

Dear Chavraya,

In times of illness, whether in walking with others or seeking strength for myself, I have often drawn from a small book of Jewish prayers for healing. One of its simple truths affirms the inner essence that makes us more than our bodies, "When the body hurts, the soul still yearns to sing." I have found myself musing recently on what has come to me for the first time as the limited nature of this beautiful teaching. It is limited to one kind of illness, that of the body. I have wondered if the reverse is also true. Can we also say, when the soul hurts, the body still yearns to sing?"

It comes to me as a hard question, perhaps underscoring the profound energy that is emanated by the soul in animating the body. We have surely all known moments, some of painfully long duration, when our souls and psyches have been so low that our bodies have felt disconnected and barely able to move, let alone to sing. When our souls hurt, what will animate our bodies? Is there a yearning in our bodies to sing, to dance, to raise up our souls. These are areas and questions in whose realm others are more knowing than I, whose wisdom I would seek from out of my wondering.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, there is a fascinating *mitzvah*, one that is virtually a commandment to be joyful. It seems preposterous, and that was the first question raised during our Thursday morning JP Licks Torah discussion. How can joy be commanded? Time limited in practice, and yet eternal in its import, we are told in regard to the bringing of the *bikkurim*/first fruits of our harvest, that we are to *rejoice in all the good/v'samachta b'chol ha'tov that God, your God, has given to you...* (Deut. 26:11). Later on in the *parsha*, among the painfully enumerated reasons for our exile from the land we are told (28:47) that it is because we did not serve God *b'simcha u'v'tuv levav me'rov kol/with joy and with gladness of heart, by reason of abundance in all things*. In the absence of joy, we become divided, exiled from our souls, at times numbed by our own material wellbeing, *by abundance in all things*. Whether it be through our own unwitting bondage to things, or through the painful realities of life, or through the imbalances of biology and chemistry, when our souls hurt, how shall the body sing?

As our discussion unfolded around the table, wrestling toward an answer to the first question, some of our number offered a helpful view to the *mitzvah* that we rejoice. Some suggested that the commandment to rejoice is meant to be prescriptive, a teaching to help us find our way toward the light when darkness seems to close all around. By learning to sing as a natural part of life, then we become attuned, perhaps, a-tuned, to the way of song. We may be more likely then to open our lips that song might come when hardly able to speak for sorrow. The *mitzvah* to sing becomes even more pronounced in the *Mishnah* in regard to the bringing of *Bikkurim*. The one bringing the first fruits of their harvest is to bring the sheaves accompanied by *an offering and a song/korban v'shir* (Mishna Bikkurim 2:4).

In this way of a-tuning our selves to song in our lives, that the body might respond to the soul's need for uplift, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov offers a most

beautiful teaching. It is especially poignant in the context of his own suffering, of afflictions to his soul and psyche, along with so much loss and physical illness. Nevertheless, Rebbe Nachman taught: *A nigun and musical instruments have the great power to raise a person up to the Holy One, therefore it is good to accustom oneself to refresh one's essence in every moment with a particular tune, to gladden one's soul, and in this way to cleave oneself to the Holy One...* (Likutei Eytzot, N'gina) It is about first steps as well as first fruits, of teaching our bodies to sing, at times to lead and inspire the soul. To sing a nigun each day is to accustom our lips to bring forth song, even when we feel barely able to speak.

Of words I have also shared before, a similar teaching from other rebbes, it is in the way of Bertolt Brecht, whether the dark times be of the soul or of the world in which we live, and so they become as one:

In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times.

From one of the great rebbes of song and spirit, another source that is so important to me, from the singing of Pete Seeger (of blessed memory), of words adapted from a Christian hymn, he made a gift of song for all us to sing, "My Life Flows on in Endless Song:"

My life flows on in endless song

Above earth's lamentation.

I hear the real, though far off hymn

That hails a new creation

Above the tumult and the strife,

I hear the music ringing;

It sounds an echo in my soul

How can I keep from singing?

It is that echo of which we sing, if we would but accustom ourselves to the healing power of song. We dare not over simplify the prescriptive, but yet to hold to its truth. It is a *mitzvah* to sing, that when the soul hurts, the body will still yearn to sing.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor