

Dear Chavraya,

There are two Shabbatot through the year that stand out as gateways to transformation. They are *Shabbat Shuva*, the *Shabbat of Return*, of *turning and returning*, that is before Yom Kippur, and this Shabbat that we are about to enter, the *Great Shabbat* that is before Pesach, *Shabbat Ha'Gadol*. As distinctly different in practice as Yom Kippur and Pesach are, they are deeply intertwined thematically. Each celebrates the opportunity to begin anew, to throw off shackles of habit and hubris and act for the sake of our own renewal. That is the beginning of the repair and renewal of the world.

In its very essence, Yom Kippur makes things right between our selves and God. There is a rub, though, to be truly whole with God, we need to be whole with people, and that does not just happen. We need to do *t'shuva*, to go out and make amends, to effect *tikkun/repair*. *Shabbat Shuva* is the reminder, the stepping off point for the journey. The journey of Yom Kippur marks the cycle of life in reverse, from death to birth. Perhaps that is how we really experience the ups and downs of our lives, many deaths in microcosm in the living of life, moments that seem to tear our souls from us, even as we are challenged to live. We fast, and step aside from the needs and delights of the body on Yom Kippur, wearing the *kitt'l*, the death garment that is really a garment of life.

Wine-stained and tear-stained, the *kitt'l* is also worn traditionally at the Seder, as well as under the *chuppah*, moments of life, as death itself is a moment of life. The cycle of each person's life is part of a much greater cycle, the cycle of all time as it unfolds toward a great flowering of wholeness and peace, each person's life as a ripple upon the waters of time, flowing ever outward. To the degree that we help to bring that time, so we become part of the great world that is coming, *Olam Ha'Ba*. In our repairing of breaches with others, effecting wholeness in our own lives, as *Shabbat Shuva* reminds, we begin the process. But that is not enough, not until we go out into the world and work for the sake of justice, repairing the breaches of so much pain and poverty, of oppression and war. That is the reminder of *Shabbat Ha'Gadol*, the Great Shabbos before Pesach, called from its *Haftorah*, the prophetic reading from the Prophet Malachi, *Behold, I am sending to you Elijah the Prophet before the great and awesome day of God/Yom HaShem Ha'Gadol v'Ha'Nora*.

Yom Kippur is the focus and context of this week's Torah reading, *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the portion this year for Shabbat Ha'Gadol. It is the source of the Torah readings for Yom Kippur. It tells of the offerings of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, offerings and rituals to remind of turning, of making relationships whole, with each other and with God. The Kohen begins by looking within, at his own sins and shortcomings, and then to those of his family, and then to the other priests, and only then to the sins of the people. *T'shuva* begins with oneself, with

one's own turning. *Acharei Mot/After the Death*, is set against the backdrop of the death of the two sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu. Painful and bewildering, two young people struck down on a day of celebration, here too the journey from death to birth. It is the path of life in spite of all toward which Pesach points, the path arising from the death in life of slavery, through the parted waters of new life beginning.

An allusion, perhaps, in the very beginning of *Acharei Mot* to the Seder itself and to the relationship of *Shabbat Shuva* and *Shabbat Ha'Gadol*, of Yom Kippur and Pesach. Aaron is not to come *before the cover that is upon the ark/ha'kaporet asher al ha'aron*. *Kaporet* is the same root as *kippur*, as in Yom Kippur, the root of "atonement," the beginning of *t'shuva*. The nineteenth century Chassidic teacher known as the Ma'or Va'Shemesh, Rebbe Kalonymous Kalman Epshtein, brings the Holy Ark and its cover together as one teaching. The *kaporet/atonement cover* teaches of *t'shuva*. The *Aron Ha'kodesh/the Holy Ark* teaches of learning, of Torah, as the Torah dwells within it. The Ma'or Va'Shemesh goes on to teach that before learning Torah one should do *t'shuva*. The Pesach Seder is the quintessential moment of Jewish learning, of Torah, and therefore should be a time of *t'shuva*, of turning toward each other. *Shabbat Shuva* and *Shabbat Ha'Gadol* inform and infuse each other as gateways to transformation.

As we come to the Seder, it is worth keeping in mind the nature of Jewish learning as a way of life and being with each other. The Seder table becomes the learning table, and at one moment or another we are each as the Four Children of whom we read, wise, challenging, simple, unable even to ask. We help each other. That is the nature of Jewish learning at its core, a way of relationship -- with people, with text, with God. Torah is meant to bring people together. Traditional learning is done with a study partner, a fellow seeker called a *chevrusa*. Of the word and its dynamics, the verbal and spiritual root of this partnership means "to join," to connect, from which comes *chaver*, friend, one with whom we are joined. Learning is meant to be passionate. We bring all of who we are to the learning table, our proclivities and sensitivities, our insights and limitations, our biases and burdens. In the presence of a friend, we are able to be vulnerable, asking, probing, able to say when we don't understand. In the way that kindergarden is meant to teach us all we "ever needed to know," Torah is a training ground for life, the essence of its content reflected in the way of our engaging with it. Competition gives way to cooperation, we learn to listen, to know the thinking of the other, to be concerned for their well-being, to disagree even vehemently but with respect, each as guide and follower, remaining together on the same page, at the same table. We enact transformation and so help to bring the great and awesome Day of God.

As on Yom Kippur, of which *Shabbat Shuva* reminds, of which *Acharei Mot* teaches, it begins within ourselves, within our own homes, with those closest to us. On this *Shabbat Ha'Gadol*, gateway to the transformation of Pesach, we sing from the Prophet Malachi the purpose of Elijah's coming, the first step on the journey to that great and awesome day, *to turn the heart of the parents to the children, and the heart of the children to their parents/lev-avot al-banim v'lev banim al-avotam*. Learning with and from each other, as at the Seder table, the great turning begins.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Same'ach, a Zissen Pasach, Sweet and Joyful,  
Rabbi Victor