

Dear Chavraya,

Not “Star Trek,” but star tracks, a mesmerizing image of streaks of light appearing on the photographic paper that my father developed. Yet, it is exactly star trek as the journey of a star, the journey of our selves. My dad would set a camera in a nighttime field, the lens pointing upward, the shutter left open. After some hours he would close the shutter. And so he showed us the movement of stars through the night sky. It was an awesome image of streaks of light, the trails, tails, and tales of a star’s trek across the heavens. There were so many streaks, each one telling of one star’s journey, one star so far away, so small to the eye, giving so much light, each speck so grand in its gift to the cosmos.

Images come that console and connect, that remind us of our infinitesimal smallness in the universe, and yet of our grandeur and importance in this place we call home. I think of the dust on my mother’s hands after she finished gardening. She hesitated to remove the dust, delighting in the sense of purpose and accomplishment that comes of working in the soil. Whether planting seeds or weeding and watering to nurture their growth, the possibility of good and goodness blossoming, potential held in her hands, a blessing of beauty offered, the beauty of a blessing. One with the dust from which we have come and to which we return, I think of the dust sprinkled upon the dead to quicken their return, a reminder of our journey, soul and soil, seeds of possibility, the dust on my mother’s hands.

When the world seemed too much for the child that was me, I would walk to the sea shore at the top our street and go down to sit upon the rocks by the water’s edge. I found comfort in the sound of wind and sea, in the rolling of the waves, and their breaking upon the shore. Cresting and falling, a spirit crestfallen raised up with awestruck delight, waves become breakers on the shore, then rolling back out and lifted up again by new ones rising, an endless cycle in the foam, all of life yearning to come home.

Images come to me of the natural world as I read this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Vayishlach*. Yaakov is making his way home to Canaan, to birthplace and family after twenty years, long ago having fled his brother Esav’s anger for the younger’s stealing of the elder’s birthright and its blessing. Now a grown man returning on the way he had come, his wives, his children, his flocks, Yaakov is afraid and he stops to pray. It is a beautiful prayer, acknowledging those who had come before, *God of Avraham, God of Yitzchak*, seeking connection with ancestors as we do in davenning the *Amidah*. With humility, he acknowledges his smallness before the kindnesses given to him, perhaps as well there in the desert sands of endless expanse, the heavens above, smallness too in standing alone, so small. *Save me, please*, he pleads, *hatzileni na*. Then he reminds God of the good promised to him, that God has said, *I will make your descendants like the sand of the sea/v’samti et za’r’cha k’chol ha’yam*.

Offering his own words as *amen* to Yaakov’s prayer, the Slonimer Rebbe lovingly probes them. He weaves into our ancestor’s prayer the ways of our own seeking, wondering of our place and of ways to understand for our time the world in which we live, the same sky and stars above, the same dust beneath, the same

rolling seas that break upon the shore. The Slonimer asks a simple question. Why, he wonders, does Yaakov remind God of a blessing given to Avraham, a promise to make his descendents as numerous as the sands of the sea? To Avraham, God also promised to make his descendents as numerous as the stars of the heavens, *k'kochvei ha'shamayim*. To Yaakov, God, has also made a promise, *your seed will be as the dust of the earth/za'r'cha ka'afar ha'aretz....*

From the ground on which he stands, desert dust upon his hands and feet and brow, stars trekking through the night sky above, Yaakov reaches back for comfort to the ones who came before, far from the sea yet drawn to the rolling of its waves, generations unfolding, that his name too would some day be added to our own praying, and through us the mothers too.

The Slonimer Rebbe teaches of the gifts carried in the images of each of nature's elements that infuse our ancestors' prayers, subsumed within the one prayer of Yaakov that becomes our own. The stars above tell of the great heights toward which we strive while yet rooted upon the dusty earth. *The stars of the heavens are the greatest level/koch'vei ha'shamayim hi darga g'vo'ha b'yoter*. Of the dust on my mother's hands, *the dust of the earth/afar ha'aretz*, the Slonimer teaches what my mother knew, the dust contains the *potential of blossoming/ko'ach ha'tzmicha*. And of the sand along the shore of the sea, the Slonimer teaches, *a pausing by the waters of the sea that none shall look upon its withering/otzer ba'ad mei ha'yam she'lo yatzipu et ha'yabasha*. I think of a child seeking renewal, and so for us, not to wither within, to be uplifted and find our home along the rolling of the sea.

As Yaakov prayed and so for us, the stars above, the dust beneath, the sand and sea, all of life yearning to come home.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor