

Dear Chavraya,

The grand scheme, the great tapestry of life is revealed in the details, in the delicate strands of each day's turning. In the embrace of the Sukkah and in the embrace of these festive days, all of life unfolding, a *b'ris* in the shtibl yesterday, meeting with a family today to plan a funeral, meeting in the home where I had married the woman's son and his wife. In the reflection of the mottled colors of changing leaves shimmering in Jamaica Pond, a reminder of changing seasons, of one year's cycle of growth and abundance coming home to rest, turning back to the ground from which all comes. Details of a funeral held in mind, I came then directly to the pond to cut willow branches for *Hoshannah Rabbah*, the Great Hoshannah, plaintive call to God on the seventh day of Sukkos to save us, to guide us, to give us life and the means to live upon this earth.

Cycles of life, of nature, of time, so beautiful and so fragile, the sukkah itself reminds us of our grandeur and fragility. I think of the words I shared on Rosh Hashannah that Rev. Ron Odom said to me as we walked in a moving vigil around the State House for the sake of the planet and all who dwell upon it, "our weakness is our strength." Rev. Odom's words speak to the essence of Sukkos, finding strength in that which is fragile, our bodies, our dwellings, all that challenges us along the journeys of our lives. A valid sukkah cannot be taller than twenty cubits, some thirty feet. We discussed with our Mishapach family Hebrew school why there would be such a height limit for a sukkah. The answer came quickly, because then it would be like a house and would need heavy supports, maybe concrete to hold it up. It would no longer be fragile, offering its teaching of grandeur and fragility.

So too it is the teaching of the willow branches I gathered by the pond. We circle the shul seven times on the morning of Hoshannah Rabbah and then at the end of the circling, cycles of life and time, we strike the willows upon the floor until scattering the leaves. Layers of teaching, as in simply standing by the pond and taking in life, the scattered leaves remind us that we can separate from those ways that weigh us down and hold us back, as in the teaching of *Tashlich* on Rosh Hashannah. Reminding us of our ability to live more fully, the scattered leaves also remind that there is a finitude to the time we have, that life scatters, days turning until the autumnal harvest comes and our days are gathered. The teachings become one, reminding us to live fully in the time we have, details of days unfolding, to every thing a time and purpose.

In the chanting of the Book of Kohelet / Ecclesiastes tomorrow, on this Shabbos of Chol Ha'Mo'ed Sukkos, we smile as we come to those words, smiling as though in meeting an old friend and upon the wisdom offered in our encounter, *to every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven*. The familiar words continue, perhaps hearing them sung in our own heads in Pete Seeger's voice, of blessed memory, *to every thing turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn, and a time for every purpose under Heaven; a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, a time to uproot that which is planted...; a time to weep and a time to laugh...; a time for war and a time for peace....* And as Pete then added, "I hope it's not too late...."

That peace might come on wings of justice, that our lives might be filled with meaning as God's partners in creation so fine and fragile, Kohelet went out to see all the needs of people, all that is broken and in need of *tikkun*: "But I returned / *v'shavti ani* and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold -- the tears of the oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter (Kohelet 4:1). In the struggle of the rabbis to comprehend so many needs and so much pain, their struggle becoming ours, God speaks through the midrashic tellings of the rabbis and says in response to Kohelet, *alai l'nachaman/it is upon Me to comfort them*. For we who would walk in God's ways, as we are commanded to do, it is also upon us to be comforters, to lightly touch the burdened shoulder of another and to be a vessel for their tears."

I heard the language of this teaching in Kohelet's book differently this year. Kohelet didn't simply go out and see. Rather, Kohelet returned to see, *v'shavti ani*. Perhaps he had at first turned away, perhaps unable to hold all of the hurt, perhaps unable to see his own connection to the hurt, perhaps even offended by a sense of slight from the oppressed. Kohelet is assumed to be King Solomon, clearly privileged, and in his humanness perhaps not feeling affirmed for his own all too human suffering. *V'shavti*, the root of *t'shuvah / to turn and return....* To everything there is a season, perhaps a time to turn away, but only for a time, a time for embracing, a time to refrain from embracing. All part of one body, we cannot remain apart for long, for then we will wither and die as the willows teach.

Perhaps to acknowledge and reassure regarding all the scattered feelings we carry, so aware of our days turning during this season, we read in the Torah on this Shabbos of Sukkos of God's attributes of compassion. In reading of God's compassion in a time of tension with Moses and the people following the Golden Calf, we remember that compassion is to be our way too, the way of being together in the fragile sukkah of world and community.

Just beyond Sukkos, on Simchas Torah in the coming week, we complete the year's cycle of Torah and right away begin again, cycles of life and time turning. In the final portion, *Parashat V'zot Ha'B'racha*, Moses dies. It is an ideal death, Moses fully aware and able to offer blessing with his last breaths, *V'zot Ha'B'racha/and this is the blessing*. With strength and clarity, Moses takes his leave, *his eye had not become dim and his freshness had not departed*. I think of the woman whose funeral I will guide on Sunday, a poet who wrote her last poem on the day before she died. Never knowing when that day will be, may we gather willows of the brook, and in the scattering of their leaves be affirmed in all of our striving, taking to heart all the beauty of our grandeur and fragility.

Shabbat shalom / Chag same'ach,  
Rabbi Victor