

Dear Chavraya,

In one small word is the possibility of change, and of the human connection from which change might come. It is always that way, however great the movement and urgent the cause, the sea-deep essence of change is found in the ordinary interactions between ordinary people, in the simple words of connection that call us to come. From wherever we are, however distant, however hesitant to engage, however great the urge to distrust and disdain, we are called to come. It may not always work, at least not at first, but we are called to try, and then the dynamics of possibility are released, set in motion, change begun, inexorably turning. It is the turning in time of which Rev. Martin Luther King spoke, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Of that one word, a moment of turning, a hint toward a vision and a way, appearing unexpectedly, always there, but waiting to be found, it is in the name of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo / Come!*

On the grand scale, it is a call to help bend that arc, to come, not to sit back, not to deny one's own importance, to take one's own place in the long walk to freedom, to work for justice and peace. It is also a call to live fully in the intersection of the grand and the small, to see the arc as it bends through the hamlets and villages far from the crowds and cameras, as it bends through the quiet spaces of one's own life, through the day-to-day interactions of people and place. Called to come and engage, whether with one or with many, each as important, it is the call to Moses at the start of *Parashat Bo*.

The oppression has ground on, taking its toll on the Hebrew slaves. And the plagues have ground on, taking their toll on the Egyptians, the people and their leaders, demagogues and demi-gods winning the day, refusing to let go of power and hate, the people be damned. It is just before the eighth plague, the swarming locusts, *arbeh*, the land about to be devoured, denuded of its crops and vegetation, so thick the buzzing cloud, day turned to night, unable to see the light. God tells Moses, *bo el Paroh/come to Pharaoh....* The obvious question is meant to challenge, why does the Torah not say "go to Pharaoh," which would seem to make more sense? What is the difference between a call to come and to go? Perhaps in the call to come is a gentler tone, something softer, more open, a sense of invitation and possibility. The Aramaic interpretive translation of the Torah called Targum Onkelos translates *bo* as *ul*, meaning enter, *t'kanes* in Hebrew, thus a sense of invitation, of needing to enter Pharaoh's space, to engage.

Three of the ten plagues are introduced with the word *Bo*, Moses called in each one to come to Pharaoh, to enter his own space, to approach him where he is. Each of these plagues, the second, frogs, the fifth, cattle disease, and the ninth, locusts are all preceded by a warning of what will happen if Pharaoh continues in his refusal to free the slaves. When hope of change seems lost, it is startling that there is still a warning by the time of the eighth plague. The purpose of the warning is to open the door to *t'shuva*, to change. That there is such possibility even now is powerful, highlighting a tension in the text, the possibility of change now, even as God is hardening Pharaoh's heart to continue in its own way of obstinacy. It suggests the possibility of change even when all seems lost and

impervious to change. It is at least still worth trying, even then, the arc is still waiting to be bent.

Reminding us of our own role in the making of change, in the introduction to his commentary on *Parashat Bo*, from thirteenth century Spain Rabbenu Bachya draws on Proverbs, 28:14, *Happy is the one who fears always, but one who hardens their heart shall fall into evil*. He then makes it clear that this is for each of us, not simply about Moses and Pharaoh, not only about them and then, but about us and now. Offered as a challenge, Rabbenu Bachya, speaks to each of us, describing a way of being that is the antithesis of Pharaoh, that each one of us should be of tender heart, *al ha'adam she'yihiyeh rach ha'levav*. From the one little word, *bo/come*, there is an invitation to approach, to draw near, to engage for the sake of human connection, even, or especially, with an opponent. Even then there is the possibility of change. Hope is nurtured in the striving. In offering the possibility of change, we help to keep our own hearts from becoming hardened, from becoming closed to another human being. In our willingness to engage the other, to come to where they are, we help to bend the arc of the moral universe in its all encompassing span toward justice.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor