

Dear Chavraya,

From out of the torment of his own life, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov fairly shouts a challenge that echoes through the generations, *lo l'hitya'esh assur l'hitya'esh/do not despair, it is forbidden to despair*. There are times when we remain alone with the challenge, seeking hope in the face of our own despair. At other times, when despair threatens through events beyond ourselves, in our being together we rise toward hope.

During the past week, I attended the J Street conference in Washington. It was an excellent conference, extremely well organized, filled with powerful presentations and dynamic conversations in response, among panelists and among attendees. At one point I found myself spontaneously humming the haunting tune that gives wing to Rebbe Nachman's words. At first surprised, I realized I needed to hear his challenge. In my own internal response, the conference was characterized for me by an inter-play of hope and despair. I felt hope in the fact of the conference itself, despair in the enormity of the task at hand, a two-state solution still to be, the birthing of a Palestinian state, the continued promise of a Jewish and democratic Israel. In the presence of more than two thousand people, inspired by the fresh energy and commitment of so many young Jews, touched deeply by the accounts of Israelis working day in and day out in the pursuit of justice and peace, hope began to rise for me, antiphonal response to the first shoots of spring breaking through hard ground.

To speak, to articulate what we believe is the beginning of hope, and to act in accord is the beginning of change. The name of the conference was "Giving Voice to Our Values." A day of lobbying on Capitol Hill followed the conference, acting to foster change, reminding and renewing commitment for a two state solution, to throw off the chains of the status quo. It can be hard to speak up, to give voice to values. I was moved and inspired by the stories shared among rabbis meeting together, supporting and encouraging each other, facing together the challenge and the cost of speaking up. It can be hard to hear values given voice by others that differ from our own. Sometimes to listen and to make room is to give quiet voice to underlying values from which the values we profess can grow in greater truth. There were seven members of the K'nesset at the conference who spoke together on a lively panel, modeling a way of debate, diverse opinions but joined by banter and caring, not all agreeing with J Street, but each one honored for the courage of their presence.

History unfolding before our eyes, stirring reflections and eyewitness accounts were offered of the revolutionary changes sweeping the Middle East. Egyptian-American journalist, Mona Eltahawy, having reported to the world from Tahrir Square, reached out as though pleading, "for once Israel, there is turmoil in the Middle East and it is not about you, be glad, and be on the right side of history." A time of uncertainty and of the fear that comes of not knowing what will be, it is the nature of life itself. To live with purpose, to act boldly and courageously, to embrace possibility by reaching out to others, and we become actors helping to shape the unknown toward the fulfillment of hope.

Of three Israelis whose words and witness moved me to tears, working tirelessly to shake from stupor, not to allow avoidance of the challenge posed by settlements along the road to peace. My own despair rose up before the facts already etched upon the ground, but their hope inspired hope to rise up higher yet within myself. Facing injustice and brutality, and seeking to repair, with the power of the pen and of the law's intent, they warn of the obstacles posed to peace with the Palestinians, of the security and economic liability for Israel, and of the moral burden that becomes heavier with each day. With voice cracking, one of the three, a noted journalist and a religious Jew, pleaded that we not allow the settler ethos to hijack, along with the possibility of peace, the vision of what Israel was meant to be and the very soul of the Jewish people.

With this Shabbos, we complete the book of Exodus, *sefer Sh'mot*. This week's Torah portion is *Parashat P'kudei*. Holding still the memory of slavery and oppression, we celebrate freedom and give form to new possibility. We are a people now, able to look ahead to the future as well as to the past. In *Parashat P'kudei*, the desert sanctuary is complete and raised up in all the glory and beauty of its intricate detail. The *mishkan* becomes a metaphor for the entire world. Caring for the world and its people, we become God's partners in creation and its renewal. The sanctuary of peace awaits our building. This Shabbos is also *Shabbat Sh'kalim*, the Shabbat of the Shekels, the first of four special Shabbatot that help us to prepare for Pesach and the journey to freedom. As we read in a special Torah reading for this Shabbat, each person is to give a half-shekel for the up-keep of the sanctuary. A very small amount of money, it is to remind that we are each but a half, that we need each other in the quest for wholeness. In that spirit, upon completing the book of Exodus, we raise up the Torah and sing out, *chazak, chazak v'nitchazek/let us be strong, let us be strong, and let us strengthen one another*.

Gathered together in common purpose, may we strengthen each other in the pursuit of peace between Israel and Palestine and throughout the world. Raising Torah together as the light it is meant to be, may we dispel despair and nurture hope.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor