

Dear Chavraya,

As I shared at the Tu B'shevat seder this week, on the flyer announcing our first Tu B'shevat seder, our very first event as a community, ten years ago, we wrote at the top, "New Blossoms and New Beginnings – the Faith to Plant." As for the farmer, amazed with the beauty of fruit and vegetables, of plants and flowers, so are we amazed, filled with gratitude and awe for what has come to be through so many hands that till and plow. It is hard to take the first steps, to put the seeds in the ground, filled then with prayer and hope. On this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Yitro*, the rabbis teach, *kol hatchalot kashot/all beginnings are difficult*. In the challenge of beginnings there is also sweetness, a depth of faith that inspires, an awareness of vulnerability that makes us stronger.

We are the fruit of God's planting, each of us as individuals, as a community, as a people. In *Parashat Yitro* we come to the field of our becoming a people. I imagine God sowing so many seeds of possibility, wondering what will be, having the faith to plant, hoping that each one of us will blossom and flourish. We come to Mount Sinai in this portion. We are each the field in which seeds of Torah are planted, each one of us as the womb of earth nurturing seed. The revelation at Sinai offers a bold and beautiful moment, such a challenging model. God plants the same seed in each of us, but awaits different fruit, all related one to another, the same species, but each so different in its emerging to greet the sun of another's smile, the rain of our collective tears.

Sinai is the focal point, the central organizing principle around which community forms. We are there with each other, every single one, bringing all of our particularities and peculiarities, incomplete if a single one is missing. In the presence of each other, we stand in God's presence. Every time we gather, every time we learn Torah, we renew that moment. Of the people's arrival at Sinai, the Torah speaks in the present tense, *bayom hazeh/on this day*. So the rabbis create of that gathering at Sinai an "eternal present." There was never a time that we were so united as a people as at that moment, in that gathering around the mountain, and that remains our challenge and our inspiration.

In a most amazing *midrash*, the rabbis describe the going out of God's voice and the way the people heard it. Puzzling on the words of Psalm 29, *kol Ha'shem ba'ko'ach/the voice of God is in the strength*, the rabbis muse on why it doesn't say the voice of God is in God's strength. They teach so beautifully that the psalm is not referring to God's strength in speaking, but of our strength in hearing. It is the strength of every individual to which the Psalm refers, *kol echad v'echad l'fi cho'cho/each and every one according to their strength; the elders according to their strength, the youth according to their strength, the children according to their strength, the nurslings according to their strength, the women according to their strength, and even Moses according to his strength..., and even pregnant women according to their strength..., each and every one according to their strength*.

Receiving inspiration from the same Source, each one's song is different, each one equally beloved and valued. Affirming each one's preciousness and the possibility that emerges when we so value each other, God offers the hope that we shall be a *kingdom of priests and a holy nation/mamlechet ko'hanim v'goy kadosh*. It

is not a given, but a goal, a vision and a way. Before gathering at Sinai, Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, offers advice, to decentralize, give everyone a role, a deeper stake in the community. So shall each voice come to be heard as an echo of God's voice.

Nurtured at Sinai, each of us as a seed planted in God's field, we reach for the sun, growing toward possibility. It begins with the faith to plant. As we planted ten years ago and see now the bounteous beauty of this community that is Nehar Shalom, so may we continue to grow toward the future. The voice of God is in the strength of each one.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor