

Parashat Vayakhel, 5774 (2014)

Dear Chavraya,

The old inn in northern Vermont has long been a place of ingathering, and so the glowing hearth that drew us near, but probably never before in the way it was now. There was a sense of *kibbutz galu'yot/an ingathering of the exiles*. All the guests "inn-gathered" were Jews, each in our own way, strands woven together as of a warm blanket, a talis that joined us in unspoken connection. As the snow swirled in the bitter cold and the dark outside, there was warmth and comfort by the crackling fire. I sat in a rocking chair, suffused with an uncommon peacefulness, drawn closer with each word to the warmth and glow of the teaching in the *sefer kodesh*, the holy book, upon my lap. I was startled by the voice of another guest, one of the *lantsman* sitting across from me: "are you reading for yourself or for work?" he asked. I paused, unsure quite how to answer. "Well, it is a fine line," I said; "really it is for both." I explained that I teach a class on Thursday mornings for which I was gathering thoughts, but that it was just as much for me. It is one of the challenges in rabbinic work, the stuff of "work" often becoming inseparable from the stuff of life. I bring Torah on vacation because it is my life, my sustenance. I find comfort in its warmth and am drawn to its glow as much as to the fire by which I sat. I teach and share from the treasures I find and receive. I learn for its own sake, though always conscious that from the learning comes the sharing.

The next day, another guest told me that his son was preparing to read Torah that Shabbos at their shul. I had seen the son carrying around his *Tikkun* and sitting in the dining room chanting. The boy's parents had each explained to me that they had made an agreement with their son that they would give him a stipend each time he *leyned* Torah. In that way he would not need to work for pocket money, but could instead devote time to preparing to read Torah more frequently. The father, a *yode'ah sefer/knower of holy books*, hoped that the joy of reading Torah would in the end become its own motivation, underscoring his hope with a rabbinic maxim, *she'lo lishma ba lishma/what begins not for its own sake becomes for its own sake*. So too my reading by the fire, if it was at first for the sake of teaching, it came quickly to warm my own soul.

The *sefer/holy book* I had taken along with me to Vermont was the *Ma'or Va'shemesh*, the writings of Rebbe Kalonymus Kalman Epshtein. The signature theme of his teaching is the importance of community, the coming together of the chassidim not simply to hear and learn from the rebbe, but to hear and learn from each other. As in knowing an old friend, I knew that he was the one to bring on this trip, coming in the week of the Torah portion *Va'yakhel*. *Parashat Vayakhel* is the quintessential portion on community. Meaning *to gather*, the word

is a verbal form of the word for community, *kehila*, a gathering of people. Most often, the opening words of the portion, *vayakhel Moshe*, are translated as *and Moses gathered*. Drawing on Rashi, the *Ma'or Va'shemesh* points out that the form of the verb is in fact not active, but causative, *and Moses caused the community to be gathered*. It is an entirely different meaning, reflecting an essential dynamic of community. Community can't be forced, the people need to want to be gathered, to be inspired, to be drawn together through their own desire and yearning to be part of something larger than themselves. They need to be active participants in coming together, not enough to come only at Moses' command or behest, but to have a stake in the gathering. Souls touched, people are drawn to the warmth and glow of a holy fire.

The gathering by the hearth expanded in time and space, as it was meant to, all learning coming in time to be for its own sake, in its touching of our selves and others. From what I had learned by the fire in the old inn, I shared in our Thursday morning Torah learning at JP Licks. I spoke of the *Ma'or Va'shemesh* and then spoke of his grandson, Rebbe Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who died in the Warsaw ghetto, continuing to teach and to write until the end. A respected leader and teacher prior to the Holocaust, known then as the Piaseczner Rebbe, his ghetto writings, and the soul from which they sprang, came to be known as the *Aysh Kodesh/the Holy Fire*. After our learning, one of our number spoke with me, telling me that her grandfather had been a Jewish scholar who had also died in the Warsaw ghetto. Yearning to know about his life, she was certain now that her grandfather must have known the *Aysh Kodesh*.

Gathered there by the hearth, holy fire kindled in our learning and sharing wherever we are, that which begins not for its own sake becomes for its own sake, life connections unexpected warming our souls amidst the cold and dark and the swirling snow.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor