

Dear Chavraya,

As the wind blew across Jamaica Pond, I stood in the raw and the rain beneath a willow tree, reaching up to cut branches, counting five at a time. With a rubber band drawn from my pocket, I then bound each group of five into its own bunch. Gathering and binding, I was immersed in the task, hardly noticing the weather or a voice from the path. Turning, I saw a man who seemed to have been standing there for a while, rain running down his slicker, his broad smile piercing the gray with rays of sudden sun. Exchanging pleasantries and laughing about the weather, the man then called out, "are you replanting those?" I said no, explaining that they were needed for a Jewish ceremony. I didn't go into all the details of *Hoshannah Rabbah*, which is this Sunday. At the end of the service we strike the floor five times with a bunch of willow branches, scattering the leaves, reminding of life's fragility, of its beauty, each person "just like a tree standing by the water," going on nevertheless, replanting.... He liked the simple answer, delighted that the branches were to be used in a Jewish ceremony. "Well," he said, "congratulations," and he turned and walked on in the rain, leaving rays of sunshine, a rainbow in the waiting.

Grateful for the gift I had received, I continued cutting willow branches, realizing that any frustration I felt had drifted out into the pond and that I was quite enjoying working in the rain. I kept thinking about the man's question and my quick answer that the branches were not for replanting. Perhaps, I considered, they really were for replanting. Maybe the man's words were meant, even if unbeknownst to him, on a deeper level. Maybe I needed to hear "re-planting" in the way of returning, the theme of *t'shuva* as turning, returning, motif of the season soon coming to closure. Perhaps "replanting" is not necessarily about digging up a plant by its roots, or taking a cutting of plant or tree, and replanting what was in one place into the soil of another place. That itself is a beautiful metaphor that speaks to its own way of *t'shuva* as starting again, nurturing and renewing growth in a new place of being and insight, and sometimes of geography as well, standing in a place we had not stood before. But perhaps "replanting" is also about turning and turning again, trying and trying again, approaching a task, life itself, in a way we hadn't before, about perseverance, about "keeping on keeping on." I think of the well-known words from *Kohelet/Ecclesiastes* that we chant in shul tomorrow, on the Shabbos of Chol HaMo'ed Sukkos, "to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven." If all of our tasks represent the sowing of seeds in the field of life, then there is opportunity every day to plant in a different way, to replant, and see what grows from that day's way of planting, beholding all that emerges, holding it all as one, smiling even in the rain at the promise of renewal.

This is the blessing, to be open to possibility in ways of doing and being, the nature of this season, nature-scape of soil and soul, to joyfully behold, even when all seems gray, to receive the smile of a stranger, raindrops as naught, change in attitude and perspective itself the replanting. It is all in the name of this week's Torah portion, the very last portion of the Torah, one more cycle of time and telling complete, *V'zot Hab'racha* and this is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel before his death.

And the very last words of the portion, the very last words of the Torah, tell of all that Moses did *before the eyes of all Israel/l'eyney kol Yisra'el*. The Slonimer Rebbe offers a beautiful teaching on these last words that quickly turn toward the first words. The first letters of these three words rearranged, seeds dancing and replanting, emerge to become the word *k'li/vessel*. And as the very last letter of the Torah, the letter *lamed*, scrolls all the way around, parchment turning from the end to meet the beginning, the *lamed* of the end is joined to the *bet* of the beginning, *B'reishit*, forming together the word *lev/heart*. And that is the vessel, the *k'li*, with which to receive the blessing.

As we come to the end of this beautiful season, the end of another cycle in Torah and time, may our hearts be open to the rain from above, to the voice from within and beyond, to the voice of a stranger along the path, to the sunshine in a smile, and to all the possibilities in a question joyfully asked, asking then of ourselves, "are you replanting those?"

Shabbat shalom, Chag same'ach, a Gutn yontef,
Rabbi Victor