holiness of this *shtender*, I took it with me. Mieke and I carefully cleaned it, scrubbed and oiled it. The yellowed page from the old *siddur*, protected by glass now, continues to ask its questions of life and meaning from its place upon the *shtender*.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor