

Dear Chavraya,

There are times when Torah and life meet at the crossroads of quotidian details, in the day-to-day, ever recurring opportunities of human happenings. These are moments in which teachings and values that excite and inspire in the abstract are tried and tested in moments of encounter with real people and their needs. These can be moments filled with excitement or fraught with panic, what to do, which way to turn, when Torah as *Torat Chayyim/the Torah of Life*, is in our hands to affirm or deny.

It had been an hour of wonderful early morning learning yesterday at JP Licks. Insights shared around the table did more to stimulate and awaken us to the day than the fresh roasted coffee we drank. We probed an essential element in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayakhel*, the portion of quintessential teaching on community. Community is a collective construct, and yet it is formed and comes to be through individuals. That was our focus, the role of each one in making the community whole. *Vayakhel / and he gathered*, Moses gathered the people together, each one, all of them, and so is formed a *kehila/community*.

The importance of every person as part of a greater whole is brought home through the parsha's emphasis on the details of all that was needed for building the *Mishkan/the desert sanctuary*. Easily missed for their beauty, myriad details are presented in the process of raising up the sanctuary. As in the building of the Mishkan, Jewish life itself is built on the grandeur of details. God is in the details, in the holy, deep meaning found in weaving together the small things of life. Wary of losing sight of the whole, we nevertheless seek out the meaning of the small, as of each one, of every person, none insignificant in God's eyes. *Parashat Vayakhel* is a symphony of details that rise to great crescendo in the completed Mishkan. In the names of its parts, both small and great, the Mishkan teaches through its material essence of deeper human truths, pointing the way toward a Mishkan of spirit that is greater than the one formed of wood and cloth and precious metals.

As so often is the case, great accomplishments of others are made possible through the labor of the humble and meek, the unknowns who are barely seen, and yet who hold it all together. All of the great curtains in the Mishkan, majestic draperies that define the sacredness of space are held together by small hooks. The humble hooks are called *vavim*, as in the simple Hebrew letter *vav*, the conjunction *and*, a letter and word that join one to another, this one *and* this one *and* this one. Of parts to be joined, each one's name adding subtle meaning, the *Me'or Eynayim*, Rebbe Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, points to the word *k'rashim*, the boards and beams that give form and structure to the sanctuary. Its letters are the letters of *kesher/connection*, and so they teach of how form and structure come to be, through connection of one to another. In the word for *sockets/adanim*, we recognize God's name, *Adonai*, and we remember in whose presence we stand, before Whom all unfolds, each one in their own way a reflection of God's image.

Only when all of the parts are included and joined can the Mishkan become one. And so we focused in our learning on two verses that celebrate the coming

together of all as one, *He made fifty gold clasps and joined the tapestries one to one, so that the Mishkan became one/va'y'hi ha'mishkan echad...* (Ex. 36:13). And just a bit further on, bringing home the message, again emphasizing first the details of connection, *He made fifty copper clasps to join the tent together so that it should become one/l'chaber et ha'ohel li'h'yot echad...* (Ex. 36:18). Of this grand coming together of all as one, the rabbis teach the way, *it was through the joining of each and every one that all was joined as one* (B'midbar Rabbah 12:15).

Blessing each other to go out into the day and be weavers of connection, each one a *vav*, a hook that joins, we finished our learning. As I got up from the table, having taken only a few steps beyond the books, Torah met life. A man of ragged clothes and wild hair came up next to me and whispered, "can you get me a coffee and a waffle?" I quietly answered yes, that I would bring it to him. I was circumspect, knowing from previous experience that the JP Licks management did not want people seeking such help in the store or for patrons to respond to their requests. I went to the counter and made my order. Pretending before paying that I had forgotten something, I went back to the man to ask if he wanted whipped cream and strawberries. After I brought him his much needed breakfast with the sweetness of toppings, the manager then appeared. He first came over to me and asked if I had offered first or if the man had asked me. Turning then to the man, the manager told him, with almost pleading tone, not to make such requests in the store. The manager and I then stepped aside to talk. I acknowledged that I was a recidivist and acknowledged how hard it must be for him and the other staff to deal with the tension in their own feelings around this issue. As we talked, I offered a suggestion whose seed had come to me in a conversation with Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari. Perhaps we could create an account that people could contribute to as an offering of the heart, and which others could draw from as needed. The manager's face then lit up as he suggested, "yes, we could have a cow card just for these situations, and I'm sure JP people would be happy to contribute to it."

As I left the store, Torah pulsating in its encounter with life, I found myself wondering about all of the hooks that join us together. If each one is truly needed, if the whole depends on the joining of each and every one, *achat el achat/one to one*, then so too is the man who needed breakfast joined to us. The building of the human Mishkan depends on his holy presence too. Toward helping to insure that each one has the stamina to be present, I have asked the manager to meet so that we can talk further.

Please let me know if you have thoughts toward a balancing of needs, how best to give *tzedakah* in such moments, honoring the needs of the store and its concern for all with the needs of people who, though often forgotten, are also part of the collective all. In the crossroads of Torah and life, may we all be as *vavs* of connection, each one needed in joining the Mishkan together as one.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor