

Parashat Va'era, 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

The oppression is deep, the chains of slavery heavy on our feet. There are glimmers of hope in the air, Moses coming before Pharaoh, a drama unfolding toward freedom. The dramatic tension in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ve'era*, turns on the beginning of the Ten Plagues. It is a troubling portion, suffering brought to another people on our behalf. That we are troubled is good, worrisome when we are not. The other is our oppressor; to be troubled for the oppressor's suffering is a sign of our ability to look deeper toward a common humanity, however buried beneath hubris. Knowing that we are joined even to the oppressor, we yet strive and struggle to overcome, knowing that we shall, many to suffer along the way, of our own and of the oppressor.

The setting of the story is long ago, in the ancient land of Egypt. It is easy to read the account of our enslavement and of our liberation as a story about another time and place. The great danger is to forget that it is about us. The Torah speaks the language of an eternal present, yearning for a flowering of hope that depends on us. The Torah is not a history book, but a guide for life, a map through time, pointing to a path upon which all are meant to walk. The Slonimer Rebbe always asks of particular accounts in the Torah, *mah ha'nitzchiyut/what is eternal*, what is the eternal message, how is it about us? At the beginning of a teaching concerning the Ten Plagues, the Slonimer says, *The Holy Torah is a Torah of life, to teach the way in which we shall go/l'horot et ha'derech asher yelchun ba*. He then says of the Exodus from Egypt, *it is an eternal matter, and is not simply a story of the past/eyn zeh rak sippur ha'avar....* This comes to be the meaning of the timeless challenge given voice at the Pesach seder, *b'chol dor va'dor/in every generation a person is obligated to see them self as having coming out from Egypt*. It is a story ever renewed in our own quest for freedom.

The Ten Plagues are not simply about suffering brought upon Pharaoh and his people for the sake of our redemption. They are meant to train us to identify with the pain of others, even of the oppressor, to feel the pain of the victim from deep within ourselves, knowing what it is like. Of oppressor and victim, we then look more closely at the unfolding of the plagues and we see how easily we too can become the oppressor, how easily our own hearts can harden. The plagues teach us about the way we direct our steps and our hearts in life, whether we come to incline our selves toward good or toward evil. The path toward one or the other is shaped ever so gradually, formed of incremental steps, from our faltering first steps as children to the sure strides of the adults we become.

Through the Ten Plagues, we see a hard heart become calcified. Arrogant in his own power, Pharaoh becomes stuck in his ways, unable to change. That is the danger that we are to see and take note of, to be wary of rigid ways that enslave. A dynamic lost in translation and clouded by popular assumption, God does not harden Pharaoh's heart until the end. Through the first five plagues, the verb for hardening of the heart is either passive, *va'yechezak lev Paroh/and Pharaoh's heart remained hard*, or it is active in relation to Pharaoh hardening his own heart, *va'y'chabed Paroh et libo/and Pharaoh hardened his heart*. In the sixth plague, a transition begins to occur, with God hardening Pharaoh's heart for the first time. In the seventh plague there is a return to the passive tense, his hardened heart a reflection of the callous way to which he himself has become enslaved. The shift happens gradually, in the back and forth a shimmering of conscience, of insight, perhaps ready to let go, to release the slaves, to release himself, but so hard to change. In the end, Pharaoh is not able to let go, habituated to the ways of power, to greed, his steps too firmly set on the path he established long ago.

Among the messages of the plagues that calls out to us, if we would soften our hearts to hear, is a teaching to be heeded by each one and all together, don't become stuck in ways that hurt. Given to Israel while still in Egypt, while still enslaved, a commandment for the future, free the enslaved, do not oppress. In matters of both national policy and personal practice, for individuals and nations, the plagues offer teaching that comes with great urgency, whether we incline toward good or evil is up to us, so the way shall be set, a "tipping point" to come. When hearts are softened to hear the cries of others, goodness welling up, all the plagues of human making washed away in a torrent of tears. As the Torah is meant to guide, the humble author of the "Sefer Ha'Chinuch," an anonymous medieval work, points to the purpose of the mitzvot: *to teach our souls to love the good/l'lamed nafshenu le'ehov ha'tov*. Learning to love the good, may that become our way.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor