

Dear Chavraya,

As we prepare to begin our family learning programs in the coming days, feelings well up as I think about how much effort goes into considering the values we teach through Torah. I think about the values that define our programs, seeking to inculcate our children with love and respect for each other and therefore for all whom they encounter in their lives. Through the years the question has often been innocently raised, without a hint of artifice, of how to love someone you don't know, or how to love someone who is mean to you. I have shared then the powerfully simple and profound teaching of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., "you don't have to like everyone, but you have to love them." This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tetze* (Deut. 21:10-:19), considers our responsibility to the "brother" who *is not near to you, or you do not know... / v'im lo karov achicha elecha v'lo y'dato...* (Deut. 22:2).

We spend much time talking about the importance of each one, the unique gifts that each one brings. It is the essence of the Slonimer Rebbe's teaching, who has joined us in class from time to time, emphasizing over and over again that no one else can do what you have been brought into the world to do. The fact of one's presence in the world is proof of their uniqueness. On this week's portion, the Slonimer teaches, *each person has their own unique task to fulfill/l'chol adam yesh tafkid m'yuchad she'tzarich l'malo/and for this they have come into the world/u'l'shem kach ba la'olam*. Emphasizing that every student, that each person, is living, walking, breathing Torah, we do not say our names until we have sung the b'racha for learning Torah.

For all of our efforts, without question for their importance, sometimes I sigh and wonder of their impact on a world so filled with violence. With unshakeable faith in the urgency to teach and inculcate goodness in children and in our selves, I weep for the ever so painful irony of what we teach in our simple family *beis medresh/house of study* and what the children see in so much of the world around them. I console myself with the awareness that we cannot know the impact of every act of kindness, of every act of decency, of every expression of moral courage on the world around us. Our children, with so many others who have been taught to love the good, represent the righteous ones through whose merit the world is sustained. The rabbis taught long ago that the world is sustained only through the breath of little children learning *b'veit rabban/in the house of their rabbi* (Tractate Shabbos 119b). Tears well up as I think of these words that are felt with particular resonance as parents and children gather on the floor and at the learning tables in our house of study. Hardly meant as theoretical, these words of the rabbis are crystallized into practice in the the *Laws of Teachers / Hilchos M'lamdim* in the *Shulchan Aruch/the "Set Table,"* central Code of Jewish Law.

The question of personal morality and decency, and the nature of each one's impact on the world, is surely not new. In regard to the doing of mitzvot as a way of acting in the world, a medieval writer of great piety offered timeless words of profound beauty and inspiration. Before we even open the *Sefer Ha'chinuch/the Book of Instruction*, a lesson on humility has been offered. It is a work whose author is unknown, whose name does not appear on the cover or on

the title page, emphasis only on essence. As pure as the breath of children learning, the way of this teacher's soul is offered as witness to the words on the page. So this humble teacher taught of the purpose of mitzvot, focused on the mitzvah at the end of the preceding portion, *Parashat Shoftim*, the mitzvah not to destroy fruit trees even in time of war. From that single commandment comes an entire category of law called *bal tashchit*, a prohibition against wanton destruction. From there the teacher's passionate concern flows into our portion, *Kit Tetze*, the portion that contains more mitzvot, seventy-two, than any other portion in the Torah.

From the medieval world so filled with violence and destruction, alas for human progress, our basest passions still untamed, our teacher soothes and offers words that speak to the very essence of our efforts to inculcate goodness. On the commandment not to wantonly destroy, speaking to the very purpose of all of the commandments, our teacher writes: *the root of the mitzvah is known, for it is to teach our souls to love the good/lilmod naf'shenu le'ehov ha'tov.../and from this you shall cleave to the good and we shall distance ourselves from every evil matter and from every matter of destruction, and this is the way of the pious ones, people of good deeds, lovers of peace; for they delight in the goodness of creatures and draw them near to Torah, and they do not destroy even a mustard seed in the world; and they are pained by every act of harm and destruction that they see; and if able to save something from destruction, so they do with all of their strength....*

With the humble teacher's breathtaking words as backdrop, we make our way through the portion until we come to its end. At the very end of *Parashat Ki Tetze* is the portion of Amalek, the desert chieftain who attacked Israel at the very rear of our line of flight as we left Egypt, attacking the young, and the old, and the infirm, all who were most vulnerable, and so they are today. Horrified by such callousness and brutality, the Torah says, *v'lo yareh Elokim/and did not revere God*. Beyond our assumption that the words are meant to refer to Amalek, on close reading it is not clear to whom, in fact, the Torah is referring as not revering God. Without a direct pronoun, it is not clear whether it is Amalek, as generally assumed, or was it, God forbid, as some commentators suggest, Israel, we ourselves? For how else could the weakest be left alone to fend for themselves?

From here, powerful teaching emerges that challenges us to look at ourselves in the mirror of Amalek. The *Kedushas Levi*, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, reflects on the commandment to *blot out the memory of Amalek/timche et zecher amalek*, as it comes to us at the end of this portion (Deut. 25:19). Unflinching, he directs each of us to blot out that portion of evil as called by the name "Amalek" that resides in our own heart. He notes that as long as the seed of Amalek shall be found in the world so shall evil exist. He then brings the teaching home most directly, reminding us of the rabbinic teaching that every single person is an entire world. Whether for good or for evil, the link is made between the world of each person and the world of all people: *adam gam ken olam katan/for the human is also a small world*, and of each human world he says, *l'cho'ach ha'ra b'chol adam/the potential for evil inheres in every person*. And so it is that evil is found in the world, because it is found in the small world that is each one of us. To rid the world of evil, we need to begin with ourselves.

As worlds merge, the great world all around and the small world that is each of us, the lesson is complete and we know the importance of the work we do. The entire world is held in the circle of children and parents, hope and inspiration for a more gentle and peaceful world, a world sustained by the breath of children learning.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor