

Dear Chavraya,

Writing from Belgium, I am feeling a deep connection with all of you and hoping that all are well. At this time of taking pause and trying to catch our breaths, in the midst of summer's beauty, we come to one of the most difficult times in the Jewish calendar, the three weeks that bring us to Tisha B'Av. Through these weeks of semi-mourning, we come to the saddest of days, day of mourning and fasting for so many sorrows that have befallen our own people, remembering sorrows too that others have suffered. Remembering the conflagrations that engulfed the holy temples, we consider with heightened awareness all the dangers that beset the world around us, the fragility of all that is. A day of sorrow is turned to one of hope as commitment rises not to let it happen again, to our own people, to any people, to the Temple of the world.

It is the hope felt in the recent births of so many little ones in our own community. They are the promise and the inspiration to insure that the world survives, that there is a future. They are the ones with all other children to whom we look as we consider the goodness of life in the midst of remembering its fragility. They are the ones who remind us that it "takes a minyan to raise a child." Hope and striving for its fulfillment among people joined in common cause is at the heart of the prophet Bilaam's words in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Balak*. Bilaam looks out upon Israel camped in the desert, having thought to curse the people he sees before him. Seeing a people joined together in community, a people strong in faith and hope and in their ways of being with each other, he sings out the words, *how good are your tents, O, Jacob, your dwelling places, O, Israel*.

Knowing how easily strife can rise and how easily we can lose the way, the words of a non-Jewish prophet offer blessing and challenge to make them so. Amidst so much that would deny the beauty of these summer days, in our common striving as a community there is beauty and hope. Coming into these three weeks, the smile of every child, their very presence in the world, is an inspiration to turn days of sorrow to days of joy, weekdays to Shabbos days, a world that is filled with Shabbos peace for all.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor