

Dear Chavraya,

I will share with you a dilemma that I felt concerning two events taking place last night. One was our own meditation and ma'ariv gathering, a beautifully soothing hour (a plug/invitation to join us on the first Thursday of the month). The other was the founding meeting of the local chapter of J Street. So why the dilemma? Apart from feeling that I should be present for a new shul program, I was torn between tending to my spiritual self and my social self, if you will, between individual needs and the needs of the world, in this case the worldly need being so close to home, Israel and peace.

While recognizing that immediate responsibilities sometime need to determine such decisions, my dilemma allowed for some musing. There is a critical Jewish tension between our attention to the spiritual and to the social (as in social justice), which needs to be finely tuned. Rabbenu (our teacher) Heschel compares this tension to that of a violin string, which, depending on tuning, produces either a beautiful sound or dissonance. Heschel emphasizes polarities in Jewish life, those constructs that appear to be opposites but which really need each other for the sake of wholeness, opposites that are not in opposition to each other. Examples of polarities might be spontaneous prayer and fixed prayer, or *halacha* and *aggadah*, law and free-form interpretation, or individual and community. It is a false dichotomy to regard either aspect of a polarity as complete unto itself. Among all people, but certainly among Jews, harmonious tension is often lost in one direction or the other between personal spirituality and the pursuit of social justice.

In both rabbinic and Chassidic commentary on this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Yitro*, there is powerful teaching on the importance of not losing ourselves in spiritual pursuit. Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah becomes a paradigmatic teaching that we should not strive to go to such spiritual heights that we lose connection with people. We are told, *u'Moshe alah el ha'elokim/and Moses went up to God*. The verse continues, *vayikra eilav Hashem min ha'har/and God called to him from the mountain*, suggesting that God was already on the mountain. A source that is emblematic of Heschel's Divine-human partnership, God in search of the human, the human in search of God, even as Moses ascends toward God, God reaches out, as though coming to meet him. The rabbis also understand the dynamic as reflecting God's concern that Moses not try to come too high, that their relationship not be just about the two of them, as it were. So God says, *hinei anochi ba elecha/ behold, I am coming to you*; and the Torah narrates, *va'yered Hashem al Har Sinai/and God descended upon Mount Sinai*.

In a beautifully warm and earthy teaching, Rebbe Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev speaks to his Chassidim and to us; even as through Levi Yitzchok God speaks to Moses and to us. As Moses engages in very great and deep preparation in order to ascend to the highest spiritual level possible, God says to him, *lo ta'aseh hachanah zot kol kach.../don't engage in such painstaking preparation as you might want, because you will not be able to learn with the people of Israel/lo tuchal lilmod im b'nei Yisra'el*. Giving emphasis to his own words, Levi Yitzchak explains that while Moses wanted to prepare so deeply, the Holy One did not want him to, *HaKadosh Boruch Hu lo ratzah kach....* God's concern is not that Moses will be

unable to teach the people, but rather that he will be unable to learn with them, that having ascended so high he will no longer be able to return to be one among them.

Concerned for that harmonious balance between spiritual pursuit and involvement with the needs of the world, the rabbis taught that one who has studied much should leave the study hall and go out into the world, whereas one who has studied little should leave other pursuits and come into the study hall. A polarity rather than a dichotomy, spiritual pursuit is meant to inspire social concern, even as God is to be found among the people as well as at the mountaintop. Engaged with the world, time is also needed to step back and to renew, whether to meditate, to daven, or to make Shabbos, creating with each a "sanctuary in time." Shabbos is the mountain from which we return to the needs of the world.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor