

Dear Chavraya,

I hope that you are all catching your breath, as we emerge from the fast-flowing stream of the *Yamim Nora'im*. These have truly been awesome days, beyond their own essence and meaning, the awesomely beautiful experience of being together, of davenning and singing together, of supporting each other as we come together as a community. I continually realize as we go through these days and as we emerge from them how much people are carrying within themselves, so much life being lived and experienced among us, each of us an entire world, worlds coming together when we gather. There is much heartache and much joy among us, all happening at the same time. We are together the communal vessel that gives shape and context to the wellsprings of life as they flow among us.

Together, we hold each other's tears of joy and of sorrow, all as *mayyim chayyim/waters of life*.

The preparation for Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur is deeply intense, focused on inner dynamics, those within our selves and those that define our relationships one with another. While the work of *t'shuva/turning back to make amends*, begins with acknowledgement within our selves, its real work is external, actually doing the hard work of reaching out to others with whom repair is needed. Most of the time we spend together, though, is in shul, deeply focused within our selves, but doing that in each other's presence. That always touches me as one of the beautiful dynamics of these days, engaging with the Holy One and with our own souls, such intimate ways of engagement, but with each other, all together, neither embarrassed nor ashamed.

As though to dramatically remind us that we are both body and soul; that we have been focused enough on our souls, time to be aware of our bodies too, we swing immediately after Yom Kippur into preparation for Sukkos. It is another powerfully beautiful dynamic in Jewish life, that right after such intense inward focus we are called to go out to the woods and fields to gather greenery for the sukkah. All of our senses are awakened to the sights and scents of the harvest, to the exquisite comingling of species in the *lulav* and *esrog*, scent, sight, and sound brought together for the sake of *mitzvah*. It is a *mitzvah* to sit surrounded by elements of nature and to look up through leafy boughs and behold the stars. It is a *mitzvah* to close our eyes and shake in all directions the four species joined together as one, reminding us that all types of people are needed to form as one the fabric of life.

One of my favorite moments in making the transition from the ways of Yom Kippur to the ways of Sukkos, is going out to the woods to go *a-s'chaching*. It is not a word to be found in the dictionary, but it is what we do, to go and gather the greenery with which to cover the sukkah. *S'chach* is roofing material, natural, organic matter with which to cover the sukkah. Meaning to cover, shelter, protect, *s'chach* represents both linguistically and symbolically the essence of what the sukkah is to be, a place of shade and shelter, of sanctuary for all, a place of peace.

I have been going to the same spot in the woods to find *s'chach* for some twenty years now, always taking the kids when they were young, finding our way

together. Now I still follow those footprints in time, often coming back to the same trees, honoring them with words of gratitude as I receive their evergreen gifts, only a few from each tree. Though I have come to use pruning shears as the primary tool in gathering *s'chach*, I still carry an axe and a saw, old time tools and old time ways. And yet, I have come to think that perhaps the pruning shears are meant to point toward the future, when swords shall be turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks, to a time when all shall dwell together in a great sukkah of peace.

It is fitting that on this Shabbos that is a bridge between Yom Kippur and Sukkos we read *Parashat Ha'azinu*. This portion of Torah is filled with metaphors drawn from nature. Moses calls on heaven and earth to give ear and hear the words of his mouth. Just prior to his death, so passionately wishing to touch the people and open their souls before he leaves them, he prays that his teaching *penetrate like the rain breaking up the soil, that God's promise may flow gently like the dew, like rainstorms on the meadow and like pouring rains upon the grass*. As though to draw together all elements of nature in their source, even God is called by a natural element, our Rock, *the Rock whose work is perfect/ha'tzur tamim pa'alo*.

At the very end of Moses' song of farewell, joining people and earth and God in one great song of wholeness, we are reminded of our deep responsibility to care for this earth from which we come. The very last words of the song cry out as Moses and God's great hope for wholeness, *v'chiper admato amo/and God's people will atone for God's world*. It is one of the gifts of Torah as our Tree of Life, a teaching of ultimate unity, that the earth depends on us to sustain its wholeness. In the way of atonement sought on Yom Kippur, the way of repair to which we commit ourselves with a great calling out from the heart, so on Sukkos we go forth and make atonement real for the sake of the earth.

As we pause in the peaceful sanctuary of Shabbos, so may we learn the way to raise up the great sukkah of peace, that the world be filled with Shabbat shalom in a Sukkat Shalom. As the gifts of field and forest remind of nature's bounty, may our hearts be as open as the simple sukkah to receive all that we bring of ourselves, all the joys and sorrows that tell of who we are. As our dwelling in the sukkah is its own prayer for peace in the world, may we also find in its warm embrace greater peace within our selves.

Shabbat shalom and Chag same'ach,
Rabbi Victor