

Dear Chavraya,

Mieke and I returned home from Los Angeles this morning, returning from welcoming our newest grandchild, from being surrounded by and surrounding with love our older children and their children, four now among them. Settling into the familiar patterns of our lives, a bit bleary, touched by the swirling hues of joy and sadness, I am touched by moments and memories that seem as a mirage, yet so real. Having gathered to greet a new little being, there were so many moments of meaning, teachings of life that appeared as gently as the butterflies that danced on the backyard breeze as the children played. I share an unlikely teaching that came to me as a gift in an unlikely moment from an unlikely teacher, a teaching meant for every child in their emerging into life and into their becoming just who they are and are meant to be. (And it is a teaching for all children of earth at whatever stage in life they may be.)

Just before our new little one's b'ris, among the many seemingly mundane tasks to be done, I went to the Starbucks at the corner of the street, just across from our children's home where the b'ris would be. I went to pick up two large containers of coffee to have for the meal following the *mitzvah*, the *se'udat mitzvah*. As I picked up the containers, one in each hand, two large cups of milk attached to one box, and a bag of sugar packets and stirrers attached to the other, the young clerk behind the counter smiled warmly and quite joyfully and then asked, "can I help you carry those?" Trying to keep my shoulder bag from shifting into the containers of coffee, bending my knees to watch my back, I paused midway and said thank you, indicating more outward confidence than I felt within. As I prepared again to lift, the clerk caught my eyes and looked right into me with a great warm smile and said, "I believe in you."

I stopped again midway in my task and spoke words of appreciation to the clerk. I felt a momentary awkwardness in realizing how moved I felt by this simple interaction. "You know," I said to the clerk, "that is such a beautiful blessing, thank you so much." I then added, "and I believe in you, and so may we all believe in ourselves and in each other."

As we brought our precious little one into the Covenant of Abraham just a little while later, I kept thinking of the blessing with which I had been blessed, realizing that the words of a stranger so freely offered were meant as well for our grandson, for all of our grandchildren, for all children. With what better way shall we bless our children as they begin the journeys of their lives? So with a gift of confidence, a gift of love, to say so simply and with a smile, "I believe in you?"

Only when we believe in ourselves, indeed only when we are truly able to love ourselves for who we are, can we truly and fully love others. It is a subtle teaching that emerges from this week's Torah portion, the combined portion of *Acharei Mot-K'doshim*. In the midst of a lengthy enumeration of *mitzvot* that are meant to guide social and interpersonal relationships, we are given one of the most well known of the Torah's exhortations that come to underscore the humanity of every person. Easily misunderstood and even abused, and so then the danger of abusing people, yet so beautiful in its simple meaning, *and you shall love your neighbor as yourself/v'ahavta l're'acha ka'mocha*.

Easily missed is the implied meaning in the last little word in Hebrew, *ka'mocha/as yourself*. So it is, we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. It is the very assumption from which love of others begins. How can I love others if I do not love myself?

Among its many layers of meaning, that is one of the beautiful challenges and reminders in this well-known verse, if we would love others, we need to love ourselves, which means also to believe in ourselves. For our newest little one, for all of our grandchildren, for all children everywhere, and so too for all of us at whatever age and stage we are in our lives, may we love ourselves as part of our loving others. With all the warmth of a young store clerk's smile, may we say to each other and to the one whose God-like image shines out from the mirror, "I believe in you."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor