

Dear Chavraya,

In the turning of time and seasons, I have not acclimated yet to the early start of Shabbos. With no less to do on Fridays, as the week draws to its fullness and finds its rest, I share now in its waning moments a few lines of connection and association from the week's learning and living, each of us to draw lessons from what is experienced in the world around and within.

I am drawn to a phrase in the Talmud that has never come to me before this week, words used to describe Moses that speak to his abiding role as teacher. He is called *safra rabbah/the great scholar*. But for one slight shift in vocalization, we have the word for book in Aramaic, *sifra*. It is a beautiful phrase that reminds us not only of Moses, but teaches that each of us is book, a book of life that is not to be violated. A long beloved teaching of the rabbis comes to mind, *where the book is the sword is not, where the sword is the book is not*.

Recent words of the Prime Minister of Israel continue to haunt and hurt, "We shall live by the sword." There is so much teaching in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Toldot*, that offers a different way of viewing the world, a different way of resolving conflict, that recognizes that by the sword we shall not live, but die. I was struck this year by one verse in the parsha in a way it hadn't touched me before, perhaps because of these cynical, deadly words uttered by the Prime Minister. The verse in the Torah is not a verse of beauty, but one that makes us think, wondering what it could mean, realizing its deeper meaning through the lens of the rabbis' reading. Yitzchak says to Esav, *v'al charb'cha ti'ch'yeh/by your sword shall you live*. The very next words speak of oppression that will come to Esav, that he will serve his brother. The sword does not bring freedom. Freedom comes in removing the sword. The rabbis were perplexed, wondering how Yitzchak could bless Esav with the way of the sword. And so we learn from the words of Rabbi Levi, *put up your sword and you shall live*, taking the first word *al* as being from *alah/raise up*. A Chassidic teacher makes it explicit, *place your sword into its sheath and you shall live/hikanes et char'b'cha b'toch nidnah v'ata ti'ch'yeh*.

Parashat Toldot is a portion of peace building and the choices to be made if we are to transcend the ways of the sword. Toward that transcendence, Yitzchak makes his own covenant with Avimelech, the Philistine king, as his father had done before. A sacred oath is made, a promise sealed not to harm each other. The word for oath is *alah*, a word that also means *club* or *cudgel*. It is the choice of whether to use words or weapons, whether to put away the sword or to die by it.

There is another discussion in the Talmud that I discovered this week, as to whether the covenant with the Philistines was abrogated by them in the time of Samson. There is from some quarters a tone of delight in the ancient voices that point to Philistine violation of the agreement. We would be free from the yoke of peaceful restraint that came with the agreement made by Avraham and then Yitzchak. These are the voices still heard today that clamor for the use of force, for the use of weapons rather than words. It is clear in the Torah that the agreement with Avimelech by both father and son is an agreement that is clearly meant to be in perpetuity. Only when Yitzchak has concluded the agreement with Avimelech and they part from each other in peace does Yitzchak dig a new

well that he names *shiva/seven*. Peace having emerged through compromise for the sake of water and wells, the seventh well gives its name to the place where peace was made, and the Torah says, *therefore the name of the city is Be'er Sheva until this day/ad ha'yom ha'zeh*. And so it is until today, and so it shall be if we put away the sword.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor