

Dear Chavraya,

In the very middle of the Torah is a silent space between two words in which can be heard the “still small voice” of God. In this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Sh’mini*, is the very middle of the Torah for both words and letters. Ancient scribes lovingly counted each word and each letter of Torah. The word for scribe in Hebrew is *sofer*, whose root, in fact, means, “to count.” The exact middle of the Torah is not a word, but the space between two words. It is the space that comes between the last word of the first-half of the Torah and the first word of the second-half of the Torah. These two words are *darosh darash*, each formed of the same letters of the root meaning “to seek, or to search.” Moses searched for the goat of the sin offering and became angry with Aaron because he and his surviving sons had not eaten the offering as they were supposed to as part of their rite of atonement on behalf of Israel. They did not eat it because they were in mourning for the other two sons of Aaron, *Nadav* and *Avihu*, struck down suddenly for offering “strange fire” before God. The grieving father had already stood before Moses and received words of cold comfort that sought to justify the tragedy. Of Aaron’s quiet dignity in his lack of response to his brother, the Torah says, *vayidom Aharon*, “and Aaron was silent.”

In the Torah’s innermost silence, Aaron’s silence echoes. Moses learned from that silence and came to search not only for the goat, but for understanding in his own heart, announcing to the entire people through the *midrashic* voice of the rabbis, “I have erred regarding the law, and my brother Aaron came and taught me.” Indeed, in the humility that allows for such admission is Moses’ greatness. The two words that frame the silence in the middle of the Torah, *darosh darash*, “and you shall search ever so carefully,” beckon us to enter that silence and to search and to listen.

From these words that give form to the Torah’s place of silence, we learn that in a search for truth and understanding we need look to both sides, to past and to future. The Hebrew for truth, *Emet*, is itself formed of the first middle and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Looking forward from the very first letter, *aleph*, we see the letters *bet*, *gimmel*, *daled* which form the word, *beget*, clothing, but with the simple shift of a vowel form *boged*, deceit. So too, standing at the very last letter of the alphabet, *tav*, and looking back, we see the letters *kuf*, *resh*, *shin*, which can form *kesher* – connection, or *sheker* – lie.

The search for truth begins in silence and humility, in the strength to recognize and acknowledge our own shortcomings and mistakes, as Moses did. No one has a monopoly on truth. When woven of the golden threads of silence, spun from the Torah’s innermost place, the garb of truth rests upon us all, joining us together beneath her wing, as a talis.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor