

Dear Chavraya,

In the mirror, I saw reflected through the window and overlaid upon my skin the bare branches of a tree. Projected onto my chest and shoulder, the fine network of lines seemed to radiate outward from my heart. In the hazy confusion of a day's first moments of wakefulness, I did not realize what I was seeing. It seemed as though I was looking within myself and seeing the delicate web of my own veins. I smiled and breathed a breath of gratitude as the image came clear, crystallized yet shimmering. So compelling, I understood now the *p'shat/the surface meaning* of what I was seeing, as I tried to understand its deeper meaning. It seemed as though the tree of life was within myself, my own veins flowing with all life, sap and blood, human and tree, the world all around and within as one. From Deuteronomy (20:19), the verse came to me, *ki ha'adam etz ha'sadeh/for the human is the tree of the field.*

The Torah weaves throughout its entire telling a thread of interdependence. That is at the root of what it means to be in covenant, in relationship, as we are with God, with the earth, and with each other. Through *midrash*, the rabbis imagine God telling the first human, and therefore every human of every generation, "do not damage or destroy my world, for if you do there will be none to repair it after you." The comparison of the human to the tree becomes a commandment against wanton destruction of nature and of all things. If we are not to destroy a tree, then all the more so are we not to destroy a human being. Every person is a tree of life, veins within radiating outward from a heart filled with the blood of life, arms outstretched in prayer as branches of a tree reaching toward heaven. All life is woven together as one.

In the midst of each day, it is so easy to miss the greater whole of which we are each an intrinsic part. At the dawning of a day and at its end, the entire cycle of life in the circle dance of earth and sun and moon, so easy to look in the mirror and see only our selves. Reflected upon our skin and in the delicate skein of veins within is the entire tree of life. So too at times in reading Torah, *Torat Chayim/the Torah of life*, so easy to see only the surface meaning, caught up in details, not seeing beneath the skin to the essence of life within. Last week's Torah portion and this week's, *Parashat Tazria* and *M'tzora*, are perhaps among the most opaque of all portions of Torah, the most difficult from which to enter the garden beneath, from whose shore to draw from the waters of life. On the surface these two portions are about skin ailments, of discoloration and ulceration, of bodily fluids and sores that ooze. As our bodies can be afflicted, so too our homes, mold and mildew upon the walls, a house no longer a home, emptied out of all within.

Bereft and empty for all to see, our bodies and our homes, so easy for others to point a finger and flee. Suddenly there are ripples of understanding upon the

surface, as God's breath once upon the water, light glinting, luminous. That is precisely the lesson of these portions, not to flee in fear from those who need us most, to turn toward and not away from those who suffer. A powerful *midrash* asks, *why do tribulations come into the world/mipnei mah ha'y'surin ba'in l'olam?* As though to disabuse us of the urge to blame, to point a finger and run, the *midrash* answers its own question, *because of those who see and look and say, one who sins is stricken and the one who does not sin is not stricken.* The all too common urge to blame the victim is turned on its head. Fearful and facile in our attempt to find order amidst chaos, to isolate all that threatens our ways and wellbeing, we turn away from what most gives meaning to life, the opportunity to help another, to foster human connection. In the *midrashic* mirror, we suddenly realize what we are seeing, a plea for interconnection. The source of so much pain and tribulation in the world is a lack of compassion that comes of finger pointing and blame, when all around and within there is such yearning for embrace. The lesson becomes clear; while we cannot remove all pain and suffering, when compassion flows we become a source of solace and strength in the face of suffering. Walking together on the path of life, roles blur and interchange, each one becoming a mirror for the other.

Telling of the interconnectedness of all life, compassion flows as a thread through these Torah portions. The way of compassion eases suffering and pain and removes the added tribulation of loneliness and guilt from the world of those who suffer. Branches upon our skin, veins within, we see each other in the mirrored image of our selves, each one a tree of life.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor