

Dear Chavraya,

I stood at the edge of another's abyss, wishing I could just reach down and pull them up. It was a place of deep and utter darkness, *choshech afelah/all-encompassing darkness*, as the implacable darkness of the ninth plague is described (Ex. 10:22). It is a darkness that seems impervious to light. I was not going to write "that seems" impervious, having intended, rather, to write "that is impervious to light." In spite of my intention, I clearly needed to offer, to imagine, for myself, for others, at least a glimmer of hope, the hope that somehow light can make its way even into that place of such deep darkness.

From the abyss, a plaintive cry, "is there any hope?" Framed as a question, the question is the beginning of its own answer, "yes, friend, there is hope." In asking of the possibility of hope, there is an openness to its emerging, an openness to the possibility of light, a slight opening of the eyes to see even the faintest glimmers of light, an openness to letting them in. This Shabbos marks Rosh Chodesh Elul, month of turning and preparation, the thin crescent of the new moon emerging tomorrow night, barely visible light, a fleeting presence in the western sky, near the horizon in between the light of day and night. Tomorrow morning and Sunday morning we sing Hallel, psalms of praise, including Psalm 118: *min ha'metzar karati kah/from the narrow place I called out to God/anani va'merchav kah/God answered me expansively*. The psalmist knew of pain, a universal and timeless reality, part of being human. The psalmist also knew that surcease begins with a great cry, a calling out from the depths, from the narrow place of all-encompassing darkness.

One person's struggle to find their way out from the pain of soul and psyche is itself both real and a metaphor. It is the way of an illness no less than an illness of the body. To attach stigma to one illness and not another is to impede the way of healing for all who suffer in a broken world, for our selves and each one. It is to our peril that we attach stigma to illness of mind, to the soul-sick and heartsick, to those who have wearied of hope and plummet into the abyss. Whether predisposed in ways inherited, or through the legacy of traumatic experience, or of a sensitive soul assaulted by the brutalities of the world, by all the ways that the world impedes our wellbeing, it could be any of us. Any of us, God forbid, could tumble and spiral down and find ourselves in that abyss of all-encompassing darkness, the plague of *choshech afelah*. In a world divided against itself, of people from planet and from each other, we come to be divided within ourselves. One person's illness of soul and psyche is a metaphor for what it means to live in a soul-sick world, seeking hope at the edge of the abyss.

The challenge is to see the glimmers of light that bravely hold the possibility of hope, to reach for sparks that pierce the darkness, light emerging gently as the silvery crescent of the new moon. It is the first word and name of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Re'eh*. *Re'eh/See!* (Deut. 11:26-16:17). There is hope if we can open our eyes and see, if we can open ever so slightly, even the eye of our heart, the soul's eye, especially the soul's eye, the inner eye. Rebbe Nachman, one who knew pain so deep, who cried out from the abyss, who knew the all-encompassing darkness, taught from out of his own suffering that we need to close our eyes to really see (*Likutei Moharan* 1:65). Just as we squint to see more

clearly into the distance, just as we close our eyes tightly when in the grip of pain, so we begin to see beyond the pain, even just a little, to receive the beginning of new Torah, Torah of the abyss, then to open and behold new light, even just a little. *Re'eh/See! I am setting before you today: blessing and curse.* It is not blessing or curse, but this and also this, each a reality of life, two strands woven together as part of what it means to be human. Scrunching up our eyes to see toward the light, if only reflexively, it is the body's way of choosing the way of blessing, even if when struggling through "the harsh passages" of life we may feel as though cursed. And yet, the light of love from all of those who walk with us, who look down into the abyss and shine a light, who extend a hand, who receive our tears, remind us that we are blessed, even in darkness.

How to cry out from the depths, let alone to sing? We sing a song of the very depths, even just a groan or sigh. Only when Israel groaned from the weight of slavery could glimmers of redemption shine, *stirrings from below awakening those from above/itaruta d'l'tata l'itaruta d'l'eilah.* Sing, Rebbe Nachman taught, for his own sake as much as ours, sing, accustom yourself to sing a *nigun* each day, a soul tune, *for a nigun has great strength to raise one up to the Holy One/ko'ach gadol l'hamshich et ha'adam l'shem yisborach (Likutei Eytzot, N'gina 11).* In the gathering darkness of what would become the Holocaust, Bertolt Brecht asked: *In the dark times, Will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.*

In the way of Rebbe Nachman, if we sing a little every day, if we kindle a spark even in the light, we shall know how to sing in the dark times, a song of the dark times. At the end of *Parashat Re'eh*, offering mitzvot as a way of doing holy deeds, as a lifeline, a pattern of behavior to infuse our lives with meaning, we are told to rejoice, *v'samachta b'chagecha/rejoice in your festival.* It is the festival of Sukkos, joyful coda to the holy days of a year's beginning. We are to insure that all are able to celebrate the festival, to find joy in its ways, we are to take care of the orphan, the widow, the stranger, all who are most vulnerable, to insure that they have food, that they are sustained in body in order to be sustained in soul, then to be able to rejoice. It is a song of body and soul, each with its needs, neither to be diminished, each part of one whole, how then stigma to be attached to either one?

In the tension and challenge held in a commandment to rejoice, a profound connection is made between the first words of two successive verses (16:14 and 15), *v'samachta b'chagecha... v'hayita ach same'ach/you shall rejoice in your festival..., and then you shall be joyful nevertheless....* The rabbis taught a principle of interpretation, *achin v'rakin mi'utin/the words ach and rak serve to diminish, to delimit or modify that which precedes.... Ach and rak can simply mean but or only....* But, it would not be realistic, in the grammar of life as of language, to be only joyful, entirely joyful on command. *Ach* serves, therefore, to modify the mitzvah to rejoice, calling us to be joyful nevertheless, in spite of all that would preclude joy. In this way of understanding the Hebrew that Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch brings, we hold the fullness of life, body and soul, the blessing and the curse, the darkness and the light. Standing at the edge of another's abyss, and so for ourselves, we kindle a light and softly sing a *nigun*, nevertheless. In the question is the beginning of its own answer. Yes, friend, there is hope.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor