

Parashat Vayakhel/P'kude 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

God's presence fluttered on his words, an elder of ninety-five years, his whisper bringing a smile to my face and heart. I was not sure if I had heard him right, doubting my ears only because they had heard something so pure, something unintended for them to hear. He has been with us at other times, along with his son, once not long ago, and on Rosh Hashannah he brought among us a beautiful *ta'am/flavor* of old time davenning. His smile is luminous. They were with us last Shabbos, sitting where they always do, to my right, in the second row just in front of the table. It was a quiet moment as I stepped back from the *shtender* from which I led. From out of the corner of my eye I could see him leaning over toward his son, and I heard him whisper, "I feel near to God here."

Suffused with warmth and a palpable sense of prayer fulfilled, knowing now God's presence among us, I continued to daven. During the Torah reading we called the man up for an *aliyah*. Before saying the blessing, he asked me if he could say something. I knew then that I had heard his whispered words correctly, because now they were spoken for all of us to hear. He spoke of how much he enjoys coming to our *shtibl*, and then he said again, "I feel near to God here." He continued so poignantly, saying that he wanted to ask the rabbi, as I stood next to him, if he would send him off when the time comes. I put my hand on his shoulder and said I would be honored to, thanking him for his words and praying that we have him for a long time yet. With his smile and warmth, he conveyed with such simple and straightforward recognition the reality that I tried somewhat to parry, that at ninety-five the horizon beyond which we cannot see is not so far off.

I felt as our ancestor Jacob that morning, who said upon waking from sleep, *Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it/achen yesh HaShem bamakom ha'zeh v'anochi lo yadati!* In whispered words that were themselves words of prayer, there came a precious reminder to be open to God's presence in every moment. I had been asleep. Even in the midst of prayer we can be closed off to God's presence. Something among us was real though, something alive that allowed for one person's awareness to come as a gift for all of us, a reminder to hear the whisper of holiness in the place where we gather to pray and be with each other.

In this week's Torah portion, a double portion, *Parashat Vayakhel/P'kude*, the *Mishkan*, the desert sanctuary, is completed. There is a crescendo of excitement as the people step back to bask in the blessing of what they have created. Whether contributing gifts of the heart in material goods, or wisdom of the heart in the way of concept and design, or skilled work of the hands to bring all the parts together as one, each person had a part in creating the sacred space where they would gather and feel near to God and each other.

In feeling near to each other, we create the space in which to feel near to God. Interpersonal tension creates static that makes it hard to hear God's voice. Beyond the quiet simplicity of place, I believe that our visitor sensed the caring way that inheres among us, joining us to each other. Perhaps too, it was the welcome given not only to him and his son, but also to seekers from afar who had found Shabbos peace with us that morning, not knowing that is what they had been seeking, strangers only until they had crossed our threshold.

With these two *parshiot*, *Vayakhel/P'kude*, the Book of Exodus is complete, as is the Dwelling Place of God and people. At the very end of *P'kude*, the Torah tells us, *and the glory of God filled the Mishkan*. Asking what these simple words mean, a Chassidic commentary explains that the *Mishkan was filled with love of one for another and their yearning for God*. The yearning is itself a prayer that awakens us to God's presence. May whispered words of holiness be heard to echo in our own hearts, that we might each say, "I feel near to God here."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor