

Dear Chavraya,

In the wellsprings of Jewish tradition there is a blessing to be offered in all realms of life experience. Among these is one blessing that is fascinating both for its meaning and for the probable lack of opportunity ever to say it in one's life time. It is a blessing to be said upon seeing 600,000 or more Jews together: *Blessed are You, God, our God, Sovereign of the universe, Chacham Harazim/Wise One of mysteries.* In the moment of our being gathered together at Sinai to receive the Torah, we were said to be 600,000, a number that comes to be symbolic of our joining together in common purpose, as one people united. In all of our fractious relationships as a people, the *Wise One* of mysteries calls us to consider one of the great mysteries of Sinai, how it is that we were so united.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Nitzavim*, we are gathered together again as a people, all 600,000, and we are asked to renew the covenant made at Sinai. Addressing those who were physically present in that moment, Moses says: *And not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath, but with the one who is standing here with us today before God, our God, and with the one who is not here with us today.* The rabbis ask the obvious question, "who is the one who is not here with us today?" Their answer is exquisite in its inclusiveness; *the one who is not here with us today* is understood to include all future generations of Jews, those born Jewish and those choosing to become part of the Jewish people.

As we are gathered here into the covenant, the Torah says of itself and of our efforts to fulfill her teachings and commandments: *It is not in heaven so that you could say, "Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it to us and make us hear it so that we may carry it out?" Neither is it beyond the sea so that you could say, "Who shall go for us to the other side of the sea and bring it to us and make us hear it so that we may carry it out?" For the Word is very near to you, to carry it out with your mouth and with your heart.* So too, perhaps, the great mystery of attaining that elusive unity that once we had at Sinai is not so far off, but in our mouths and in our hearts, in the way of our hearing one another.

As our very first hearing of Torah joined us together at Sinai, so can our ability to hear each other's "torah" join us together today. Recognition that every person has unique teaching to offer is the starting point, teaching that derives from the nature of one's own soul and the lived experience of her or his life. I want to share with you here a most beautiful teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe, one that he draws from the requirement of a King of Israel to write two *Sifrei Torah/Torah scrolls*. It is a teaching that I shared at our *Siyyum HaTorah*, when in dedicating our Torah, we dedicated ourselves to the challenge of its calling.

*There are 600,000 letters in the Torah, corresponding to the 600,000 souls of Israel. So it is that there are 600,000 interpretations to the Torah. Every soul has its own unique interpretation to the Torah, which instructs a Jew along all the paths of her or his purpose and task in this world. So from the strength of this, a person's soul instructs him or her; but from where does the soul acquire its knowing? Ah, it is that she suckles her interpretation from the Torah. This is likened to the Sefer Torah that the king places for himself in his place of safekeeping. "His place of safekeeping" hints at the Sefer Torah of the soul, that special interpretation of Torah that is uniquely one's own. That Sefer Torah*

*which the king carries with him, in going forth and returning home, is the collective Sefer Torah that is arrived at through the entire people of Israel. So it is that the Jew should always have two Sifrei Torah, which shall guide her or him in all matters, both personal and collective.*

In our ability to hear the unique torah of each other's soul, so may we come symbolically to stand in the presence of 600,000 hearers of Torah, privileged then to bless God together as the *Wise One of mysteries*. Approaching these Days of Awe, may we enter the new year with hearts truly open to hearing each other.

Shabbat shalom and Shannah tovah,  
Rabbi Victor