

Dear Chavraya,

I love to sit in the corner of the shtibl, tucked in just to the right of the fireplace, there by the worn old books that line the tightly packed shelves. Perhaps you have looked over at those books, maybe even pausing to peruse them. And if not, perhaps you have been touched by their aura. The books represent a mix of our sacred texts. There are a number of old volumes of *Mishnayos*, some complete sets of this first part of the Talmud, the first compilation of our *Oral Torah*, but mostly random volumes. So too, there are random volumes of Talmud, many of Tractate *Bava Kama*, that part of Talmud concerning damages, the harm people do to one another and our effort to make it right, apparently having been a focus of study for students in another shul once, in another time and place. I am particularly drawn by to that spot by the warmth of the *Eyn Ya'akov*, of which, curiously, or perhaps not, there are quite a number of volumes, even two full sets. Two sets were published in Europe, in Vilna, known prior to the *Sho'a* as *Yerushalayim d'lita/Jerusalem of Lithuania*, one published there by the *Widow and Brothers Rom*. For centuries the *Rom Publishing House* was the most famous Jewish publishing house in the world. One set was published right here in Boston in 1920 by a Jewish publishing house of the day, the "Sifra Publishing Company." Several volumes have stamps and imprints of various congregations upon whose shelves they rested and around whose tables they were studied.

One of the stamps of a particular community, imprinted on the first page of one of the volumes, is the stamp of Congregation Tifereth Abraham in Winthrop, MA. That is the town where I grew up, and that is the shul where I first went to Hebrew school, known affectionately as the "little shul," in relation to the "big shul" that was down the street. Through my long association with the little shul, it is from there that many of our ritual items came as gifts. Among the gifts were many of the books that sit on the shelves in the corner of our shtibl. It amazes me how many years have gone by since I walked through the old shul in Winthrop with Mr. Leon Schiff, looking together at items that would help to nurture the new shul whose seeds were being planted in Jamaica Plain. I still keep in touch with Leon, visiting from time to time, a man now in his nineties whose tenacious spirit is all that keeps the "little shul" alive. Leon is virtually the entire congregation now, most others having long ago journeyed to the *Yeshiva shel Ma'a'loh/the Yeshiva above*. Their spirits hovering above the dusty tables in the now silent room just off the sanctuary, many of the members of the little shul back then were learned working folk who made time to learn from the holy books that rested on the nearby shelves, books that now rest upon our shelves.

As we walked and talked that day, pausing to browse and to muse, Leon said to take whatever seemed helpful. Looking at the well-worn books, taking in their titles, I wondered out loud about all of the copies of *Eyn Ya'akov* on the shelves. "Ah," Leon said, so much nostalgia held in his sigh, "that's what they would study the most, learning it with Rabbi Koenigsberg. A revered figure, I shared my own recollection of Rabbi Koenigsberg as he appears to me still through the eyes of a young child, a large man with a large black beard and a large black hat. It was not until many years later, when I could understand what it meant, that I learned that he was a Holocaust survivor, that he had a number on his arm, that he had arrived on these shores in 1950. A European rabbi, he taught in the small

town of Winthrop Massachusetts from books published in a world that no longer existed. The volumes of Eyn Ya'akov were a bridge to a vanished world, and so they remain for us. For us, they are a bridge to vanished worlds, to Jewish life in pre-war Europe, to Vilna when it was the Jerusalem of Lithuania, to the Rom Publishing house, but also to one small shul where for one rabbi Jewish life was reconstituted.

The Eyn Ya'akov might have been a source of comfort for Rabbi Koenigsberg and for those who learned from its pages with him. So it has been for Jews throughout the ages, often a focus of learning more accessible than the fullness of Talmud. A beautiful and tender work that touches the soul, the Eyn Ya'akov was created in early sixteenth century Spain by Rabbi Ya'akov bar Sh'lomo ibn Chaviv. Speaking directly to the heart, Eyn Ya'akov is a compilation of all of the *aggadic* strands of Talmud, weaving together stories, legends, folk tales, homilies and healings into one whole, independent of the legal or *halachic* portions of Talmud. Spanning the S'fardic and Ashkenazic worlds in the breadth of commentators brought to its pages, bridging time and space, the Eyn Ya'akov offered to the literate Jewish masses a shared context for wrestling with God, with Torah, with life, and in the end this is the blessing.

Spanning the time of a year's Torah cycle, and so of life, end and beginning joined on Simchas Torah as we complete the past year's reading and begin again, now facing Moses' death with him in the final portion, *Parashat v'zot ha'b'racha*/this is the blessing. In the closing words of Moses' blessing of the people just before ascending the mountain to be gathered to his ancestors, Rabbi Ya'akov found the name of his work, *thus did Israel gain a dwelling place, secure and alone, the fountain of Ya'akov/Eyn Ya'akov, for a land of grain and new wine; even the dew dripping down from God's heaven* (Deut. 33:28). Carried as part of a larger discussion in the Talmud, commentary in the Eyn Ya'akov becomes its own blessing, encouraging, strengthening, the *fountain of Ya'akov* as the source of blessing, for each of us as individuals and for all of us as a people. Striving to be and become, whether around learning tables after a day's work, or in the camps and ghettos, praying to survive and work another day, we have found strength in our holy texts, joined together, as the Eyn Ya'akov teaches: *each one shall dwell... and there shall be no quarrel or strife among them... when they are gathered together/keshe'hem m'kubatzim yachad...; as the fountain of Ya'akov, of which it says, and Ya'akov was left alone* (Gen. 32:25)...; *and there wrestled with Ya'akov an angel whom Ya'akov overcame... as it is written, for you have wrestled with God and with people and you have persevered...* (Gen. 32:29).

Of cycles in time, of Torah and life, of holy seasons and people remembered, of *Yizkor* and yearning, prayers shared and solitary, I share with you a story that in its essence tells of this season. As we come to the end of these holy days, having journeyed together into a new year, having held together all the weight and hope of Yom Kippur, having dwelled in the sukkah and prayed for the world to be a sukkah of peace, now about to enter the days when in the turning of Torah endings and beginnings become as one, I share a story of such turnings in time. It is a story of connections through time and space, of people and place, a story that is about our shtibl, of the little shul in Winthrop, and about so much more.

Some months ago, Fred celebrated among us the sixty-fifth anniversary of his Bar Mitzvah. Fred and I are *lantsmen*, both of us from Winthrop, each of us with long ago roots in the little shul. We have often reminisced of people and times that were. One of my earliest memories in life is of Fred's grandfather, a connection I made the very first time Fred came to Nehar Shalom. Mr. Regolsky was a mattress maker, a big, strong man, a *shtarke*, who carried mattresses into homes on his back. That is how I remember Mr. Regolsky in that very early memory, carrying the mattress for my very first real bed into our house and up the stairs, on his back. For that reason, we came to call him "Mr. Mover." As Fred and I reminisced over Kiddush, following his deeply moving chanting of his Bar Mitzvah *haftorah*, we spoke of his grandfather. I asked Fred to tell me more of the man who I remembered only for his brawn, hardly as a pious and learned Jew. "You know, Fred said quietly, "he used to learn at night with Rabbi Koenigsberg." I was overcome with images and imaginings as for some reason, seemingly out of the blue, connections being woven above, I asked Fred if he knew what they learned together. "Oh," as though to say, of course, "they learned Eyn Ya'akov." I could barely contain myself in that moment, tears welling then and now as I write. "Fred," I said, "do you see those books?," pointing to the shelves in the corner where I love to sit, "they are mostly volumes of Eyn Ya'akov from the little shul. "Come," I said, "and touch the books that were held by your grandfather, that he learned from, come and hold his hand once again."

Of books that lay once upon a time and table between the rabbi and his student, they tell now of connections that endure. Of a Bar Mitzvah boy and his grandfather, of people and shuls that were, of people and shuls that are, the living and the dead held in God's hand, joined across the span of Jewish history, from Vilna to Winthrop, to Jamaica Plain. As this long season of holy days draws to a close with the song of Torah renewed, may each of us be renewed in the ways of renewal that each of us needs. In all that we may encounter on the way ahead, may we walk together, each of us and all of us blessed by those who came before. Touched by the dew of heaven, soothed by the blessing of Moses drawn from Jacob's fount, hands gently touching through time the books upon a *shtibl's* shelves, wellsprings giving flow through the ancient pages of *Eyn Ya'akov*.

A Gutn Yontev, Chag Same'ach, and still to say, Shannah Tovah,
Rabbi Victor