

Dear Chavraya,

As with many tunes that take root in the heart, I remember the very first time I heard it. It was on Rosh Hashannah morning several years ago. Our good friend, Rabbi Adina Allen, was leading the davenning. It was in the earlier part of the morning. As she began to sing that tune, I began to cry. I had never heard it before and it went right to my heart, where it continues to sprout, watered with my tears almost every time I hear it or sing it.

It has become somewhat of a theme it seems for many these days, a line to hold on to, a song of yearning and hope, the tune and the words. With several others from among us, rabbinical students from *Nehar Shalom*, I was in New York for the earlier part of this week for a T'ruah gathering of rabbis, cantors, and rabbinical/cantorial students. It was a time to gather from around the country to share and plan and give strength to each other as we considered ways of organizing and building resistance in the Jewish community, ways to affirm life and goodness and the humanity of all. Throughout the time together that tune would arise, at times as planned, at times as though of itself, a bird seeking to alight, like Noah's dove, rising from all the gathered hearts and lips, and the tears would come. We sang it in prayer, we sang it in study gatherings, we sang it on a protest march, and again as some of our number sat down on a New York Street and were arrested in front of Trump International Hotel. Ubiquitous, lifting the soul in every time and place, the tune affirms the words a minister spoke at a recent meeting in Boston, "In these days there is little distinction between the pulpit and the protest line."

I had the honor to offer closing words and a song at the end of the T'ruah gathering. Of course, I knew the moment I was asked that it would be that song, offering a reflection on the meaning of its words and then to sing it all together. The tears come simply in my thinking of singing it, of being gathered in that closing circle singing together. The words are from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'shallach*, the portion that framed our gathering, the portion of this Shabbos, *Shabbos Shira/the Shabbos of Song*. It appears at the start of *Shirat Ha'yam/the Song of the Sea*. Israel is about to pass through the parted waters to freedom. The question that hangs in the air, that continues to weigh on our hearts, perhaps even more on God's heart, is whether our song, our intent, shall be one of vengeance and hate or of healing and hope. The verse of the song is read in both ways, by some as triumphal, a song of victory, by others as soothing, a song of new possibility. It is a verse that offers a vision and a way to a new time, truly to the land of possibility.

You have heard the words; *Ozi v'zimrat Yah va'y'hi li li'shu'a/God is my strength and song*. That much is sung, but it continues, *zeh eli v'an'vehu elohey avi v'aro'm'menhu/this is my God, for whom I shall be a refuge, my parents' God, and I shall raise God up*. The way the verse is translated reflects entire world-views and offers a context of struggle for the Jewish soul. Some translate the opening words as telling of the power and vengeance of God, war waged on our behalf. Power and might become common ways of understanding the verse, tragically and dangerously demeaning it. Yet, the language itself tells of another way, the vision and the way as one. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says of the first word,

*oz/strength*, that it is from *oz*, and that *oz* is the power of resistance. We raise up song to counter all that would deny life and shackle human decency; that is the resistance that we are called to be and do, to sing for the sake of goodness, to be the song of God. *The Song of God / zimrat Yah*, so rich and beautiful, the song we need to bear, to sing, to nurture. On this Shabbos that is also *Tu B'shevat/the New Year of the Trees*, we realize too that it is a song of this earth that we are called to protect. In B'reishit (43:11), Yaakov tells his sons to bring produce of the land of Israel down to the "man in Egypt," whom he does not yet know is his beloved son, Yosef. He tells his sons, *k'chu imachem zimrat ha'aretz/take with you a song of the land*. In the word that tells of song and of produce there also shimmers a vision of peace, of the time of swords turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks. As the prophet Isaiah (2:4) sings, the very word for song becomes pruning shear, *va'chanitoteyhem la'maz'merot/their spears to pruning hooks*. Of these opening words of the verse, strength and song, the Yiddish translation of Torah is earthy and beautiful, *mayn shtarkeit un gezang is Yoh/my strength and song is God*.

That we should be a habitation for God, a refuge for the Holy One, draws together the gentle hope of the first words. The rabbis say it was the children who cried out at the Sea, *zeh eli v'an'vehu. That's the one, they said, that's the one who took care of us in the fields of Egypt*. When mothers hid their children in the fields praying they would be saved from Pharaoh's edict to kill the sons of Israel, it was God who came down and swaddled and nursed them. Hardly a warrior God, *that's the one, that's the one*, the children cried, the nurturing God who suckled children in the way of peace and wholeness, of hope and possibility. As our task too, the rabbis understood the same words, *zeh eli v'an'veyhu, as ani v'hu / I and God, as God is gracious and compassionate so should I be*. As I am to be a refuge for the Holy One, therefore, so too am I to be a refuge for all who bear God's image.

As we sing the words of that song tomorrow in the Torah reading, and as we give voice to raise them up with melody of the heart, I know I shall cry. Touched so deeply by the melody and by the promise and yearning of the words, may we raise our voices and sing, making real the vision and the way.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor