

Dear Chavraya,

These days that we are in of *S'firat Ha'Omer/Counting the Omer*, teach essential truths of life and call us to listen. The deepest truths can be heard only if we pause to hear. That is why a voice goes out from Sinai, pleading for us to listen. It is that most familiar word, *Sh'ma/hear*, our ears and hearts meant to hear the words of our lips, the words that come from deeper still. We count each day from Pesach to Shavuous, from the Exodus and freedom to Sinai, Torah giving purpose to our freedom, the journey continuing until reaching the Land of Israel, and there the challenge just begins. Only upon arrival are we tested to see if we do indeed remember that we were slaves in the land of Egypt, that we know the soul of the stranger. In Torah time and earth time, we count to Sinai and we count from the first harvest at Pesach until the second harvest at Shavuous. We learn through these days to count each day to make each day count. And if all our senses are attuned, we learn during these days of counting of the interplay of grandeur and fragility in all realms of life and nature.

From the fragile state of being in servitude, we reach for the grandeur of freedom's hand. From the pits of slavery and the muck of a parted sea, we reach for the mountaintop. In the turning of seasons one to another, from seedtime to harvest and back again, the farmer knows how fragile the way until the grandeur of a bounteous yield. These days of counting the *omer* are exhilarating as we make our way to Sinai. And they are also days of semi-mourning, numerous tragedies remembered in their unfolding, the interplay of grandeur and fragility as joy and sorrow, life and death. Counting tells of finitude and warns of demise, urging that we protect and nurture in the moment to insure for others that there shall be a tomorrow. From seedbed to Sinai, these days tell of the grandeur and fragility of life itself, of our own lives, and of this earth whose body and soul is our essence and existence.

I write this week honoring our own Rabbi Shoshana and the other fifteen clergy who were arrested this week at the site of the West Roxbury Lateral Pipeline, honoring too all of those who gathered in support. It is a life and death matter that calls for us to truly hear the voice that cries out from Sinai, and then to act. It is the voice that says, *Sh'ma Yisra'el/hear Israel, God our God, God is One*. If God is one then all people created in God's image of Oneness are one, and this earth of God's creation is one. Earth is one in its essence, and it is the only one, the only place of all creation's dwelling, together to hold and behold such grandeur and fragility.

And so they gathered this week to cry out and give voice to earth's pain, to act and move all of us to act before it is too late. The natural gas the pipeline is to carry is only natural if left in the ground well below the surface. It is not natural when sucked out by fracking to blast and pollute the womb of earth, pumping in clean water, poisoned then to flow into fields and valleys where crops grow, as in the delicate shoots the farmer counts with wonder from seedtime to harvest time, from Pesach to Shavuous. It is no longer natural gas when methane leaks from the pipes in which it flows, adding to greenhouse gases that choke mother earth and all of her children who breathe her airy breath so freely given. It is not

natural, when leaking gas can ignite into massive explosions and destroy whole neighborhoods, destroying the fragile web of human connection.

Pipes are meant to be channels of connection that join and give life. Each week and each day in the counting of the Omer is associated with its own attribute of the Holy One and each attribute is channeled into our world and into our selves through its own *tzinur*, its own *pipe* that channels the divine essence. The world and each of us as a world in microcosm is the vessel into which God's essence flows. The fragile network of such channels as sacred pipelines is juxtaposed in mystical imagery upon the human body. The human is earth and the earth is human, *adam* is one with the earth, *adamah*. As Torah flows from Sinai, we are joined with each other, with earth, with God, with all life.

In that flow of Torah that comes down from the mountain top, it all become clear in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'har / in the mountain*. All of Jewish life is expressed through *mitzvot/the holy deeds* that define us as Jews. In *Parashat B'har* we learn that all of the holy deeds that give us life are contained and reflected in one *mitzvah* that is a plea to care for the earth and for all who dwell in her grand and fragile embrace. In the very first verse of *Parashat B'har*, two words are added to what would otherwise be very familiar words of God's calling to Moses: *Va'y'daber HaShem el Moshe – b'har Sinai – laimor/And God spoke to Moshe – on Mount Sinai – saying....* It is the addition of these two words, *b'har Sinai/on Mount Sinai*, that become so important. All that follows is about cycles of seven in time, the *Sh'mita year, the Jubilee year*, and the weekly Shabbos, all times of freedom and renewal, of harmony and equality, of peace among people and between people and nature. Unfolding immediately from the unusual first sentence of the portion is detailed teaching of the *Sh'mita/Sabbatical year*, when land is to lie fallow and be given its own Sabbath rest. It is only this *mitzvah* of allowing the land to rest that is introduced with such words, reminding that it was given on Sinai. The rabbis and commentators through time ask why only this *mitzvah* is so introduced, since all of the *mitzvot* were given on Sinai.

I have often in the past found the rabbinic response weak, that all the *mitzvot* are contained within or represented by the *mitzvah* of *Sh'mita*. It no longer seems weak, but so profound. This world and this earth upon which we live is the place and context for the doing of all that is human and holy. None of the other *mitzvot*, none of the other visions of justice, of wholeness and peace can be realized without a context and container, without this earth that is the place of human life. All is contained in *Sh'mita* as the quintessential *mitzvah* of caring for earth and for each other in her embrace. The Slonimer Rebbe says it so simply, so poignantly, *ki k'dushat ha'makom t'luyah bi'k'dushat ha'zman shel sh'mita/for the holiness of the place depends on the holiness of the time of Sh'mita*.

In *Sh'mita* time, as in these days of counting, we learn of grandeur and fragility, of earth and of life, of interconnection and responsibility. Joined with earth and each other by channels of divine flow, we are each called to listen and to act. In this week of *Parashat B'har*, we honor those who hear the cry of earth that is one with the voice of Sinai. To the call and response that joined heaven and earth at Sinai, may we rise up singing and answer with one voice yet again the call that

flows down from the mountain. As Rabbi Shoshana sings, “the sea is rising and so are we.”

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor