

Dear Chavraya,

Seeking a way through one of the “harsh passages” in my life, a time of great pain and sorrow on the ending of a marriage, unable yet to see the light of what would be, I wondered if it had all been worth it. In the haze of sorrow and confusion, I mused on the waste of all the years that had been, years cut off from what I thought had been their goal of years unfolding together. In addition to the support of family and friends, I found comfort in the words that seemed meant for me in teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov and of the Slonimer Rebbe. I had just met the Slonimer at about that time, the time of his death coinciding with the time of one of those smaller deaths in my life, as we all experience them, smaller deaths within ourselves as part of our life’s journeys. The Slonimer quickly became one of my beloved teachers as he drew me with his own insights to a teaching in the Zohar, *leyt n’hora eleh ha’hu d’nafik migo chashuchah/there is no light except that which emerges from the darkness*. So that light, a pillar of fire by night, a hovering cloud by day, became my hope, even when unseen, amidst the uncertainty.

The uncertainties of life can overwhelm, seizing us with their terror if that is what we dwell upon. If the goal is always beyond where we are in the moment, fulfillment is denied for what we do accomplish in the place where we are. Sometimes just getting through the day is goal enough and the journey sacred. The hard times are not a waste I came to realize. They too are part of the journey, one of the journeys that add up to the journey of our life, part of who we are. To cut out the “bad” days, the hard times, would be akin to cutting out the less than perfect pearls from a strand. All the other pearls too would fall and roll away, reminding us then that there is no perfect or less than, only the striving to be and to become. Each day becomes a pearl that tells of where we have been and of who we are as touched by sun and sorrow, by fire and cloud.

It is a teaching of this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat B’ha’alotcha*, a thematic thread unfolding that tells of journeys. When the people journeyed, the sanctuary traveled with them, so for us in all of our journeys, lovingly assembled and disassembled in each camping place along the way, a cloud covering it by day and a fire-like glow at night. The people did not travel at will, only when the cloud lifted, camping when the cloud settled. It is a tale of uncertainty that tells of life’s vagaries, *al pi ha’shem yis’u b’nei yisra’el v’al pi ha’shem yachanu/according to the utterance of God did the children of Israel journey forth and according to the utterance of God did they camp*. Perhaps hinting toward the meaning that is to be found in the place we are, the Torah says, *Even when the cloud remained over the dwelling place for many days, the children of Israel kept that which had been given to them by God to keep/v’shamru v’nei yisra’el et mishmeret ha’shem*. It is a hint toward the meaning that is to be found in simply being in the place where we are.

It does not mean that we are to celebrate, theologically cruel to suggest, events that have brought us to a place of pain. If it is a time of great difficulty, it means only that we are yet to see our own worth and meaning, our own purpose even in that time, the possibility of light yet to emerge, yet to keep the keeping of God. Nachmanides, the Ramban, seems to draw as much from life as from Torah in describing Israel’s yearning to move on from a hard place, a place of difficulty in

which much time is spent, *and that place was not good in their eyes and how they desired and yearned to travel from the place/ v'ha'makom ha'hu eynenu tov b'eynehem v'hayu chafa'tzim u'mit'avim m'od linso'a min ha'makom.*

Of those places in life from which we yearn to leave, of those encampments from which the cloud seems never to rise, the dear Slonimer teaches: *for surely in one's life... there are times that illumine and times that shadow.../yesh z'manim m'irim v'yesh z'manim cha'shu'chim/and so it is to know that the shadow times are as light..., that also in the times of darkness there is to each one a task and purpose, and a way of holy service/yesh yi'ud v'tafkid v'seder avodah/as in the times that illumine....*

Even in the hard times, the “harsh passages” of our lives, we are still who we are, our lives still have purpose and meaning as keepers of God’s way. That every person has a unique task and purpose in this world is the central theme of the Slonimer Rebbe’s teaching. Our own task and purpose, the essence of who we are is still just as real in the hard times. Each place of our camping along the journeys of life informs something of who we are. Each day of our lives is as one pearl upon the strand, each one needed if all are to remain and tell of where we have been. From each place we look toward the light that shines beyond and even from within the very place we are, life’s goal and purpose found in each moment in the way of our living it.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor