

Dear Chavraya,

As we make our way through the “harsh passages” of these Torah readings that come in the midst of summer’s heat, I can’t seem to help but speak of my own struggles with the violence, ever seeking waters of life in the desert. Thoughts come as meditations, questions as their own response, flashes of insight as glimmers of light through the prism of Torah itself. The ultimate purpose of the Torah of Life, of life itself, is not to celebrate violence. The Torah cries out from within herself, challenging us to wrestle with that which violates her essence. We wonder if Moses realizes this as he approaches the end of his life, and then seeks new understanding in the face of the violence of which he himself is guilty.

At the very beginning of this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat D’varim*, the first portion in the fifth book, *Sefer D’varim*, the context is set in space and time. Israel is still in the desert, *b’eyver hayarden*, on the far side of the Jordan. We are eleven days journey from *Chorev*, which is Mount Sinai. It is in the fortieth year, the first day of the eleventh month, which, according to tradition, makes it some five weeks before Moses’ death. One more detail is added. We are told, *acharei hakoto et Sichon/after he had struck down Sichon, king of the Emorites*. It is a strange construction, a strange placement. It is only later in the portion that the horrific details of this battle are recounted. Why is there reference to it first? What is it that happened afterward?

As though to offer a cushion, a glass through which to look beyond, as though to let us know that what follows further on is not the way, we are told in the very next verse what happened after Moses struck down the Emorites. He began to teach Torah, *ho’iyl Moshe be’er et ha’Torah ha’zot/Moses began/undertook to explain/to clarify, to elucidate this Torah*. How can it be that Moses is just beginning to teach, having been teaching Torah for forty years? Is there new urgency in Moses’ teaching now, in teaching *this* Torah? Juxtaposed directly with overwhelming violence, with so little time left for Moses to teach, perhaps the new Torah to be taught and learned comes out of revulsion, a challenge to find another way.

In the simple word *be’er/explained*, there is depth of meaning. The very same letters, vocalized as *b’er*, mean *well*, as in the *well of living waters/b’er mayyim chayyim* that Isaac’s servants dug and refused to engage in battle over, resolutely digging new wells until there was water for everyone. So too, the Torah that Moses teaches now is meant to be for everyone, explained so that all might understand, whatever their own tongue and people. Drawing on midrash, Rashi says, *ba’shivim lashon pirsha lahem/he explained it to them in the seventy tongues*. A universal expression of connection, of joining with rather than dividing against, the rabbis speak of the seventy tongues or peoples to refer to all the peoples and nations of the world.

Seeking to mitigate the violence of Israel’s entry into the Land, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes of Moses’ message, of the Torah he begins to teach here, “Israel is to enter upon its path in the history of nations not as a mighty nation, skilled in the arts of warfare, but as the people of God’s moral law.” Hirsch offers a far greater challenge for today than he could have imagined in nineteenth century Germany. As is often done in Chassidic literature, so the battle with

Sichon is spiritualized, becoming a metaphor for inner struggle. In this tradition, the Slonimer Rebbe writes of these words, *ho'iyl Moshe be'er et haTorah/Moses began to explain the Torah, that he should be able to enter into his heart words of Torah and ethics.*

Looking beyond violence, seeking the waters of life, to draw from *b'er mayyim chayyim/a well of living waters*, beginning to teach new Torah, we come to *Shabbat Chazon*, the *Shabbat of Vision*. It is the Shabbat that comes before *Tisha B'Av*, day of mourning for so much destruction that has befallen our people. The ninth of Av falls this year on the ninth of August, the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, Hiroshima already lying in ruins. We look at the violence, in the text and in our world. It is a time to envision new Torah, new teaching. In the midst of mourning, *Tisha B'Av* calls us to plant seeds of hope. The rabbis teach that the Messiah will be born on *Tisha B'Av*, helping us to look from the midst of destruction recalled and seen before us toward that time of swords turned to plowshares. Once we have done our part to sufficiently repair the world, Elijah the Prophet/*Eliyahu Hanavi* will come to announce that the time has come. *Ho'iyl Moshe be'er et haTorah* – the letters of *ho'iyl* are the letters that spell *Eliyahu*. With *Shabbat Chazon*, the Shabbat of Vision, may we begin to learn the way of Torah that will bring *Eliyahu* and surcease from violence, the day that is all Shabbos.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor