

Dear Chavraya,

I kept a promise this week. It is a promise that I made several years ago during the previous Daf Yomi cycle. Taking some seven and a half years to complete, Daf Yomi is the coordinated program of Talmud study through which all participants from throughout the Jewish world learn the same page of Talmud each day, all joined to each other through words on an ancient page. At the end of every tractate, as the last page is completed, a promise becomes ritualized. The formula is called *Hadran*, from its first word: *Hadran alach maseches Bava Kamma, v'hadrach alan/We shall return to you, Tractate Bava Kamma, and you shall return to us. Our thoughts are on you, Tractate Bava Kamma, and your thoughts are on us. We will not forget you, Tractate Bava Kamma, and you will not forget us – neither in this world, nor in the world that is coming.* It is in the form of a love letter, lovers yearning upon parting, promising to return.

And so I returned this week to tractate Bava Kamma, “the First Gate,” concerned with damages and liability. Beyond the difficulties of content, of rents in the social fabric and efforts to reweave, there is joy in the moment of return. As I turned to the last page first to move the bookmark from where I had left it upon my departure, I felt a sense of fulfillment, almost giddy in knowing I had kept my promise to return. How can we ever step out of the cycle once we promise to return? I thought of a long ago Hebrew school class and a shy young student named Ayal. As I love to do when introducing any *sefer kodesh/holy book*, I showed the class the gate on the title page of a volume of Talmud. The gate beckons, inviting us to enter, welcoming us into the garden of learning. One student asked if there was a gate at the end. Often too shy to speak up, Ayal bubbled with excitement and said before I could even turn to the end of the volume to see, “no, there can’t be a gate at the end because once we come in we never leave.”

I have never forgotten that beautiful Torah from Ayal. Once we have entered the book we never leave. And yet, we return. I have thought a lot this week about leaving and returning and of simply being where we are. Last week we completed the third book of the Torah, *Vayikra*. And this week, we have returned to begin the fourth book, *Bamidbar*. At our Family Learning Circle this week, we took out the Torah and laid it lovingly upon a table that lay low upon the floor, its legs folded, so that all of the children could easily see the Torah’s dancing letters and learn its song. One of the children asked me if I have read the whole Torah. I said yes, we read the Torah every year. She then asked how many times I have read the Torah. Uhm, I thought, “probably thirty-five to forty times.” But then I thought to myself, musing on her question, but if each time is like the first time, then, really, how many times have I read it?

And this week was Rosh Chodesh, time of the moon’s return from its journey through the sky. In the moment of its return is the beginning of a new journey. The astronomical Rosh Chodesh is in the most perfect of moments, when ending and beginning become as one. The completion of the previous cycle and the beginning of the new cycle occurs in that moment of perfect alignment between the sun, the moon, and the earth. And so, I wondered, does the moon return or is it ever in a place of new beginnings, as for us in the journeys of our lives?

I found myself wondering this week if we can return to a place we've never left, or to a place we've never been. As we enter the fourth book of Torah and begin this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bamidbar*, God speaks to Moses in the desert of Sinai. That is where we all are now, as we approach Shavuot and prepare to receive the Torah anew. Surely, we were there last year and now we are returning. But the rabbis teach that whenever we learn Torah we are at Sinai. And so we have never left, endings and beginnings become as one through Torah, as in the cycles of sun and moon and earth. It is all part of heaven's plan, seeking and returning, a game of hide and seek, sometimes in the bright sunshine of summer, and sometime in the gray and cold of fall and winter, always seeking our way home.

So too, in the weekly cycle of days coming home to Shabbos, ever returning to a place we never left. With every Shabbos we come closer to the day that is all Shabbos, that day when the whole world is filled with Shabbat shalom. The day is so familiar in our returning, but the new week's Shabbos is not the same as the one to which we sang farewell with Havdalah last week. And so too in reading Torah, however many times, each week's portion is familiar, but it is not the same as when we left it the year before because we are different, changing as we age through the days of our lives.

As concentric circles flowing ever outward, days become years and bring us home, returning us to familiar places we have never been. Of promises kept, we arrive now at Sinai to receive the Torah once again. As lovers reaching, remembering the day of parting, may Torah be renewed as we are renewed, each of us, and all of us, coming home to a place we have never been. And just as easily, may we return to the place we've always been, Sinai within.

Shabbat shalom v'Chag same'ach,
Rabbi Victor