

Dear Chavraya,

Perhaps it is in the joining of fire and water, a message of peace in the harmonizing of the incompatible. Even if only a metaphor, it offers the hope of ultimate repair, the great tikun, There is in the deepest, most gentle message of Chanukkah a joining with creation, strands of hope woven from the very beginning to a future that God waits for us to create. There is in the Chanukkah story a message of peace that cries out against the too oft glorified tales of war and violence that drown out God's gentle spirit, lost in the din of steel on steel.

The deepest meaning of Chanukkah begins in the very beginning, with the first breath of creation, a primal light then offering its glow as though of God's own menorah before there was a sun, or moon, or stars. The rabbis tell of seven Chanukkas, each one rooted in a day of creation, the very first in the very first words, *breishit barah/in the beginning of... did God create....* In the creation of light the midrash sees the lighting of Chanukkah candles, and in the creation of trees, which include the olive tree, olive oil the source of light for the candles we kindle. And on the sixth day the human, whose soul shines as God's candle in the world, words to come much later in the book of Proverbs, *ner hashem nishmat adam/God's candle is the human soul*, body and soul as wick and oil.

Following the first words of Torah that tell of God's creating, in the second verse we are told how God created. In the deep, dark silence, God simply breathed, *v'ru'ach elokim m'rachefet al p'nei ha'mayim/and the breath of God hovered upon the face of the waters*. Creation begins so quietly, so simply and softly, so gently. That is the vision and the way that we are to hold as we make our way through Torah and life. When Torah forgets, and even God, that moment of gentle beginning, the backdrop from which all unfolds, it is for us to remind of the way that was meant to be.

In the choosing of the *Haftorah* for the Shabbos of Chanukkah from the prophet Zecharia, the rabbis seek to remind. They knew well what they were doing. They knew well the limits of power and might, knowing well that those who lived by the sword would come to naught, as had the great Maccabees, the Hasmonean dynasty they spawned having become brutal tyrants against their own people. To help us find the way, God speaks to the prophet Zecharia, drawing from the well of God's own spirit from which the world came to be, spirit as breath upon the water, now as challenge to military might. When Zecharia does not understand the meaning of the menorah placed before him as in a vision, an angel of God says with surprise, *do you not understand what these mean...?"* Then the angel answers, telling of God's word that is to be conveyed to the general, *Z'ru'bavel: lo v'chayil v'lo v'cho'ach ki im b'ruchi amar ha'shem tz'va'ot/Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit, says the God of multitudes* (Zecharia 4:6).

To be sure that we understand in real terms, in their context and in ours, the nature of power and might, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch insures that they not to be left as abstractions. Expanding on his translation as a cry against militarism, Rabbi Hirsch's pleading voice is magnified in his commentary, *know that not by force of arms, not by physical strength will it be furthered, but by My spirit. Let every*

human circle know, every individual person, even the outwardly weakest and smallest, that as soon as he is penetrated by My spirit, and thereby places himself in the service of justice, brotherly love and holy living, he has the strength of giants in accomplishing his work....

Of fire and breath-rippled water, elements that are incompatible, joined in symbolic expression of God's hope for the world. God's spirit is the bridge, spirit as breath upon the water, spirit as challenge to the sword; *v'ru'ach elokim m'rachefet al p'nei ha'mayim; ki im b'ru'chi....* If fire and water can be joined as reflections and context of God's spirit, so too warring human beings, all the children of earth. From the earth we have all come, the breath of God breathed into each one's nostrils. And to the earth we shall return, elements joined once again, flesh and bone in elemental harmony, finally at one with earth and each other. As it shall be in death, so we are challenged to do in life.

Only a few short verses before the angel responds to the prophet's confusion words are spoken to Joshua, standing ready to become the *Kohen Gadol/the High Priest*. Soiled garments removed, cleansed and ready to serve, the words spoken are the words with which each of our dead are addressed as we prepare them for their journey of return to the dust of earth. In death, each one is as the *Kohen Gadol*, no lesser and no greater. So it is meant to be, not only for the dead, but for the living too, no lesser and no greater, in the way of Rabbi Hirsch's teaching, *even the outwardly weakest and smallest*, all joined in the ways of justice and love, held in God's spirit, neither sword nor armies to divide.

It is all held in the very first words of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Miketz*. The word means end, referring to the end of two final years of Yosef's imprisonment in Egypt. The word *ketz/end* is layered with Messianic allusion in Jewish tradition, telling of *ketz ha'yamim/the end of days*, that time of swords turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks, when God's spirit shall have transformed the sword and those who would wield it. In a midrashic telling, the rabbis draw on a verse from Job (28:3), *ketz sam la'choshech/put an end to darkness*. So it is understood, as an imperative, a human task, not for God, but for us to do.

That is the quiet, gentle message of Chanukkah, to put an end to the darkness that inheres in all the ways of division among people, that we might come to that day of elemental harmony. The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that the only way to put an end to darkness is by doing good. A bridge of light from creation to Chanukkah, God's gentle breath upon the water as the ultimate challenge to the sword, Chanukkah light and Shabbos light, the human soul as God's candle in the world.

Shabbat shalom / Happy Chanukkah,
Rabbi Victor