

Dear Chavraya,

In a beautiful gesture to our ancestors and the sacred stream of memory, one of our members is hosting a Kiddush tomorrow in honor of the two hundred and fifty-fifth *yahrzeit* of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Rabbi Yisroel ben Rabbi Eliezer v'Soreh is the trunk in the tree of Chassidism, the founder of a new way that celebrated joy and ecstasy, purity of heart and depth of personal connection to God and to people. Not diminishing the importance of traditional learning, Rebbe Yisroel expanded the path to God to include not only the way of scholarship, but also the simple ways of the heart's yearning. It included the song of the shoemaker who sang a *nigun* while mending soles, the metaphor of repair not to be lost. It was a path to include the heartfelt tune played upon a shepherd's flute, and the offering of holy letters by the unlearned, each letter of the *aleph-bet* recited with care, asking God to weave them into the prayers. It was a path along which people could dance their way to God.

The greatest teaching if we would find our way along that joyful path, is in the name by which Rebbe Yisroel came to be called, the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, *Master of a Good Name*. A common appellation for wonder-working rabbis, it comes to be most associated with Rebbe Yisroel. It is in that calling that we are challenged to see ourselves reflected, to strive to be, each one, a master of a good name, a *ba'al shem tov*. In Yiddish, a person of integrity can be described as *der guter nommen/the one of a good name*.

I have found myself thinking about this matter of a good name, of integrity, as I have read so much of the sordid and sad in the news lately. Whether of those who earn respect on the playing field or, God protect us, through Torah, of people known and unknown whose good names become tarnished, a mirror is held up for us through the lens of all the painful stories. We are challenged and given pause in which to wonder and reflect, to take stock and consider the path. Held in the balance before us, we see the weighing of arrogance and humility, ways of response from which to consider our own ways in the moments of every day interactions and decision making. Different only in scope from deeds that play out in headlines, it is in the details of every day that we are given the strands from which to weave a good name, to become the masters of our own calling, be it for good or ill.

In this week's double Torah portion, *Parashat B'har B'chukotei*, the path to a good name is offered, and so a choice, *im b'chukotai telechu/if you will walk in My statutes....* This is not the *im/if* of an "if/then" proposition. It is the "if" of choosing, an encouraging "if," urging us on, pointing the way. It is up to us, it is about a way of going, *if you will walk....* Rashi emphasizes the "if" as an imperative to do the *mitzvot*, to fulfill the commandments. In ringing response across the ages, in the spirit of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Slonimer Rebbe cries out, *she'eyno tzivu'i al kiyum ha'mitzvot/it is not a command concerning keeping the commandments!* The Slonimer certainly wants us to keep the commandments, but he wants something more, something deeper. He then says, almost breathless and in tears as I hear him, *and this is the meaning of "if you will walk in My statutes," rather, it is about a way of going in the way and spirit of the Torah/al halicha va'derech v'ru'ach ha'Torah.*

Encouraging us to walk in that way and spirit, the spirit of God's gentle breath upon the water at the very beginning, the spirit of caring for the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the spirit of Shabbos wholeness, the rabbis long ago heard God's own prayer in that simple word, *im/if*. They said so simply, *eyn "im," eleh lashon bakasha/there is no use of the word "im/if" except as a word of prayerful beseeching*. Opening our hearts to hear God's yearning, our deeds bespeak *Amen*. So much later, time turning to nineteenth century Germany, the human heart as constant, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught of the word *telechu/you shall walk*, "it is the movement towards a goal...; the *chukkot/statutes* are the bounds set by God in accordance with our moral nature and our moral calling...."

May our greatest calling be the name by which we are called, each one becoming in the way of our walking a *Ba'al Shem Tov/Master of a Good Name*.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Victor