

Parashat B'shallach 5773(2013)

Dear Chavraya,

Having just returned from visiting our grandson, Leo, in Los Angeles, I am trying to keep his scent in my clothes and in my consciousness. I am grateful for his presence in our lives, however far away he and his parents live. For all of the stresses and challenges that come with children, there is something so soothing in holding a little child close. I look around in our community and feel the blessing of so many little ones, those among us already and those on the way.

This is a time of year when extra concern is felt for children, that they stay healthy and warm in the cold and damp of winter. There is a Jewish tradition of fasting more during this time, among some as an expression of supplication on behalf of children. These weeks in mid-winter are known as the "Shovavim Tat," an acronym standing for the first eight Torah portions of the book of *Sh'mot/Exodus*. As a beautiful irony during this time of heightened concern for children, *shovev* means mischievous, as in the way of playful children. In modern Hebrew, the word comes to refer to a Dennis the Menace type. With so much harm brought to children in our world, we pray that they should be *shovavanim*, to be alive and healthy, and, yes, mischievous.

In the Torah portions of recent weeks, the tears of children would fill by themselves the bowls of salt water into which we dip the *karpas* sprigs at the Seder table. Children cry, and we for them, whether the children of slaves or the children of the oppressors. Parents are equal in their helplessness and longing when unable to soothe or protect their children. The bond that joins children to each other should be enough to join their parents beyond all that divides. At the beginning of our enslavement, Pharaoh sought to kill all the baby boys of the Israelites. Among the ways he tried to carry out his diabolical design was to move Egyptian families with babies among the Israelites. He reasoned that when the Egyptian babies cried, the Hebrew babies would hear them and cry in sympathy. Twisting to evil such a beautiful way of universal response and connection, Israelite families with babies could then be identified and the little ones taken to their deaths. Creating our own midrash, our own seeking between the lines of text and life, we listen for the cry of our children in response to the suffering of Egyptian children and their parents at the time of the fierce Tenth Plague, when all the first born of Egypt were slain. And today, across all lines, do we hear the children crying for each other, and do we cry with them and for them and for their parents?

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'shallach*, it is the children at the edge of the seashore that help us to look beyond violence and oppression, to a time when tears shall no longer need be shed for destruction wrought by humans upon each other, of adults upon children. There at the sea, Moses and all the people sing, *zeh eli v'anvehu/this is my God whom I will praise*. The Torah goes on then to describe God as *ish milchamah/a man of war*. But the children know better. In a midrash, it is the children who say *zeh eli/this is my God*. These are the children who were hidden in fields to be saved from Pharaoh's edict. Left alone to fend for themselves, the Holy One came to them as a young man to nurture and care for them. At the sea, these children cry out to their parents, *that's Him/zehu oto, the One Who took care of all our needs when we were in Egypt, zeh eli v'anvehu/this is My God Whom I will praise*.

It is the children who see God as nurturer, not as warrior. This is the God to be praised. In that image of God, so are we to be, nurturers and protectors of children everywhere, creating a world in which all children shall grow in peace and unafraid in all seasons of the year, joined with each other through tears of laughter.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor