

Dear Chavraya,

Mieke and I were in northern Vermont for a few days this week cross-country skiing. Through deep woods along the trail from Greensboro to Craftsbury Center, we paused by a stream. I was mesmerized by a simple image of change and transformation that stays fixed in my mind, even as it transfixed, an ever so simple moment, one simple teaching amidst the grand and beautiful that was all around. Pausing to consider the ice breaking up, water flowing just beneath, channels forming, thickened water not quite as ice beginning to flow. Words came to me and continue to turn, asking me to be understood, inviting me to understand: *Leaves carried on a viscous stream, ice melting toward spring...*

Sometimes it is the grand and beautiful that holds us, and sometimes the simple beauty, the simple gifts that call us to see the miracles that are with us every day for which we give prayerful thanks, *v'al nisecha she'b'chol yom imanu/for your miracles that are with us every day*. As in nature, so among people, also of nature, as the completion of creation on the sixth day, people come to be, so very good, so may we be. There are times of large gatherings to inspire and give us strength; and there times when strength is found in the small and simple, gatherings of just a few, or even of one on one, words shared over tea, words of heart and hearth.

Facing down the fears, strength and inspiration elusive at times, each way needed, the grand and the simple, this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*, offers one and the other in the turning of a scroll, intermingled as in the way of life, a stream flowing slowly and sure. There is a powerful teaching that leaps out from the page, calling for us to respond, the very source and fount of all that we are called to be and do in these days. The first and the second appearance of thirty-six times of reminding in the Torah, called to remember that we were strangers once, and therefore, and therefore...: *And you shall not impose restrictions upon or oppress a stranger -- for you know the soul of the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt/ ki gerim hayi'tem....* Envisioning a Jewish state someday in the future, from nineteenth century Germanay, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offers through that particular lens a powerful universal challenge and standard for all nations, *The treatment accorded by a state to the aliens living within its jurisdiction is the most accurate indication of the extent to which justice and humanity prevail in that state*.

And in subtle tones and lyrical, *Parashat Mishpatim* sings of the flowing stream, slow and sure, empowering us each to act, each and all, together to make change, to know the value of each and every one, knowing the soul of the stranger and our own. The Torah having just been given at Mount Sinai, in just the previous *parsha*, there amidst thunder and lightening, all the grand pagentry of one majestic moment. In this portion the stream flows out from the source, more quietly now, more slowly, finding its way toward spring.

Rooted in *Parashat Mishpatim* are sources of *Oral Torah/ Torah she'b'al peh*, the oral tradition of wrestling and interpreting, a tradition of people engaging with God, with the Book, and with each other. The *Written Torah/ Torah she'bichtav* is complete in the Five Books of Moses. The Oral Torah is ever flowing, never

complete as long as we engage with Torah and each other. As though pausing in the woods by a simple stream, Rabbi Hirsch offers further commentary on this portion, here on the quiet and simple, explaining, *the relationship between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah is the same as that between brief written notes taken on a detailed scientific lecture, and the lecture itself*. It is a bold and radical statement, that the full lecture is not God's word as given at Sinai, but the ever flowing stream of our words, human words flowing across generations, people speaking with each other across time. Later, Rabbi Hirsch says, *the Written Torah is only a teaching aid intended as a reference source to facilitate the retention of the actual Torah Law, which was to be taught by word of mouth*. We are empowered to speak, to raise our voices, to engage with the holy, to remember that we were strangers and to ask what it means to remember.

The grand and majestic, the simple and lyrical, all part of one organic whole that includes us, in Torah and in life. We breathe in the pure air and behold the beauty, inspiration from above and from within, and from each other; sometimes many, sometimes few. We are all part of an unfolding tradition that flows toward a great awakening, blossoms of things to come, time and seasons turning. I try to understand, *Leaves carried on a viscous stream, ice melting toward spring....*

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor