

Dear Chavraya,

Have you looked to the night sky this week and taken note of the new moon's journey? Sunday night and Monday marked Rosh Chodesh, beginning of the new month of Sh'vat, start of a new lunar cycle. It all began on Sunday, when the moon slipped ever so slightly out of alignment with the sun, the moon, and the earth. In that perfect moment of alignment end and beginning are as one, the previous cycle complete, the new one just beginning, a moment of stasis, of harmony, all joined as one. And then the moon moved slightly out of that holy conjunction to reveal its silvery sliver of outer crescent, able now to catch rays of sun that would glint off its newly revealed edge, glimmers of possibility.

In the time of conjunction when all three bodies are aligned, we cannot see the moon, for only its far side is illumined then by the sun's great light. In the darkness, we wait, knowing that light is shining beyond our ability to perceive, knowing too with the faith born of experience that we shall yet again see light. It is the hope of Rosh Chodesh, a hope renewed each month with the renewal of the moon. The moment of conjunction is called the *molad/birth*, the birth of the new moon, birth of possibility. Looking toward the moon at the time of conjunction, is to see the birth of possibility.

The mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh is in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Bo* (Ex. 10:1-13:16). At the beginning of chapter twelve, introducing the first lengthy enumeration of commandments in the Torah, still enslaved in Egypt, on the edge of redemption and freedom, we are told to look to the sky. In the days of the Great Sanhedrin, Rosh Chodesh was to be marked by visual observation, the new moon to be announced only once having been seen by those who look to the sky, those who are able to see the birth of possibility. The Torah's gift of the mitzvah begins with beautiful words unusually phrased, unusual in their emphasis on us, the receivers of the gift: *ha'chodesh ha'zeh lachem/this renewal of the moon is for you*. Playing on the root *chadash/new* in the word for month *chodesh*, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches of our own renewal as the purpose of marking Rosh Chodesh, of looking to the drama of birth monthly renewed in the sky: "What we are to establish is not an astronomical cycle of months but monthly renewals for ourselves...." Continuing, Rabbi Hirsch teaches: "Even as the moon renews itself by the law of nature, so you, too, should renew yourselves, but of your own free will...."

There are times when it is hard to look to the night sky and see the birth of possibility, times when the thin crescent is shrouded in cloud, when our eyes are unable to see clearly for tears, for being squeezed shut in a time of pain or sorrow. How then to see, to know, to believe in the birth of possibility, how to nurture hope, to still find meaning in times of darkness? It may indeed be that meaning shall not emerge until later, able only in retrospect to see or draw meaning. The moon continues to turn, as though waiting for us to notice, even if it be in a later cycle, a subsequent birth. As we make our way through the monthly turnings of time, the seasons of our lives, times of joy and of sorrow, we take care not to suggest that there is necessarily meaning in the difficulties themselves that we encounter along the way. So it would be cruel to attribute meaning to tragedy and terrible events in our lives or in those of others. It is

about how we respond to the human condition and find meaning in spite of our frailty, even right within and because of that deeply human state. Especially to attribute meaning or purpose in regard to someone else's suffering would be cruel, both of our selves and of God. Rather, I believe that with God's help and with the help of God's human angels, as well as from the strength of our own souls, we are able, nevertheless, to find enduring meaning in the world around us and in our response to life's challenges. As we can know that God is there even when we feel distant, as we know that the moon is continuing in its journey, the *molad* birthing possibility, even when we cannot look to the sky, we can know that there is meaning, nevertheless, meaning that transcends and envelops our pain, even if in the moment we cannot articulate or be fully aware of that meaning.

So we are trained to be moon watchers, to see the birth of possibility, learning to look to the sky and squint until a fragile sliver of light appears. When the new moon first appears, it is only for a short time, low in the western sky on that first night. The light of hope can seem fleeting, and so we look again on the next night, and then on the next. In the moon's journey through the sky we see reflected our own journeys of life, the human journey, the journey of time. Looking to the sky, we learn to look more clearly within ourselves and at each other, seeing more clearly all of those with whom we travel. *Ha chodesh ha'zeh lachem/this renewal of the moon is for you.* So may we receive the gift and know of its possibility and its hope.

Chodesh tov / a good month v'Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor