

Dear Chavraya,

I was startled by what I found in the firm, brown envelope that came in the mail recently. Enclosed in a letter that offered explanation, I immediately recognized with a gasp the small, black plate with white letters as I drew it from the envelope. The white letters, all in caps, said, RABBI'S STUDY. The white of the letters was a bit more yellowed than I recalled. The black of the background was scuffed and scratched. The thin white line around the edges of the plaque was worn away in several places. Some eight inches by two inches, the plaque had been on the door to my rabbi's study, Rabbi Meyer Finkelstein, *zichrono livracha/may his memory be for a blessing*. And so it is.

With the closing of the old shul recently, Temple B'nai Israel in the Beachmont section of Revere, homes were sought for all the items that told of so many journeys of people and time. The letter was from two people shepherding the transition, the president and a board member, Debby and Howie. Howie wrote, "We have been finding new homes for parts of Temple B'nai Israel. Remembering your story about being inspired by Rabbi Finkelstein in his study, Debby and I thought you might be interested in the enclosed plaque which graced the door to the Rabbi's Study." Of journeys through generations, all playing out in a building that was such an important part of my early years and onward, Howie's father and my father were childhood friends in Roxbury. I still laugh when I remember how Howie's father would tell me after the Friday evening service that his name is Moishe Pipik, Moishe belly button.

Of laughter and life, it was the deeper encounter with life that happened in Rabbi Finkelstein's study. When I was a junior in high school, Rabbi Finkelstein had somehow become aware that I was registering for the draft as a conscientious objector. I will never know for sure how he had heard of my wrestlings, though I assume my mother must have shared with him her pride and concern for her son. I was planning to make my case on humanist grounds. Rabbi Finkelstein contacted me and suggested that we learn together, that perhaps I would come to shul on Shabbos morning and afterward we would talk. I remember seeing that small black plaque with white letters on the door to his study as we entered. I was mesmerized by the magic of that small room. I was transfixed by the large folio volume of Talmud that he opened on the desk between us. I do not remember exactly where we traveled in the holy books, but I remember the words that seemed to keep appearing that taught the importance of peace and the peacemaker.

I made my case for conscientious objection on Jewish grounds, writing proudly as a Jew, the Jewish grounding of my life path having been set. It was my first encounter with adult Jewish learning and its possibilities for touching souls, as my soul had been touched. The volume of Talmud before us was its own teaching, a large, brown volume printed in pre-war Poland. The holy book itself told a story of my people, a people I felt drawn to embrace in a way I never had before, through Torah. I had come to my Rabbi's Study to learn how to speak as a Jew to the violence in the world all around us. In so learning, I was drawn to my people and to a deeper journey that coursed through my veins and told of who I am.

This is the week of *Parashat Mattot-Massei* (Numb. 30:2-36:13), a double portion that tells of our people's journeys. From leaving Egypt until arriving in the Land of promise, the Torah never describes a single journey, but tells of many journeys unfolding one from another. By tradition, forty-two journeys are enumerated. The word *matteh*, singular of *mattot*, can mean *staff, rod, branch, or tribe*, each tribe as a branch on a greater tree. Also meaning to stretch out, to extend, or incline, the verbal root of this word, *nattah*, becomes *nattah ohel / to pitch a tent*.

The names of these two parshiot tell in their own meaning of journeys, of our comings and goings in life. *Massei* means *journeys, journeys of the children of Israel/massei v'nei yisra'el*.... The verbal root *nasah* means literally *to pull out or up*, as in to pull up the tent pegs to begin the next journey. This portion, which concludes the fourth book of the Torah, *Bamidbar*, enumerates the journeys, our journeys, often telling with small vignettes of what happened in a particular place, of life unfolding as we made our way, of place names simply to remind and awaken memories. *Leaving Egypt...., they journeyed from Ramses and camped in Sukkot.... They journeyed from before Ha'chiroth and crossed through the midst of the sea.... They journeyed from Marah and came to Elim, and there were in Elim twelve springs of water and seventy date palms.... They journeyed from Kadesh and camped on Mount Hor...; Aaron the priest went up to Mount Hor at the command of God and he died there, in the fortieth year after the exodus of the children of Israel from the land of Egypt....*

Of journeys to be read as a telling about our own lives, the holy Ba'al Shem Tov teaches: *all the journeys were forty-two, and they correspond [to the journeys] of each person from the day of their birth until their return to their world.... It is to understand, that the day of one's birth and going out from one's mother's womb is in the aspect of the Exodus from Egypt...., and afterward one journeys from journey to journey until coming to the land of the living above/kach no'se'ah me'masah l'masah ad bo'oh l'eretz ha'chayim ha'elyonah...* (Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov).

As our own journeys interweave with those of our people, the stories of Torah become our own. As I made my way through this year's reading of *Parashat Massei*, I went to a shelf and drew down an old volume of Maimonide's *Moreh N'vuchim/Guide for the Perplexed*. It is a book that had belonged to Rabbi Finkelstein. Pausing to look at his name on the inside cover, as he had written it so long ago, I smiled and sighed as I opened to a page I had marked once before, journeys of coming and going through the years, ever returning. Maimonides explains here the importance of the stories in the Torah, explaining why all of the details are important, of how they offer teachings about life with which we are meant to wrestle and learn. He tells of the importance of how the tellings of Torah guide us on the path of repair, *la'tikun ma'aseh min ha'ma'asim/to the repair of [even] a single deed from among [all of our] deeds, ad she'lo yihi'yeh beyn b'nai adam avel v'chamas/until there shall no longer be among humanity injustice and violence...* (Moreh N'vuchim 3:50).

The seed that was planted in Rabbi Finkelstein's study continues to blossom. Through the same volumes that he once learned from, feeling his presence as I

turn the pages, he reminds me of that long ago lesson, you can be a conscientious objector to war, to injustice and violence on Jewish grounds. Looking at that small plaque of white letters on black, faded and scuffed by the journeys of life, I enter yet again, with life-long gratitude, my RABBI'S STUDY.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor

