

Parashat B'har-B'chukotai 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

For our grandson's first birthday recently, Mieke and I gave him his first pair of hiking boots, a little bitty pair of Timberlands. Truth to tell, he isn't walking yet, but the boots are meant to encourage him, not by way of hurrying him, which certainly isn't the way of his *zayde*, but toward helping point the way toward all there is to discover and do. As he takes his first steps on the path of life, I pray that many hands will reach out to walk hand in hand with him. The one hand, if we can so speak, that will be there, that is already there, if he chooses to take it, is God's hand.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'har-B'chukotai*, the theme of walking with God unwinds as a path throughout the second one of this double portion, *B'chukotai*. The portion begins with the words, *im b'chukotai teylechu/if you will walk in My statutes*. The obvious question that emerges from the start is, what does it mean to walk with God? Rashi has a very straightforward answer. He says that walking with God means to keep the mitzvot, *zeh kiyum ha'mitzvot*, to sustain the commandments by laboring in Torah. This is meaningful and important, but it hardly seems like enough to speak to the breadth of what it means to walk with God.

The Slonimer Rebbe responds to Rashi with uncharacteristic sharpness, quite startling in fact. Responding to the words, *im b'chukotai teylechu*, he says *she'eyno tzivui al kiyum ha'mitzvot/this is not a command concerning keeping the mitzvot!* Wow, and then he goes on to let Rashi and us know what he thinks it means to walk with God. The Slonimer certainly kept the commandments, but understood a deeper yearning as we put on our hiking boots and set out on the trail of a new day. He explains that it means walking in the way of Torah. So far he doesn't sound so different than Rashi. Ah, but then he goes further and we see so clearly that he is speaking of Torah as much more than words on parchment. He then says in fact, *yesh et ru'ach ha'd'varim/there is the spirit of the words...*, and that our challenge is to walk *in the way and spirit of the Torah/ba'derech v'ru'ach ha'Torah*.

The specific commandments and laws of the Torah are as signposts on the path of life. The common word for Jewish law as formed of the commandments doesn't mean law at all. *Halacha*, from the word *holech/walk, go*, is a way of going through life. The spirit of Torah is breathed into Torah and into the world, into each of us, with the first words of Creation, *v'ru'ach Elokim m'rachefet al p'nei ha'mayim/and the breath/spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters*. The spirit of Torah is the breath of life, breathed so gently into the birthing of life, all life and every life.

Still at the beginning of *B'chukotai*, having been told to walk with God, God says, *I will walk among you/v'hithalachti b'tochachem, and will be God for you, and you will be a people to Me.* Softening his earlier rather dry statement, Rashi draws on a beautiful midrash to these words, so warmly interpretive, *and I will walk with you in the Garden of Eden/etayel imachem b'Gan Eden, k'echad mikem v'lo tihiyu mizda'a'za'im mimeni/as one with you and you will not tremble before Me.* So rich and warm, walking hand in hand with God in the world perfected, for that is the Garden of Eden. Walking hand in hand with God, having learned to walk hand in hand with each other, so having arrived at the day that is all Shabbos, the destination toward which we walk in the spirit of Torah, on the path of life. As we begin the journey, God says, *va'olech etchem ko'm'miyut/I taught you to walk upright.* So may our little one learn to walk with confidence and faith, putting on his boots and setting out on the path of life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor