

For Leo and Ruby

Dear Chavraya,

The sweet sounds of my grandchildren surround me as they play on the floor of my study. Though they have come into my space, I feel as though I am in theirs, feeling as a voyeur listening, peering over my desk or even bending to look under it as they engage with each other. Drawing on our recent trip to Belgium, I had planned to write a very different letter this week, a deeper, reflective piece on journeys and delays along the way of getting to where we are going, and of what we learn in between. I had taken notes and had even begun to write, stealing away to my study as the little ones slept in this morning, thinking I had a few hours to work as they woke into the day and had breakfast. Truth to tell, I was feeling untrue to myself and to them in not spending every possible moment together, especially such simple, unscripted moments as of a day's beginning. Seeming to sense my longing, they soon found their way to my study and have now made it quite their own.

Together, we are weaving the thread of generations into a tapestry of memories, journeys unfolding. Yesterday, we visited with my father, Noa's grandfather, Leo and Ruby's great grandfather. When I exclaimed to my dad, "they are your great grandchildren," he responded with one of his ever sincere stock phrases, "all of my children and grandchildren are great." Each time my father says that, whether he realizes it or not, he helps us all to feel important. As Mister Rogers used to say, "you are a very important person," something that we all need to feel and know in our hearts at every stage of our lives.

Leo is standing up now on the arm of the sofa in my study and playing with the train cars from so long ago that sit on a few remaining pieces of track on top of the old wooden file cabinet. I tell him of the electric train set given to me when I was not much older than him, describing the ever-circling journeys that played out on the table my dad built, lights shining along the track, a distant whistle sounding through time, days of glory.

Ruby calls to Leo, "Yea'o," as she pronounces his name, "don't you want to play with me?" As big brother comes down to the floor, the two begin to put together the old wooden train tracks of another train set, one that their mother and her brother and sister once played with. Of journeys and generations, tracks joining from one generation to another, the two reach into the firm, blue and white cardboard box that waits for them between visits. They take out the wooden tracks, setting them on the floor, and with a sense of wonder they hold up the still brightly colored wooden train cars, as though musing on the distance traveled, a moment of time and conveyance suspended.

There are moments of tension along the tracks, the way of journeys, part of life. The challenge is in how we resolve them. Older says to younger, "I'm going to set up all the tracks." "No, I want to," says the younger." "Well, I'm not going to be done for a long time," says the older. In the back and forth dance between my desk and the floor, I suggest that they can work together, that if they both help to assemble the tracks they will both feel happy and have more fun. Seeking a way

of resolution, younger says to older, "can I use it after you?" And older responds, "Okay, thank you." It is all part of the journey toward wholeness.

This week's Torah portion is about journeys and their uncertainties, the comings and goings of life, struggle and strife, tragedy and triumph, ever seeking home as we make our way in time and space. *Parashat Mattot-Massei* (Numbers 30:2-36:13) is a double portion, separated from each other in a leap year to insure enough portions to go around in accommodating the extra month, its own teaching on life and sharing. The two together offer framing for the way, telling in their very names of times we are settled in spirit and place, and of times in motion when we set out along the way. *Mattot* means tribes, the gathering of families into a greater whole, a prayer that the human family should become as one. In the singular, *mateh* is a staff, a walking stick to give support along the way, and a *branch*, as each one of a family and tribe are part of a greater whole, each one a branch on the tree of life. A reminder that we all need a place to call home, however transient, sanctuary and shelter along the way, from the same root, *natah ohel* means to pitch a tent, to put down stakes. And at the turning of night to day, when taking up the journey again, the root *nasah/linso'a/to journey* means literally to pull out or up, as in the pulling up of tent pegs to begin the journey again, *eleh massei b'nei Yisra'el/these are the journeys of the children of Israel*.

Telling of journeys and generations, the Slonimer Rebbe reaches all the way back along the track to the holy Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism, who taught, *all the journeys of Israel were forty-two and they correspond to (the journeys) of each person from the day of their birth until they return to their world, so from the day of one's birth and going forth from their mother's womb, it is in the aspect of the Exodus from Egypt, as is known, and afterwards journeying from journey to journey until one returns to the land of the living above.... The journeys in the Torah are to teach the upright way/l'horot ha'derech ha'yashar..., to know the way in which one should go all the days of one's life, to journey from journey to journey//lesah me'masah l'masah. The Slonimer then adds words of his own, telling of time and timelessness, this parasha is speaking to each and every generation and to each and every individual//l'chol dor va'dor u'l'chol yachid v'yachid, that as one passes through all the days of one's life it is in the aspect of the forty-two journeys (of Israel)....*

Leo had gone back up to stand on the arm of the sofa and play with my old trains. With a voice that was his, but which might have been mine as an echo in time, he said so quietly but emphatically, "Zayde, say something nice about me and look at me...." His words took my breath away, "you are so wonderful, Leo, so gentle and strong and beautiful, and I love you." And I see you, Ruby, sitting on the floor playing with the wooden trains, your joyful sense of self emerging, easily delighted and so delightful, and I love you. Yes, we all need to feel important and to know that we are seen for who we are. In the way of Chassidic teaching, it is in the aspect of "all of my children and grandchildren are great."

It is time to go and to give undivided attention now, in the way of Shabbos, of journeys and generations, of tracks in time, of homecoming.

Shabbat shalom, Zayde Victor