

Dear Chavraya,

I am winging home now from Iowa, where I had gone to be with family in mourning, to attend the funeral for the twenty-eight year old son of one of my first cousins. In the midst of wrenching sorrow, there was much wholeness in the loving embrace of those who gathered. Louis had died suddenly earlier this week, his death cutting to the core as only the death of a young person can, one so filled with life and possibility. There was no ready explanation, no health problem or concern to point to, a heart so filled with love and generosity, kindness overwhelming itself, and it simply stopped beating. As unanswerable questions hung in the heavy air, "why, why," I thought of one of my Bobi's few English sayings, one she would have offered now in tears, "Y is a crooked letter." It didn't need to make sense because there is no sense to be made, reflecting simply the bifurcations of life, paths that veer sharply from the way we want it to be for our children, from the path of life unfolding as it should. Encountering such sharpness of grief, each cry and wail cutting our hearts, senses overwhelmed, so hard to contain all that we see, and hear; taste and smell diminished, ordinary pleasures denied. The sense of touch is heightened, reaching out to each other, holding close, feeling upon our own cheeks the hot tears of those most deeply touched.

Parashat Shoftim is not where I would think to look for comfort, nor is there any source that can truly comfort, only to offer insight into the frail human condition, helping us to see that our vulnerability is also our grandeur. In Chassidic teaching, the surface meaning of the portion's opening is quickly transformed, helping us to look deeper. *And you shall appoint judges and officers in all of your gates/shoftim v'shotrim titen l'cha b'chol sh'arecha*. It is in the singular, directed to each of us. All of our gates, as the gates of a city, become all of our senses, our body's points of contact with the world and its ways. Monitoring all that enters and exits at the gates of our souls, at times the judges and officers are overwhelmed, thoughts and feelings, our very consciousness, unable to bear the torrent. Understanding that there are no answers in the moment of being overwhelmed, only to hold and to receive each other's tears, the Slonimer Rebbe offers gentle teaching to hold for later. Each season of life, every stage and moment becomes its own gate, *behold, in a person's life there are diverse seasons/yeshnam t'kufot shonot...*, *seasons of ascent and seasons of descent*. It is for us, the Slonimer teaches, to offer all up to the Holy One, *l'hitromam l'ha'shem yisborach b'chol ha'z'manim v'ha't'kufot she'over b'chayav/to raise all up to the Holy One in all the times and seasons through which we pass in our lives*.

It is in essence the rabbis' teaching that God cries with us. In those times when there are no answers, when "Y" remains a crooked letter, incorrigible, when all we have are our tears, we offer them to up to God, tears from above and below joined in seamless flow. Standing at the gates, we hold each other and comfort. During these seven weeks of comfort that bring us from Tisha B'Av to the edge of Rosh Hashannah, time and seasons turning, we realize it is not judges and officers that we are called to be, but comforters in the gates.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor