

Dear Chavraya,

Kaleidoscopic images of the week swirling in snowflake patterns of light and shape, words of Torah and words of State intermingled in wintry consciousness. I look back to an image from the moment of last week's merging into Shabbos, completing now the cycle again. At *Kabbalat Shabbat*, prayerful song to vibrant rhythm offered in one voice. One image stands out for me that has made me smile through the week. It is of my dad and of little Jeremy Dvorin. Sitting two seats apart from each other, my dad is ninety-three years old and Jeremy is two years old. Shaking a small rhythm instrument in perfect time to the beat of the skilled drummers, Jeremy's face shined with delight, his whole body in motion. Ninety-one years between them, my dad's eyes were closed, his body swaying as he tapped his cane upon the floor, so young and so old moving to the same beat, stirred by the same song.

So it was at Mount Sinai, a drumbeat of thunder filling the air, the song of Torah rising for the first time, joining the people together as one, women and men, young and old, even right and left I'm sure, a bridge of hope across every divide. In one voice, *kol echad*, they answered Moses' call to accept the Torah, and then they said, *na'aseh v'nishma/we will do and we will hear*. That is the crescendo of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*. Beyond our ken to imagine, there has never again been such unity among us, not among the Jewish people, nor among all the peoples of this earth. It yet remains the vision of Torah from the moment of its giving, forlorn and forsaken, the challenge we are given and the inspiration from which to strive.

In the image of that gathering before the holy mountain, each one is there and each one is needed. Every gift of soul and spirit, of hand and heart and mind, each one's part in the singing of the song is needed to make possible the saying in one voice, *na'aseh v'nishma*. I thought about the need for each one's gifts during President Obama's State of the Union address this week. As it came to be emphasized, I appreciate the importance of science and math in the world of today, and as vital disciplines unto themselves. At a certain point though, I began to wonder, what about everyone else and about all else that is needed toward reweaving the social fabric and making a more peaceful world? And I wondered too, is even science and math only for the sake of competing with other nations? Lest we forget in teaching our children, science flows from curiosity that comes of wonder and awe when looking to the heavens or to the smallest flower. To behold such beauty, how do we ever come to destroy? Unity comes through the sharing of gifts, among nations and peoples as well as individuals, each one with strengths that are unique. The poets and writers, the scholars and singers, the builders and artists, the teachers and tailors, the healers and haulers are all needed to do together and to hear each other if voices shall be raised as one.

*Na'aseh*, we will do, each in our own way, and so contribute to the whole. The Slonimer Rebbe, like so many others, probes the order of the two words we said at Sinai, *na'aseh v'nishma/we will do and we will hear*. It would seem to make more sense to hear first and then to do. Some regard the word order as an expression of our love for God and Torah, a reflection of our eagerness to do the *mitzvot* and

then come to hear, to understand their depth. While undoubtedly agreeing with that, the Slonimer offers a different view, looking to the soul as the source for knowing what is good and right, not only to do, but how to do in an upright way. Asking why *na'aseh* precedes *nishma*, the Slonimer teaches that it is because prior to the giving of the Torah, and so too even independently of the Torah, our souls have taught us how to behave before God and people. He looks particularly to moments of moral decision for which there may not be a specific law and says that in such moments, we are to ask, *what is God's will in this matter/mahu ratzon Hashem ba'zeh?* Directing us to look within, the Slonimer then says, *nishmat adam t'lamdenu/a person's soul will teach them.*

It involves a different kind of teaching, a different kind of learning, as we strive to inculcate in our children and in our selves the moral intelligence to know and to cleave to the right and the good. All paths and ways of knowing are needed in our coming to stand together. At times in the classroom, at times in the laboratory, at times in forest and field, our hearts and minds are opened to learning of Creation and of the world of which we are a part. And if we would stand together again as at Sinai long ago, our souls need to be opened too. I think of a beloved elder and a sweet child, souls touched, swaying together as one.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor