

Dear Chavraya,

There are times when we just keep going, knowing we need to pause, knowing we need to take a breath. Even when we move from one good, happy, holy, or important matter to another, we can miss the significance of each moment if there is no room to pause and proceed with awareness and breath. Shabbos and times of prayer are built into the Jewish way of delineating time to help us find moments of pause. They are the Jewish way of delineating time. The notion of 24/7 is anathema to a Jewish notion of time. None of this is to question the importance of working efficiently and well, but to help us remain rooted in what we are doing, rooted in life and its fullness, and about our ability to continue along life's path in a purposeful way. So too, if we would create a better world, we need to be able to see the beauty of this world and to be inspired by it. We need to be able to pause long enough to appreciate each one's presence encountered on the way of our journeys. We need to be aware of our own thoughts and yearnings, pausing to hear God's still small voice as it calls from within our own hearts and souls, as it sings from the wondrously fragile flowers and is held in the echoes of a child's footsteps.

The challenge to pause and to reflect in the midst of life is offered in a beautifully gentle, even playful way in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ekev*. It is rooted in a teaching of the Holy Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth century founder of Chassidism, and blossoming then in a fuller teaching of the Piaseczna Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira. The source of the teaching is found in what becomes the second paragraph of the Sh'ma, *v'haya im shamo'ait will come to be if you will really listen*. Challenging, warning, pleading we are told of the good that will come if we live in accord with God's word and in accord with the land, with nature, with all of creation. *If you will really listen* becomes the essence of the challenge. And if we don't really listen, if we don't pause long enough to hear the needs of earth, of God, and of each other, then the earth will not sustain us..., and, God forbid, we will *vanish quickly/va'ava'd'tem m'heyra*.

With deep intent, the Baal Shem Tov playfully turns that phrase into a hopeful challenge, helping us to see a way to hear more deeply, to really hear, and thereby to sustain ourselves upon the earth, the very hope that is offered at the end of the paragraph: *so that your days and the days of your children may long endure upon the soil..., ki'y'mei hashamayim al ha'aretz/as the days of the heaven upon the earth*. The Baal Shem Tov turns the terrifying words upside down, *va'ava'd'tem m'heyra/and you shall quickly vanish*, becoming active now, offering us a place from which to begin the turning, *l'abed et ha'm'heyirut/to banish haste*.

The Piaseczna Rebbe, who later became known as the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, offered in more ordinary times a teaching to his students that builds on the words of the Baal Shem Tov. He taught, *it is very difficult to work and to serve if one is not in a place of settled mind, but is only hurried, and even more in the service of the mind. One should therefore activate their thoughts and feelings/l'fa'el im ha'machshava al ha'r'gashiyotav, and turn all that is bad to good/u'l'hafoch et ha'ra'ot l'tovot*.

In the deepest places of our own being, the seeds of change in the world are planted in our own furrows of thought and feeling. So much more is needed, change hardly to come as a consequence of thought, but so it begins. Taking time to envision and be renewed, to think and to feel, we come to see more clearly the way ahead and are strengthened for the journey. Banishing haste, may we find in Shabbos the breath we know we need to take, continuing then in a more purposeful way.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor