

Dear Chavraya,

It is the month of Elul, now on the waning side of the moon, moving closer toward Tishrei and the journey into time's renewal. Looking within our selves, looking out at the world all around, so much to take in, so much to hold, feeling as though impossible to take in or to hold so much. The fierce storms that are lashing places of habitation in far-flung parts of the world lash at our hearts, worried for people both near and far. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, blessings and curses are set before us, taking care not to think they are set only before our ancestors upon their entering the new Land. They are really for us, about us. I pause on the blessings, wondering how to apply them to all who struggle in the storms, *baruch atah ba'ir u'varuch atah ba'sadeh/blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field*. I think of the cities and fields inundated with floodwaters unable to be contained by the riverbanks and beachheads, of rains that gush from swollen clouds, waters no longer of life, but of death. And the Torah's blessing that I pray should be for all of us, *blessed shall you be in your coming, and blessed shall you be in your going/baruch atah b'vo'echa u'varuch atah b'tzey'techa*. And of the curses that come as warnings, that turn the blessings upside down and inside out, our comings and goings through floodwaters that overwhelm, that drive young and old from their homes. How God must cry in hearing our prayers misdirected, not God who has cursed, but our selves. And so we seek to change, from the way of the curse to the way of blessing, to be who we are meant to be in caring for the earth and each other.

Seeking to change our selves and the world, Elul is a time of pause. In the midst of all that churns in the flood, we can yet find moments, must find moments, in which to reflect and find the place of inner peace from which to go on. Elul offers a gateway in which to pause. It is the place from which we enter the new year, as through a gate, taking our first steps on a new path. I share with you, a teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe on Elul as a gate in which to pause, for our own sake, for the world's sake:

*There are gates into the world, into the year, and into the soul. There is a gate that precedes the new year. It is the month of Elul. The holy rabbi, Rabbi Yechiel Mamosh of blessed memory, said, "Elul is the beginning of the year." But Elul is the last month of the year, thus it is the end of the year. Indeed, the month of Elul is the beginning of a new year, for it is the gate upon which the entire new year depends. According to the quality of preparation in the month of Elul, so the way of the coming year is set. There is a gateway into each month, and into each Shabbat. The nature of our rising in the morning is the gateway into the day. The very first line of the Shulchan Aruch declares, "one should rise into the day like a lion to the service of the Holy One." The essence of a person is seen in their way of going forth through gates (the way we encounter and create transitions). A person's life depends on gates (transitions...). If one lifts up their gates fittingly in the month of Elul, so shall the entire year be built on a new level. And so too, all of the gates (of the year).*

As our ancestors came near at this point in text and time to entering a new land, so we come near to entering a new year. As *Parashat Ki Tavo* begins, *v'haya kit tavo el ha'aretz/it shall be when you come to the land*, it is for us, making our way through the terrain of time. At numerous points in the Torah portion, the people

are reminded of where they stand “today.” Drawing on the Zohar, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches that “today” is a hint that points to Rosh Hashannah, *ha’yom da yoma d’dina/today-that is the day of judgement*, which is one of the names for Rosh Hashannah. He then adds, *hu yom hitchadshut ha’bri’ah/it is the day of creation’s renewal*. As part of creation, in entering moments of pause in which to renew ourselves, so we help to renew creation.

As we journey to the land, the Slonimer teaches of our journey, not a journey of long ago but of today. The land to which we go, he says, is the upper land, the land above, not as in Heaven, but here on earth, the land as this entire world made whole in the way of Shabbos peace. Of that land, the Slonimer writes, *ha’aretz ha’elyona haynu Shabbos/the land above is surely Shabbos*. Of a land, of a world not wracked by storms rising from overheated seas, of people able to come and go in peace, of people living safely in city and field without fear of sword or storm, he writes so simply, *ki ha’shabbos hi gan eden aley admot/for Shabbos is the Garden of Eden on earth*.

Pausing to be in Shabbos time, so may it be, *a river of peace/nehar shalom* flowing with us out into the world, standing in Elul’s gate renewed, blessed in our coming and our going as we make our way together toward the land of a new year.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor