

## Parashat Ki Tetze 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

I find it difficult to write today, to delight in the learning and sharing of Torah. The sadness among us, of which I wrote earlier, weighs on my heart, the stillbirth of David and Felicia's baby. I turn to Torah, nevertheless, though, for that is our way, in sorrow as in joy. Encompassing all of life, it is *Torat Chayim/the Torah of Life*, revealing sparks of insight, glimmers of understanding in all realms of our encounter with life, those we readily embrace and those we would prefer not to. I share very simply from that place in life where we find ourselves as we approach Shabbos this week. I wrote two phrases in my earlier note to share with you the sorrow among us. Speaking of the little one who did not come to be, I wrote that, "the baby stopped moving with the spark of life." And at the end I prayed, "may we all be angels of comfort now and always." I did not consciously see or assume a specific connection to this week's Torah portion in writing those words. Now, as I reflect and turn to Torah for comfort, a teaching appears that I had not seen, emerging from an unlikely source, holy words meant to give rise to holy deeds.

This week's Torah portion is *Parashat Ki Tetze, ki tetze la'milchamah/when you go forth to battle against your enemies*. In Chassidic teaching, the violence is countered and transcended in its becoming completely spiritualized and personalized. It is not about physical violence, it is not about violence at all. It is about engaging with, wrestling with and thereby overcoming our own internal "enemies," the unique challenges and the painful demons that impede us from being the full person we desire to be and are each needed to be in the world. At the end of the verse, the Torah speaks of taking captives, *v'shavita shivyo/and you will take his captives*. In the way of Chassidic spiritualizing of the text, the *Ohev Yisrael*, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apta, offers a beautiful teaching on the essence of our purpose in the world, the gathering and releasing of holy sparks. It is based on a mystical concept called *sh'virat ha'kelim/the breaking of the vessels*. In an earlier effort to create the world, God tried too hard, channeling light into the world through holy vessels called *s'firot*. The light was too intense and it shattered the vessels, scattering shards of holy light everywhere. Our task in the world is to free all of these holy sparks and raise them back up to their Source. That is the mystical conception of *tikkun olam/repair of the world*. So it is in our brokenness that light waits to rise.

Of the captive referred to by the Torah at the outset of *Parashat Ki Tetze*, the *Ohev Yisrael* says this is every spark of light waiting to be released; *rak avor nitzotzot k'dusha/it is only for the sake of the holy sparks that were scattered*. Their release depends on us, *b'ma'aseyhem ha'tovim, u'v'machshavtam ha't'horah/through our good deeds and pure thoughts we release them from captivity and from wherever they are*

*imprisoned. The essence of your intention is only to bring forth the sparks of holiness from all the places of their captivity.*

With the death of a dear little one before even coming to be, the spark of life ceased to move within. That we not be captive to grief, it is now for us to raise up the spark of light that was hidden in such a tiny vessel. Of so much yearning and longing for this baby's presence, God weeps with us and prays that we will lift up her little spark and so many others through deeds of goodness, of kindness and caring. As we become angels of comfort now and always, we answer God's prayer, comforting David and Felicia and raising their little spark of light back up to its source in the Holy One.

Shabbat shalom, a Shabbos of comfort,  
Rabbi Victor