

Dear Chavraya,

What do you see that draws you to Jewish life, to Jewish living, to Jewish belonging? What moves you and affirms the bond with our people and its story? What and who do you see when you look at your Jewish self in the mirror? What do you see in the mirror that is reflected in your own eyes? What do you see when the Torah is carried among us, when you see its dancing letters on the parchment? What do you see when you look through Jewish eyes at migrants on the border, at suffering people wherever they are? What do you see when Jews respond to the cry of others? What do you see when Jews behave badly or heartlessly? What do you see in the flickering light of Shabbos candles, of Chanukkah candles? What do you see when a baby is brought into the timeless covenant of our people, when a child on the awkward cusp of adulthood is called to the Torah for the first time? *Mah ra'ita/what do you see...?*

It is such a simple and such a complex question, both probing and straightforward. It is a question that is to be asked of one who comes to convert, of one who wishes to become part of the Jewish people. It is a question brought by the essential code of Jewish law, the *Shulchan Aruch* in *Hilchot Gerim/Laws of Converts*. Offered as a guide to rabbis, the stage is set: *keshe'ba l'hitga'yer/when someone comes to convert say to them....* There is a silent pause then..., worlds shimmering, well understood that in the medieval context one who comes with a desire to be a Jew is crossing a divide, passing literally from one world to another, worlds and lives held in the balance. There is a tiny asterisk on the page. Following with a finger down to just below the text, the corresponding tiny asterisk and then tiny lettering in Rashi script, the cursive font with which Rashi's commentary was first printed when printing was new. The note says, *these laws are operative in those lands where it is allowed according to the law of the kingdom to convert....*

Returning to the text, *say to them....* The *Shulchan Aruch* tells us what is to be said. It is those two simple words and two more: *mah ra'ita she'bata l'hit'gayer/what do you see that you have come to convert?* There is clearly a pause now, allowing the one who has come to share what turns within them, to tell of what has moved them to cross the divide from one world to another. The text goes on, taking time to hear, to allow words and worlds to be held. And then, *i'atah yo'de'ah/don't you know that at this time Israel is oppressed, swept away, torn, and tribulations come upon them...?*

I find it to be such a powerful question, *what do you see?* Asked of those seeking to become part of the Jewish people, I have come to indeed see the question as one to be asked of all of us, a question for each of us to ask of ourselves. It is in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Yitro*, that we come to Mount Sinai and there become a people through Torah. In a powerfully radical teaching the rabbis emphasize that all the future generations of Jews, born Jews and choosing Jews were all at Sinai. The souls of all who would ever be Jewish were present in the moment when the Torah was given. Referring to that moment of such full presence, the Torah uses the present tense, telling of our arrival *ba'yom ha'zeh/on this day....* Sinai is an ever-present moment. We are there whenever we engage in Torah, whenever we hear the echo of the voice that went forth from the

mountaintop. We are there whenever we feel joined through time with ancestors and with descendants. We are there when we see hope in the light of gently flickering flames. We are there when we hear the Torah's call to love our neighbor as ourselves, when we respond to the needs of the stranger of whom we are told some thirty-six times not to oppress. We are there when we hear the call to make Shabbos, not only in the week to week, but to make a world that is filled with Shabbos peace. We are there when we hear the question that is asked of each one of us, *mah ra'ita/what do you see...?*

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor