

Dear Chavraya,

It has been heartbreaking to hear the stories from California, stories of such immense loss in the face of the cataclysmic fires. The most fearsome loss is that of so many lives and so many missing, dread with every name seen on lists and the accompanying pleas for information. I have found myself both needing to hear and unable to hear the interviews with survivors, those who escaped with their lives, but who lost everything else that was theirs in this world. There have been tearful references to photo albums, to family heirlooms, to wedding rings, all incinerated, remaining only as memories along with the homes that were the context of the memories and their sharing.

Juxtaposed in the news cycles with the California fires has been reportage of the migrant caravan, making its way through Mexico. It is so hard to listen to these accounts, as well, but they too need to be heard. Suffering is a human thread that joins us all. In one case are the flames of fire, and in the other flames of violence and brutality and all consuming poverty. A mother spoke of feeling caught between the death threats to her and her husband at home and the threat of being separated from her children if able to cross the border into the country still imagined as one of hope and possibility. Leaving everything behind, to flee at least with their lives seemed still to be the only option.

As I listen to these painful stories, stories that are so deeply woven into the Jewish story, I find myself thinking about the nature and meaning of home and place. Within the world that is home to all, we need to have a place that is uniquely familiar, and that in its familiarity allows us to feel a sense of safety and belonging in ways more direct and accessible than in the wide world all around. Whether fleeing from fires or from violence, the refugee has been cut off from the personally familiar, from that unique sense of place and belonging in the world.

As I listen to the tearful accounts of those fleeing the flames and those fleeing the violence, the pain engendered by the loss of precious things becomes palpable. Trying to distinguish between the truly important stuff and just the stuff in our lives, the importance of the precious things can't be minimized. It is the precious things that weave the threads of generations, joining us to those who came before and will come after us. Hardly wishing to benefit from teaching borne of other's suffering, I find myself trying to discern how we might look beyond the stuff of our lives, the precious things. Without for a moment minimizing the importance of the precious things in our lives, or of the degree to which we may feel bereft in their loss, as I know I would, I find myself reflecting, nevertheless, on what the precious things really mean, trying to consider why they are so important. The question might then emerge in which to ask of our selves how to act on and to hold the essential meaning beyond the treasured things themselves. The things themselves are often not of great intrinsic or objective value. They are filled with meaning for us because of the lives they have been part of, joining our lives to theirs, even across worlds and time. Even when we are fortunate enough not to have lost the items themselves, the challenge is how to hold the meaning carried by the treasured things and to hold that meaning beyond the things themselves. It is to hold the real treasure, to feel the love of the one to whom the treasured item once belonged; to feel the warmth of a smile that still offers encouragement,

to hear the timbre of a soothing voice, to feel with eyes closed the abiding presence of one who in spirit is still with us, unencumbered by the physical, whether of body or of the precious things they left behind.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayetze*, Jacob sets out on a journey, fleeing his brother's wrath, seeking home and safety. The telling begins so simply, *va'yetze ya'akov mi'b'er sheva va'yelech charana/and ya'akov went out from b'er sheva and went toward charan*. Jacob has gone out and is going toward, but where is he? We are left to feel exactly as he did, unsure of where he is. Everything left behind, fleeing for his life, a stone for a pillow; his home for now is "in the journey." Without a sense of place, he seeks his way. Amid the searching, the word *makom/place* appears eleven times in the portion, a reminder to Jacob and to us that place is beyond one place, beyond the physical things that come to define the places of our lives. *Encountering the place/va'yifga ba'makom*, he does not yet know the meaning of the place where he is and where he is not, the meaning of the journey. There is a shimmering in the language of place. Simply meaning *place*, *Ha'makom / the Place* is also one of God's names, *the Place*, the One who is with us in every place, a name that reminds us that wherever we are, we are not alone.

Not to minimize the stuff of our lives, especially the precious things that remind of people and places, there is an opportunity as we journey with Jacob to consider the meaning held in the precious things that is beyond the things themselves. As God and place are joined in the linguistics of life, so the physical and spiritual is joined through the precious things in our lives. Crying for those who have lost everything, for those who have lost even their lives, for those who flee the flames and those who flee the violence, we send strength and we draw strength, wondering if we would be strong enough. In the wondering, may we find meaning that is deeper than the precious things themselves.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor