

Dear Chavraya,

From out of silence, possibility emerges. In the fast pace of our lives, of our times, it is difficult to find such places of creative silence. It is not that the places of silence are any less present in our midst to be entered than at other times. It is that we have lost the keys with which to open the quiet places and spaces in our lives, in our hearts. We have lost amidst the din the paths that lead to oases of pause. In truth, it is perhaps that we have not lost the keys or the way, but that we simply forget to pick up the keys on our way out the door, or that we walk so fast to notice paths of peace to be taken if we would. Sometimes it is a matter of simply taking a breath before speaking, to allow another's words to be heard and held. Sometimes it is when we feel anxious or overwhelmed with all that calls for us to do rather than to be, then to pause and even for a moment to breathe, simply to be. The keys are ever present, a long slow breath, to meditate and reflect, times of daily prayer set into the cadence of time, calling us to look beyond ourselves, to know that we are part of a greater unhurried whole. Sometimes to find our selves in the pages of a book, drawn to the magic of words, pausing to reflect. It may simply be to sing a simple tune, whatever emerges from our lip, allowing our own nigun to lift us up to the Holy One, as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches. To write words that come to us unbidden, to hold them as birds alighting on a branch, to sketch with pencil or paint, to splash color on the canvas of a day. It is to walk as pilgrims on the way and to notice with gratitude the flowers so bravely emerging from darkness to the light. It is to make Shabbos, a weekly homecoming to a place so familiar and yet to which we have never been. To make Shabbos is to step out of time as we know it, to enter a place of pause in which to envision the world as it might be and to make it so.

The very middle of the Torah is the silent space between two words, between two words in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Sh'mini*. It is the silent space between the words *darosh* || *darash/seeking* || *surely seeking*. Out of the silence we seek, surely to seek. The ancient scribes, the *Sofrim*, teach that *darosh* is the last word in the first half of the Torah and that *darash* is the first word in the second half of the Torah. Two words cannot therefore form the middle, becoming instead as loving hands to define and shape the silent space between, as clay in the hands of the Potter, as we sing on Yom Kippur, giving sacred shape to the vessels of our lives.

The ancient scribes were called *sofrim* because they lovingly counted each word and each letter of Torah. That is how we know that we have come to the middle this week in our journey through this year's cycle of Torah reading. The root of *sofer* can mean either *to tell*, as in *to recount a sippur/a story*, or it can mean *to count*, as in these days of *s'firat ha'omer/counting the omer*, counting each day to make each day count. In counting each letter and each word in the telling of our story, the *sofrim* remind us of the importance of each one, that each one counts, that each one is needed, that each one is of inestimable value. If that is so for words and letters, then how much more so is it true for people. That is the lesson to be learned in arriving in the silent space of pause that is the very heart of the Torah.

From out of silence, the right words emerge. Facing the wrenching tragedy in this portion, the death of his two sons, Aaron is silent before Moses' effort to

explain the unexplainable, *va'yidom aharon/and Aaron was silent*. Out of that silence, we learn from the ethical teachings of *Mussar, she'nityached imo ha'dibbur/he was united with the word*. Pausing before speaking, the message is clarified, more easily then to be heard, the faith to go on strengthened as we seek the way forward. Of silence giving strength to faith, the nineteenth to twentieth century Chassidic rebbe known as the *Shem Mi'shmuel* taught of the silent space at the heart of Torah, *b'd'mimah sh'murah al chizuk ha'emunah/in silence faith is watched over and strengthened*. And from that middle place of silence, the Degel Machaneh Ephraim, grandson of the holy Baal Shem Tov, teaches of the emergence of the Oral Torah, the *Torah she'b'al peh*, the Torah of the mouth, words emerging out of silence, words of engagement from a place of pause.

Coming now to Shabbos, may we find a place of pause in the pace of our lives, united with the word, the way of speech to connect and not to hurt, united with ourselves, with each other, with the Holy One, with earth and all there is, from out of silence possibility to emerge.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor