

Dear Chavraya,

Whenever I enter the *tahara* room, the place of “purification,” the room where members of the *Chevra Kaddisha* gather to lovingly prepare a body for its journey, to wash the sacred vessel that was the dwelling place of a soul, I bring with me a small, well-worn green book. Occasionally, as part of the prayers that are said, I may read a few lines from the book, offering words of its wisdom to help guide both the living and the dead. At other times, it is enough simply to have the book with me, its title alone enough to remind of this moment’s meaning. The title of the book is *Ma’avar Yabok*. The book is the primary source for how the *Chevra Kaddisha* is to care for the dead, as well as the way of Jewish caring for the dying, and, then, for when the time comes, laws of mourning. The author of the book is Rabbi Aharon B’rechia of Modina. I have always been fascinated by one sentence describing the purpose of the book that would appear to be Rabbi Aharon’s own words, effectively the first sentence of the book. Appearing immediately after the author’s name on the frontispiece of the book, are the words: *herein is elucidated how a person should conduct themselves through the number of their life’s days until the time comes for their day of accounting/bo y’vo’ar aych yit’na’heg ha’adam mispar y’mei chayav ad et ba yom p’kudato*. It is a striking statement, startling us as we open a book presumably about death and realize that it is really about life.

The title *Ma’avar Yabok* is drawn from this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Vayishlach*. At the outset of the *parsha*, Yaakov is setting out to return home to Canaan and his family after twenty years. He had long ago fled from his brother’s anger after he had twice tricked him, first stealing the birthright and then the blessing of the firstborn. Sending messengers ahead, word is brought back that his brother Esau is approaching with four hundred men. Distressed and afraid, Yaakov develops a plan to placate his brother with gifts. Prior to the beautiful moment of encounter, in which the gifts become secondary and the past as naught, in which the brothers embrace and fall weeping upon each other’s neck, Yaakov remains alone. Before he can encounter his brother he has work to do with himself. During the night, he brings all of his family across the river that he might then return and remain alone. The river is the Yabok, and the place of its fording is *Ma’avar Yabok*. It is the setting of the well know scene of the night wrestling.

Time has merged, past and future become as one in the moment of Yaakov’s encounter with self, anticipating and preparing for the encounter with his brother. We know what has been, not at all of what will be. In that moment of pregnant fullness, the present offers itself as a bridge of transition from what was to what will be. Standing in the narrows of the river just before the wrestling, a *midrashic* teaching offers a beautiful image, describing Yaakov as a bridge: *Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Idi, he made himself as a bridge – transferring from here and bringing to there*. Rooted in the solid ground of the moment, standing in the *ma’avar Yabok/the ford of the Yabok*, Yaakov picked up each one of his dear ones and every creature of his flocks and with his own hands helped them to journey from one shore to the other.

The Chevra Kaddisha becomes as Yaakov in that moment, standing in the *ma'avar Yabok*, helping a dear one to ford the river, to make the journey from one shore to the other. Until this year's reading of *Parashat Vayishlach*, I have felt disappointed that *ma'avar* is a noun, the place upon which Yaakov stands. I have thought how much stronger it would be as a verb, referring then to Yaakov's fording of the Yabok. So too, I have wondered of the book, the *Sefer Ma'avar Yabok*, feeling that the role of the Chevra Kaddisha is to actively guide and help to bring a soul across the stream from one shore to the other. That is what we do, and that is what Yaakov did, but that assistance can only be provided if one's feet are firmly rooted, only if one is fully present in the moment. Only then can one be a bridge in the stream and not be swept away on the flood, only by being present in the place of the *ma'avar*, the ford.

Only by standing in the place we are, not frozen in fear, can we facilitate transition, for ourselves and for others. Every place in which we stand is the context given to its own moment in time, and it is also the fulcrum upon which the present turns to the future. To stand fully present in the place we are, the place in which we stand in the confluence of time and space, to breathe deeply and take it all in, is the only way we can then go on and make the journey forward. In every place and moment of transition, we stand at the Yabok. Earlier, Jacob had not been fully present in the place where he rested for the night, saying with surprise upon awaking, "God was in this place, and I did not know."

In the hardest of times, we need to find our footing, to stand rooted, only then to ford the river and make our way forward, to know that God is in this place. It is true each day and in the gathering of our days. The degree to which we give meaning to every moment, perhaps as well the degree to which we see the meaning in every moment, becomes in the end of our days the measure of life's meaning as we lived it. It all depends on our taking time to be in the place of the narrows, the place of fording and of birthing possibility, to stand fully in the place of the *Ma'avar Yabok*.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor