

Dear Chavraya,

The birds begin to sing at the first hint of the coming dawn. They are the harbingers of day. I think of a beautiful *piyyut* that is sung on the morning of Hoshannah Rabbah, and I offer it to the birds, *kol m'vaser, m'vaser omer/the voice of the herald sings out and proclaims*. It is one of my favorite moments, at the end of the Tikkun Leyl Shavuot, the all night learning to commemorate the giving of the Torah. And so it had been this week, a beautiful night of deep learning, of soulful sharing and singing, of laughter and tears. And now the dawn was near. I knew roughly when it was time to daven Shachris, but how to know for sure? With the song of the birds, at about 4:15, we went to the back door and opened it into the stillness. Looking up into the sky, branches of trees and their still fresh leaves silhouetted against the gray, night was turning to day. I thought of the question asked in the Mishna, *may'eymatai korin et sh'ma b'shachris/from when may we say the morning Sh'ma?* Of several answers given, not in measures of time, but in degrees of light, the most poignant says, *From when a person can see their friend at a distance of four amot and recognize them*.

As that same day turned to night, the late afternoon sky turned leaden, the line between day and night becoming blurred. The air was heavy as the storm approached. It felt so different than the day's gentle birth. Then came the thunder and lightning, and the hard rain falling. I stood at the front door, awestruck, both terrified and spellbound as the entire street was illumined in a surreal flash of light. In a midrash on this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'ha'alotcha*, Rabbi Berechya Hacoen son of Rebbi says, *this lightning is generated by the celestial fire, and it goes forth and lights up the entire world*. He must have stood in his doorway once too, and seen the same lightning that I saw.

And soon after, ushering in the second day of Shavuot, the warm glow of Yontev candles filled the room. A *Yizkor* day, a day of remembrance, the second day of Shavuot also begins with the lighting of a *yahrzeit* candle. Like hearing God in the still small voice, "above the sound of many waters," the flickering *yizkor* light that burns through the day speaks of a light so much brighter than a flash of lightning that for all of its power is gone in a moment. In the simple and quiet, there is grandeur. There is no blessing to be said in lighting a candle of remembrance, called in Hebrew *ner n'shama/soul candle*. The life of the one remembered is the blessing, the light of their soul an eternal light, *ner Hashem nishmat adam/God's candle is the human soul*.

Throughout our lives, we raise up the light of our soul and let it shine in the world, and so it continues to shine beyond our own time on earth. Our soul's light shines through deeds of kindness, of goodness, of justice. Simple deeds can bring so much light. So a number of us learned last Sunday, when parents and children of the Mishpacha Family Hebrew School went to spend time with elders at Hebrew Senior Life. It was such a simple activity, playing bingo together. From the moment we walked into the room, mostly the children, a light went up, a light that was palpable. Children calling out numbers, children turning to their elder partners saying "we won!"

At the start of *Parashat B'ha'alotcha*, instruction is given concerning the lighting of the menorah in the desert sanctuary, the *mishkan*. The Torah does not speak of kindling light, as in *l'hadlik ner*, but says, *b'ha'alotcha et ha'nerot/in your causing light to go up*. At the end of the same midrash in which Rabbi Berechya Hacoen describes the brilliant flash of lightning, it becomes clear that it is not the physical light of candles kindled that God needs from us. God says, *l'alot ot'cha/raise up your self!* God needs us, our essence, the light of our souls expressed through deeds. May our own light be as the shamash by which we light the Shabbos candles.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor