

Dear Chavraya,

Houses have souls, which is what makes a house a home. The soul of a house is formed of the people who live there, and of their relationships and ways with each other. The soul of a house echoes the laughter and tears of those who dwell within, and the voices of loved ones who no longer dwell on earth, whose words we yet strain to hear. It tells of the unfolding of lives, and exudes the smell of favorite foods, meals of welcome and comfort and celebration. It is the sounds and sights and smells and values, the music and art and gifts of self of those who live there, the photographs and trinkets and all kinds of old junk, the light and warmth of Yontev gatherings and the stories that were told there that tell of where you come from.

The soul of a house is made of words spoken in love and tenderness and also in anger and hurt. It is formed of lessons taught by life and time and learned by children and parents together, of lessons taught by one generation to another in both directions, of the struggle of brothers and sisters to live peaceably with each other and even to love. The soul of a house is formed of the bond with strangers made welcome at a supper table, of real teachers from school invited home and the neighborhood kids who lined up to gawk. It is formed of the memories of those same kids, your friends, who came to play and thanked your mom and dad whom they thought were special; and of the awkwardness of that first visit with early boyfriends or girlfriends, brought home for approval -- always given with a laugh and a vote of confidence in your own good sense and taste. The soul of a house is a reflection of our own souls, and when we leave forever the roof that once gave shelter, there is left but a body and a time of mourning and then abiding memory for the life and lives that filled the space of walls' embrace with love.

The interplay of dwelling and of those who dwell within forms a framework through which to understand the content of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat M'tzora*. Combined in a non leap year with the preceding portion, *Tazria*, the thematic thread concerning an affliction called *tzara'at* continues through *M'tzora*. Most often translated quite imperfectly as leprosy, *tzara'at* can appear as a mark of discoloration upon a person's skin, or upon utensils, or upon the walls of a house. Frequently approached as a medical text, the deeper and beautiful teaching that illumines a difficult portion of Torah is missed. That the concern is not for contagion is made clear in regard to *tzara'at* of houses. Noticing a suspicious mark upon the walls, the homeowner calls for the *kohen* to come and examine it. Before the arrival of the *kohen*, the homeowner is commanded to empty the house, *u'finu et ha'bayit*, of all of its contents, that there not be undue loss if the mark is indeed *tzara'at*. Not as a public health official coming to quarantine all that may carry contagion, the *kohen's* presence is understood in relation to the moral and spiritual health of the home's occupants.

Called to examine our selves, to look honestly within, only the homeowner can call on the *kohen*. It is not for another to point an accusing finger from the outside, to declare forbidden that which is not one's own, *davar she'ayno shelo*. In the Torah's words of instruction "to empty the house," *u'finu et ha'bayit*, I am drawn to a beautiful teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. Giving us to imagine

Creation's womb, Rebbe Nachman speaks of the *challal ha'pa'nui*/hollowed out empty space in which there is conceived the letters and speech through which Creation comes to be, and through which as the words upon our lips we are joined or separated from each other. And you shall tell your child, Rebbe Nachman says, referring to the telling of the Seder night, "that the essential principle of Creation was for the sake of compassion/*bishvil rachmonos*." Of the same root as *challal* in Rebbe Nachman's phrase, a *challil* is a recorder, hollowed space through which soul-breath enters the world as song.

Allowing for a *niggun* to form and rise, soul tune unfettered by affliction, to "empty the house" is to unburden the soul, creating space for renewal and possibility. In cleaning for Pesach, may this be the space we create, souls renewed within ourselves and in our homes.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor