

Dear Chavraya,

Some months ago on a Friday morning I was at Cheryl Ann's bakery buying challah. Hearing a vaguely familiar voice behind me, I turned around to see a former student of mine from my days at the Solomon Schechter School.

Delighted to see him, now quite a bit larger than the sixth grader I remembered, I stepped out of line so that we could talk. As we caught up, he asked me what I was doing since leaving Schechter. I told him that I had started a small shul in Jamaica Plain. After we finished speaking and the young man had left, I turned back to the counter to get my challah.

At that moment, as though on cue, Reb Mendy stepped in front of me. Reb Mendy is a Lubavitch rabbi whose shul is across the street from the bakery. We often run into each other on Friday mornings. We chat a bit and compare notes, each as rabbi of a *shtibl*. Standing nearby, he had overheard the conversation I had with my former student. Leaning in toward me, Reb Mendy's eyes sparkled now behind his big red beard. With great and earnest feeling he said, "Don't say 'small,' promise me you won't say 'small' again. You have a shul in Jamaica Plain." I was stunned by the intensity of his caring admonishment. I was amazed that as a deeply traditional Lubavitch rabbi he felt such concern for a rabbi and a shul so different from himself and his world. *Dayenu*, it would have been enough that morning only to have experienced such genuine *ahavat Yisra'el*, love of one Jew for another, so rare in our fractured Jewish world. I also received an important personal gift, however, a reminder that the way we see ourselves influences how others see us.

As I got back into the car, having expressed genuine appreciation to Reb Mendy and having wished each other good Shabbos, my mind flew ahead in the Torah reading cycle. I thought of a verse in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'lach L'cha*, that teaches exactly what Reb Mendy had taught me in the bakery. Moses sent scouts ahead to search out the Land. Upon their return they brought back a very discouraging report, giving rise to rebellion and a call to return to Egypt. Saying they had seen giants there, the scouts, all but two, Calev and Yehoshua, then said, *We were in our own eyes like grasshoppers, and so, too, were we in their eyes.*

Since that Friday morning encounter with Reb Mendy, this verse has new meaning for me. I have never again referred to our shul as little. Little is a relative term. Reflecting on this verse, the Holy Alshich, a thirteenth century commentator says, *When we see ourselves as big, our smallness is not measured as so small.* In the depth of our striving toward meaning, building relationships with each other and the world around us, laughing and crying together, davening, learning Torah, pursuing peace and justice as Jews, looking after each other -- in short, creating community where none had been before -- we are not small, but ever so large. May we see ourselves in the scope of large vision and grow toward it together.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor