

Dear Chavraya,

Standing in the checkout line at CVS, I noticed that the cashier was glancing at me as I approached the counter. Once there, and with no others behind me, she paused while placing items in a bag, "where are you from," she asked. Realizing that she had been looking at my kippah, I sensed what she was asking, but I wasn't going to go there, at least not at first. "From just down the street," I said, "from Lochstead Avenue." That was clearly not the exotic answer she was looking for. "No," she said with some emphasis, "I mean where are you from?" "Well," I said, feeling now that I would really disappoint her, "I was born in Boston." Seeing the probing look in her face and feeling the depth of her question still hanging in the air, I knew that in fairness I needed to give her a more substantive answer in relation to the underlying nature of her question. I had admittedly been somewhat mischievous, though not entirely, wanting to underscore a common bond among us all, regardless of our place of family origin. I pointed to my kippah and asked if that is what she was wondering about. I told her that I am Jewish and I explained the kippah as a symbolic reminder of humility, a way of acknowledging holiness in whatever place we stand, including in that moment of our conversing at the checkout counter. I told her that my grandparents were from Russia, that Jews come from many places, and that I was the rabbi of the synagogue on Lochstead Avenue. With great pride, she then gushed that she would soon be going to visit the "Holy Land" with her son. I understood; that is where she really wanted me to be from. "How wonderful," I said, "that is where the story of the Jewish people begins." Holding my bag, having somehow completed the transaction in the midst of our talking, I offered words of blessing, "May you travel safely, and may you find great meaning, and in your own way may you bring a glimmer of peace, shalom."

As I left the store, I felt affirmed in my preference for human cashiers, rather than the ubiquitous automated checkout machines. I thought about the deeper meaning of the cashier's question, "where are you from?" The corollary, of course, is "where are you going?" While on one hand the question of origin is easier to answer than that of destination, to understand the genesis and unfolding of our journeys offers challenge in both directions. In regard to the past there is an element of peeling back layers, of turning pages in photo albums and continuing to turn when the pages become blank, always wondering of what came before. How far back do we go to know where we are really from? And in our own lives, beyond physical place, from out of which experiences have we emerged as who we are? And from the confluence of which rivers and roads have we come to be in the place we are now. Toward the future, we can only build the roads and shape the craft that will carry us on the tide, never knowing the nature of terrain to come or of rapids in the stream just beyond the bend.

It is the entire story of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Lech L'cha*, with which the particular journey of the Jewish people begins. Avram and Sarai are told to go forth from all that is familiar and take up the journey to a land they do not know, *Lech l'acha me'artz'cha u'mimolad'itcha u'mi'beyt avicha el ha'aretz asher areka/go forth from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your parental home to the land that I will show you*. It is a journey of faith, the journey of life, never knowing the road ahead, only that we need to go, to take the first steps, each step

its own departure and its own arrival. As Avram and Sarai are told to go forth, to begin their journey, a question is later asked of Hagar as she too begins a journey, one that starts in a place of pain, sent out from the home of the journeyers, Avram and Sarai. As she stops along the way, in the confluence of roads and rivers, God asks of Hagar, *from where have you come and where are you going* *ley mi'zeh vaat v'ana taylechi?*

Though it had been asked in simpler terms, it is the way I heard and pondered the question of the cashier, where have you come from and where are you going...? As Simon and Garfunkel taught, "the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls," so words of Torah are spoken in the checkout line and in all the holy places where people earnestly ask of each other's story. In the telling of Torah, our story in truth begins in the company of all people, in the universal beginning of humanity in the first two portions of B'reishit. Our own particular journey now begins with *Lech L'cha*. As each person and each people begins to tell their own stories of coming to be and of their hope for where they go, the particular journey is the starting point of being in relation to others in all our similarity and difference. Going forth each day as Avram and Sarai did, may we hear the questions of those encountered on the way and be grateful for their asking, "where are you from?"

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor