

Dear Chavraya,

Sitting at the large table formed of many smaller ones joined together, I felt a great yearning well within me, of joy and sadness intermingled. In the details of tables and people joined in a greater whole were intimations of the teaching I sought. It was at a late afternoon into evening Purim *se'udah*, the Purim meal, having gathered for our own at *Nehar Shalom* earlier in the day. Day turning to night now, sacred comingling of light, *beyn ha'sh'mashot/between the suns, beyn arbayim/between the evenings*, time suspended between yesterday and tomorrow, the present filled with pulsating possibility, the richness of dreams, a bridge of longing.

It was a gathering of the extended Talner community, once centered in their Brighton *shtibl*, whose spirit infuses the vision of *Nehar Shalom*. Their *shtibl* is gone now, but they are still held in its embrace, walls of spirit expanding and surrounding, taking in all who come. Descended from the eighteenth century Rebbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, the *Me'or Eynayim/Light of the Eyes*, they reflect the pure essence of what *Chassidus* was meant to be in its blossoming from the tree of the Baal Shem Tov. People were in costume, well known teachers in flowing wigs and gowns, none too proud or self-conscious to share a different facet of themselves, embracing frivolity and foolishness as the order of the day, an expression of reality turned upside down. Around the many tables joined together, it was a diverse gathering, a Chassidic rabbi in *kappote* and fur *shtreimel* at the head of the table, core members of the Talner community, friends and outliers, women and men, gay and straight, old and young, children running in from elsewhere in the large house. There were mounds of food on the table, platters continuing to arrive from the kitchen. Liquor flowed freely. *Nigunim* would rise on wings of spirit, song called forth by request and unbidden. The convener began to speak, and then the next person, and the next, each one in turn making a *l'chaim*, loving interruptions of song and free-form words of Torah, until attention returned to the one whose words awaited illusory completion. A man stood up to speak, his voice filled with emotion, loosened perhaps a bit from drink, but it needn't have been for his truth to be heard. It was a truth implicitly affirmed in the embracing ways of the community, but it was the first time among them that I had heard this truth put to words. I was sitting next to the man as his words flowed forth, "people search everywhere for community," he said, "for a spiritual home, for a place of belonging, a place to be accepted." And then he said it so simply, in a voice trembling with love, acknowledging the truth of all those tables joined as one, "you have no idea how hard it is," he said, "for two guys raising a little girl to find a home like this." He was going to say more, to offer some words of Torah beyond the heartfelt holiness of the words just offered, but a *nigun* rose up and went on and on, surrounding the man and his husband and child, joining all together from heart to heart.

It is the yearning in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tzav*, teaching of hope emerging out of darkness, encouragement that is hard to see and feel at first. There is an enumeration of offerings in the portion. The *Olah/Ascent* offering is to be placed upon the altar at night and left to burn through the night until the morning, *kol ha'lyla ad ha'boker*, when the new day's fire is to be kindled from its

dying embers. Rashi explains that the word *tzav* is a term of encouragement, *lashon zeruz*. Because the *Olah* offering is to be burned entirely, not to be a source of food but of spiritual sustenance, people need to be encouraged still to give in spite of perceived financial loss, *chesron kis/a loss to the pocket*. It is not only in that time and place long ago that encouragement is needed, and not only for loss to the pocket. It is for us as well, encouragement needed in the face of loss that empties heart and soul. Rashi expands the context, cycles of all night until the morning continuing through time, for then and now, soothing away despair that is both *miyad u'l'dorot/immediate and for the generations*. Of a flame kept burning through the darkness, *kol ha'lyla ad ha'boker/all the night until the morning*, the Me'or Eynayim teaches: *surely, it is also one's own darkness that one is able to raise up and to make from it the morning light/v'la'asot mimenu boker or*. Lighting the way to a new day, the *light of his eyes* was shining upon that table of his spiritual heirs.

I felt strangely quiet, putting my arm on the man next to me as he sat down. I was crying, unsure of what to do with such tears on Purim. By then it was *Shushan Purim*, the Purim of walled cities in the Land of Israel from the time of Joshua, of walls then and now still waiting to fall. I wanted to let go, to simply be there, but something weighed on me, even on Purim, especially on Purim. When it was my turn to speak, I took a sip of good Scotch and then rose from my seat. I tried to find words for all the swirling in my head and heart. I paused, holding for a moment the horrors of the week, what had happened in Belgium, so close to home for us, calls to Mieke's family early on that bleak morning. My arms stretched within to span the divide of hate that is tearing this country apart, of demagoguery and its applause, Jews that think good is evil and evil is good. And in that moment too, I held the violence of the Purim story, the mayhem and madness, of what others would do to us, and have done so many times before and since, and of what we would do to others, in cathartic fancy then, too real now to imagine, Esau's sword in our hands, Jacob's voice too quiet in its needing to arise. And yet to celebrate, just to be, that is the way of Purim and its wisdom that I yearned for, a time to let go, not to take our selves too seriously, to turn reality on its head. That is the challenge of Purim, the holiday of holding it all, all the contradictions, and yet to celebrate. When in the turning of the Megillah and by the end the tables are turned, the Megillah says *v'nahafoch hu/it was reversed*, it is about something much deeper than the story of our people in ancient Persia.

I wondered as I rose to speak just what words would come out, just how I could convey the swirl from within myself, to find a way in that place and time to share the tensions I felt, and yet to celebrate the love and wholeness around those many tables joined as one. I spoke of all the tensions and contradictions in the Megillah. Even in our own salvation, the Purim story reflects the world as it is, as it continues to be to this very day, the sword dominating, strife and hate, waiting for reversal. The story becomes a mirror in which to look carefully and imagine what a world turned upside down might truly be. In a world so filled with strife, now no less than then, there was around those tables an intimation of a different world, one completely reversed from the way it is now. The *olam hafuch* is the world as it should be, and that world becomes the *olam ha'emes / the world of truth* in our making it so. Blessing the hosts for their kindness and generosity, I shared that our being gathered there was itself the *olam hafuch/the upside down world* that

we yearn for made real now. Of so many ways of being in the world as Jews and people, all were joined as one around those many tables that formed a greater whole. As I sat down, a *nigun* rose and we sang.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor