

Dear Chavraya,

When I was the school rabbi at the Solomon Schechter Day School, I taught *Torah She'b'al Peh/Oral Torah*, the oral interpretive tradition, in the sixth grade. I would never take attendance at the start of a class without first saying together the *b'racha* for learning Torah. I emphasized to the students that their names represent Torah and that each of them, as each of us, represents living, breathing, walking Torah. Over time, that became its own lesson, perhaps more important than the content of any one class. It was meant to convey respect for each of the students and for the insights drawn from each one's own experience of life that was brought as a gift among us.

Torah means teaching. In its narrowest sense it refers to the *Sefer Torah*, the sacred scroll whose song is the story and way of our being a people. More broadly, it is the content of the Torah, the *chumash*, the Five Books of Moses. More broadly than that, Torah is the entire tradition of learning that sustains us, as milk and honey on our tongues, a way of active engagement with God and with each other, heart and mind and soul. And even more broadly than that, or in the way of saying a blessing for learning before taking attendance, perhaps most specifically, Torah is the teaching that each one of us brings to this world because of who we are.

The first task is to discover and to know our own Torah, to know that which is most unique in who we are. Each one's Torah emerges from the unique experience of their own lives, the unique insights through which reality is filtered and interpreted, indeed in the way of Oral Torah. Each one of us brings our own special commentary to the realities of life. We can each see the same sunrise, hear the same music, be touched by snowflakes in the same swirling storm, and yet our response reflects our own way of being in the world. So too, in each of our own ways of navigating life's journeys through times of joy and sorrow, each of us touched in different ways by the same universal realities of what it means to be part of the human family.

In all of the different ways of our being in the world, we have a different Torah to share. In the ways that we know and experience pain, in the ways that we are vulnerable, in the ways that we feel different and are different from others, so we learn our own Torah. Only if we are open to receiving the gift of who we are can we share that gift with others. When who we are does not fit neatly into socially accepted and expected categories, others may push us away or themselves step away from us. Whether in matters of faith, or race, or gender, or sexual identity, others are easily threatened. It should not be upon us then to claim the space that is rightly our due, and yet it often is. Each of us is the best teacher and guide in bringing to the world the gift of Torah that is uniquely our own. For all of us, at one time or another it is no less a challenge to receive the Torah of those whose ways seem closed to ours, even closed to our presence. How then not to be closed to their presence, but yet to be willing to engage?

It is the lesson of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat M'tzora*, and of last week's, *Parashat Tazria*, these two often read together as one, and even of the entire book of *Vayikra*. The rabbis refer to this third book of Torah as *Torat Kohanim/the Torah*

of the Kohanim. At the start of *Tazria*, we encounter *Torat ha'yoledet/the Torah of the one who has given birth*. At the beginning of *Parashat M'tzora*, we read, *zot ti'hi'yeh torat ha'm'tzora/this shall be the teaching of the leper....* Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch translates it as a prayer, "let this be the teaching of the leper...." In this way, I read these words as a prayer that we be open to receiving the Torah of the leper. The leper symbolically comes to represent all who are alone, who are cast out, the one made a pariah through the fear and loathing of others, through the hardened hearts of a society.

Repelled by the appearance of the leper, the Torah calls us to open our hearts, to know that this one too has Torah to teach, Torah that we need to learn for the sake of our own wholeness and theirs. The Torah acknowledges the messiness of life, knowing it is not easy to open our hearts to one from whom we feel blocked. It may be just as true in regard to one whose ideas we find repellent, how to hear their Torah as well? In reminding that each one carries their own Torah, the Torah itself challenges us to be open to all. In its own reflection of the messiness of life, through its tellings of family strife, its violence, its call to strive toward elusive heights, its teachings of *t'shuvah*, of what to do when we come crashing down, the Torah becomes *Torah Chayim/the Torah of life*.

On this *parsha*, the rabbis weave a midrash that tells of a great debate in heaven before the giving of the Torah. The angels remonstrated with God not to give the Torah to people. The angels claimed that they would be the more fitting recipients of Torah, they who are pure and holy, unsullied by sin and shortcoming. The Holy Blessed One said to the angels, *you are not able to fulfill the Torah; for you do not have children among you, and there is no impurity, and no experience of death and illness, rather you are all holy, for it is written in the Torah..., zot ti'hi'yeh torat ha'm'tzora/this shall be the teaching of the leper....*

The Torah is given to us that we might learn to hear the Torah of each one, at times as counterpoint to our own, at times as dissonance; that we might learn to make our way through all the challenges and messiness of life. We are each meant to be *Torat Chayim*, living, breathing, walking Torah, each one worthy of a blessing before our name is said. And let us say, Amen.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor