

Parashat Sh'lach L'cha, 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

There is a kinship among shuls, as among people. Perhaps it is in the common language of the holy tongue that gives wing to our prayers. Perhaps here and there it is a common tune that with its hearing brings a smile, soothing sound of the familiar. On a mystic plane, perhaps it is an affirmation of an elusive truth in the rabbis' words, *kol Yisra'el arevim zeh ba'zeh/all Israel are interwoven/responsible one for another*. Wherever we are in the Jewish world, upon entering a shul we should feel as though we are coming home. In the end, of course, it is about the people who fill the shuls, it is the people with whom we feel a bond, the people who make a shul a home. A shul is a sacred vessel that is filled with the lives of people. The shul is the holy context in which community forms and is sustained. The longer a shul stands, the more years that unfold from the time of its building or from its becoming a shul, more stories come to be gathered within it, more echoes of beloved voices, more *nigunim* and words of Torah accrue to its sacred walls.

From time to time, people ask me about the large print alongside the *aron ha'kodesh/the holy ark* of our shtibl, or about the small print next to the front door, on your left as you face the door. These are both prints of Canada's oldest synagogue, the home of Congregation Emanu-El in Victoria British Columbia. It is where over sixteen years I came of age as a rabbi. It is a beautiful community, in spirit and in location. At the southern tip of Vancouver Island, there is a certain sense of self-sufficiency that comes of being on an island, that whatever is going to happen needs to be nurtured into being by the community and not left for professionals to do. That is an important teaching and challenge for every community, to do what needs to be done and not leave it for others to do, to know that each one is responsible.

I am thinking about the community in Victoria today for two reasons. One is because this weekend marks the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary since the building of the shul and the presence of a Jewish community gathered within and around it. The shul is a national historic site in Canada. While there are older congregations in the east, the fame of Emanu-El is as the oldest continually functioning synagogue building in Canada. The other reason I am thinking about the Jewish community in Victoria as it celebrates one hundred and fifty years is because it gives me pause to think about our selves and our own community.

There is so much that is immediately different between these two communities, both beloved to me. At first glance they hardly seem comparable. One is a community housed in a venerable old building that is so filled with history, high vaulted ceilings and stained glass through which the sun dances in myriad colors

upon the walls. Nehar Shalom is so new, a small space in a home that could fit many times into the womb of Emanu-El's place of prayer and gathering. But there is the kinship, of people, place, and purpose. In each place there is prayer, song, and Torah, gatherings to celebrate and to comfort, to sing and to cry, each one a place from which good flows out into the larger world. There would be no anniversary of one hundred and fifty years of Jewish life in Victoria if not for the faithful and joyful living of Jewish life all along the way. Celebrating the past is possible only if there is a worthy present to receive the gifts of those who came before. The Hebrew words for inheritance and stream are formed of a common root, *nachal*. The flow of a legacy through generations, to be received in turn by each one as its inheritance, depends on every generation's commitment to continuity, to both transmission and transformation. The words of Rav Kook remain a sacred challenge and guide for every generation and every community, "The old shall be renewed, and the new shall be made holy."

Two communities, old and new, and the process, ever to be renewed, of becoming a holy community, a *kehila k'dosha*, I find myself thinking about us, about the community of Nehar Shalom. In the coming days we shall begin to engage with each other in conversations about our future as part of a nascent strategic planning process. There will be parlor meetings in which to envision and to imagine. I urge you to participate, each one having a unique gift in the perspective that comes of their own life and experience. We cannot know what will be in the coming years, any more than the founders and early members of the Victoria Jewish community could know what would be. As those founders were pioneers, so too are we. The key is to enrich our lives now through the cadence of Jewish living, engaging timeless teaching as a context for wrestling with the challenges of our world and time, bringing Torah to life in word and deed, infusing all that we do with kindness and compassion, blessing the gift of community by nurturing its unfolding. Every community, as every person, is unique in some way, its own special character formed of those who make the community. Envisioning the future, we strengthen the present and bring more fully into being the gifts that make us who we are.

I share with you below a message that I sent today to the holy community of Victoria. As I wrote it for them as a blessing on celebrating one hundred and fifty years, I offer it to you as a blessing for our community as we look to the future and consider what it means to be Nehar Shalom.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor

Dear Friends,

I am very much with you in spirit, wishing it could be in person, at this time of celebration and affirmation. Congregation Emanu-El, the people and their synagogue, are an intrinsic part of who I am as a rabbi and as a person. My years as rabbi in Victoria continue to infuse so much that I do. I often speak of the gifts that were given to me by this holy community. I always felt free to try and to strive, to fall down at times, knowing there would be hands to raise me up. I saw the possibility of community in its most beautiful expression, of people reaching out to each other, creating more than might be thought possible. Celebrating one hundred and fifty years, it is the present to be celebrated now as well. Without those who labor so faithfully today, the past would remain only as a memory of what was. These celebrations are about you, artists all in shaping a vibrant and creative community in the present, a link of faith and possibility between past and future. As once we walked from City Hall to Emanu-El in interfaith solidarity to honor the lives and teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Rev. Martin Luther King, so may your walk this weekend celebrate all that is possible when people join hands and walk together. As it was in Victoria one hundred and fifty years ago and as it is today, may the way of understanding and harmony go forth through you and rise as a blessing in the world. So you fulfill the name and words of the Torah portion of this Shabbos, Sh'lach L'cha, Send Forth. Joined to you with love and affection, from heart to heart and house to house, I honor Rabbi Harry, all of you as the holy community of Emanu-El, and the sacred space of a venerable shul and the abiding inspiration that is its soul.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor Reinstein