

Parashat Vayetze, 5774 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

On top of my dresser there sits a small, cream-colored ceramic baby shoe. For as long as I can remember it sat on my parents' dresser. It was given to them when I was born, a gift to celebrate my arrival, a shoe to remind, perhaps, of life's path, a prayer, in spite of all, for sure and hopeful steps along the way. That is undoubtedly my own *d'rash*, reflecting the life path I came to follow, my own way of making sense of so much that doesn't. On the underside of the sole my name is printed with capital letters in my mother's hand, spelled in a way I never saw my parents use anywhere else, VICK. The shoe is very delicate, slight undulations in the ceramic as though to show creases left by the movement of a little foot, a few streaks of gold color, a line of gold around the base where the upper meets the sole, simple pink petals and the green of a flower upon the toe, perhaps suggesting a rose. There is one other thing to know about this little ceramic baby shoe. At some point it fell and shattered. I can only imagine how my parents felt. Dad carefully repaired it with his fine eye and hand. There are telltale brown lines of glue, some smooth and subtle, others jagged and raw, crisscrossing the cream-colored ceramic shoe. I never thought to ask any more of its story, of when it fell and of tears shed when it did. Such details are forever locked away in the vaults of my father's memory. It is the only way I have ever known the little shoe, whole and so delicately beautiful for all of its reminding of brokenness and fragility.

I had never realized the deep and hopeful teaching in this little shoe until this year's reading of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayetze*. Ya'akov is fleeing from his brother's wrath. Having deceived his brother and stolen his birthright, Esav has threatened to kill him. He clearly sees the conflict between his parents, his mother setting up his own deceit of his father. Running from the shambles of his family, at a certain point Ya'akov can go no further. With darkness descending, he stops and lies down for the night. We are told, *Vayifga ba'makom va'yalen sham/he encountered the place and lodged there....* The root of *vayifga* is richly layered, encounter, alight, confront, vulnerable, hurt, wound, and also a reference to prayer and supplication. Of two words so richly layered in life's experience, *makom* means place and is also one of the most expansive names of God, All Place, with us wherever we are.

Ya'akov is alone, not feeling God's presence with him in that moment. Around our learning table on Thursday morning the question was raised among us, did he stop or was he stopped? In a powerful *midrash*, the rabbis seem to suggest that he wanted to keep going, to keep running, but *the entire world became as a wall before him*. "Hitting the wall," he lays down, perhaps as though to shut out the world and his struggles in that moment. In a series of beautiful teachings on this moment in Ya'akov's life, and on its playing out in painful moments in our own lives, the Karliner Rebbe, known as the Beys Aharon, teaches that in the interplay of words, *vayifga ba'makom*, there is urging that we pause, not to flee, but to pray, to breathe, to take in the pain and the presence, that we not be divided against God, cutting

ourselves off yet further in our brokenness. Encountering the Place, the Karliner says, *she'lo yihiyeh libo chaluk al HaMakom/that one's heart not be divided against God.*

The Karliner then offers a poignant and seemingly personal acknowledgement, saying that there are times when we are not able to work, to serve, to pray, *to feel any pleasure in worship/v'ayn lo shum ta'anog me'ha'avodah shelo.* These are the times when we may feel just too worn down, too tired even to struggle, the world becoming a wall before us and we put our heads down upon the stones as Ya'akov did.

Then the Karliner shifts, as though to greet us now in the morning of a new day. He says that our pain and all that we have encountered is real, *p'gisha mamash,* not something to be spiritualized away, but of this world, to be confronted. It is not to put aside or let go of the pain, but to glue together all the pieces of our shattered hearts. He says, *one needs to encounter and to unite oneself in that very place/tzarich she'yifga v'yityached ba'makom she'hu.* That very place is the place of our hurt and pain, there to become one within our selves, *v'yityached/ to bring oneself together, to unite oneself.*

And then the Karliner slips in a teaching that is all of three words, deftly placed between two longer teachings. On the words, *va'yalen sham/and Ya'akov lodged there,* he says, *lashon t'lunah u'tarumot/it is the language of protest and complaint.* The root *lun* can mean both "lodge" and "complain," perhaps here coming together, as in "lodging a complaint." There is something powerful, not as sleep now, but as a crying out, protesting, rising and railing. There is something positive, active, alive, the start of change. To cry out, to complain and protest is part of a relationship with God, a way of engagement and encounter, that we not step away in retreat, alone, our heart divided against God. Not easy to go forward from a place of brokenness, needing to consciously and deliberately direct our steps, we are told, *and Ya'akov lifted up his feet/vayisa Ya'akov raglav,* slowly taking up the journey of life again.

There are times when our hearts are broken, and so too the shoes we need for the journey. The sole of the shoe has our name on it, where our soul meets the path of life, even if at times our own name feels foreign and different than we know it usually to be. It is a way of giving us pause, to think, to say that is me too, in all of the ways I am, even from the very beginning. In the shattered wholeness of a baby's shoe, lines of glue remind that wholeness is formed of broken shards, a prayer, in spite of all, for sure and hopeful steps on the path of life.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor