

Dear Chavraya,

On the shelf just behind my desk, where many of my most precious books live, there is a small rather homely volume of faded yellowish-brown cover and brittle, yellowed pages. In startling contrast to the book itself, flowing out from the pages and folding down upon the cover is a brightly colored in green and red and white, tasseled fabric bookmark of Scottish tartan. So long ago, my father sent the bookmark to his mother from Britain, where he was stationed during the Second World War. The book that has lovingly held these woven threads of connection between mother and son for all these years is a *T'china Buch*. Representing a beautiful genre of prayer literature, *t'chines* are women's prayers written in Yiddish that speak to many facets of women's lives.

In arriving each year at this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Va'etchanan*, I think of my Bobi Sarah's *T'china Buch* and the bright tartan bookmark that tells its own story of hope, connection, and comfort. The name of the *parasha*, *Va'etchanan*, and *t'china* are of the same root, *chanan*, suggesting graciousness, favor, compassion. One of many words for prayer, *va'etchanan* in its various forms means to entreat, to implore, seek and beseech, to supplicate. It is a crying out from the heart. Of the same root is the name of that part of the weekday morning service called *Tachanun*, beautiful prayers of supplication that bring the sweet yearning of High Holy Day prayer to the day to day.

At the beginning of *Parashat Va'etchanan*, Moses speaks to the people as he nears the day of his dying. In a poignant moment of heart-felt sharing he tells of his own prayer, of how he pleaded with God to be allowed to enter the Land, *va'etchanan el Hashem/I entreated God at that time*. With great humility, Moses acknowledges that such is not to be. As throughout much of the fifth book of the Torah, *Sefer D'varim*, Moses then reminds the people of all their journeys together, of the places they have camped and of what transpired in each time and place. Modeling life-review for the people, all of the details, the places and the names, events great and small, all become as bookmarks on the pages of life.

As we come to *Parashat Va'etchanan* this year, as each year in its time, I take Bobi Sarah's *T'china Buch* from the shelf behind my desk. Looking at the bright tartan bookmark, I began to reflect on my own voluminous use of bookmarks. As anyone will notice who looks at the books upon my shelves, strips of paper of all sorts rise like a shaggy mane from most every volume. While initially, and at least in my mind even now, I placed bookmarks to allow for easy return to important pages, the mass of rising paper now impedes rather than assists in finding a particular place. There is something deeper, however, in the placing of bookmarks than finding the place.

Bookmarks for me have become an important way of preserving memorable moments in my life's journeys, and, at the same time, of recycling. Books for me are stepping stones through life. As I take a book from a shelf and walk through its pages, I encounter signs and reminders of my life, of what had transpired at an earlier time when I had camped on the same page as I am looking at in the present moment. Along the pages of my books there is often evinced a smile, a sigh, a laugh, and tears of both joy and sorrow. Surely, there are times when I

can't allow myself to stop and dwell with a memory, but even then I wave and remember and promise to return.

You see, I use all sorts of things for bookmarks. Anything that is made of cardstock is especially good. Baseball tickets are a favorite, but museum passes, even subway passes also work well. All of the left over honor cards from the High Holy Days become bookmarks. In my *chumash*, marking a page in this week's Torah portion is a ticket from a Red Sox – Blue Jays game on April 21, 2003. It was that rare annual morning game on Patriots Day. I remember walking with Tzvia after the game to watch the marathon, a springtime ritual when she was younger that we remember every spring, hoping that some day she will be in Boston at the right time, and that it won't be erev Pesach. In a tattered siddur, marking *Kabbalat Shabbat*, there is a whimsical drawing of a "fancy lady" and the words, "Shabbat shalom, abba." My older daughter Noa handed it to me just before Shabbos one summer when I was the camp rabbi at the camp she was attending. From a very young Yossi, a child's scrawl saying, "I love you, abba." From the precious to the mundane, shopping lists and birthday cards, a love letter, vignettes of life along the pages of books. The rabbis said, *Torah is acquired only through signs/ayn Torah nikneyt eleh b'simanim*. The Hebrew word for bookmark is *simaniyah*. So we recall the torah of our lives and acquire the blessing of memories.

As Moses beseeched God, *va'etchanan el HaShem*, so may we form our own *t'chines*. Of prayers fulfilled, at times, and at others not, all part of life, even the faded and brittle pages can be marked in bright color, as of a Scottish tartan that joined mother and son across an ocean.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor