

Dear Chavraya,

A favorite moment of the year comes for me on the day after Yom Kippur, and so it has for decades, as it did yesterday. I rented a truck and took a bow saw, an old Maine axe, and pruning shears and headed to the same woods I have gone to since the children were young. In those years they would come along and proudly walk through the woods holding the axe and saw. I didn't use pruning shears then, and while I primarily use pruning shears now, I still take along the axe and the saw as emotional props, reminding me of the old ways and of my helpers now grown up. This annual outing is to gather *s'chach* for the sukkah, fir boughs to become the green roofing thatch for the roof of the sukkah. Such a wonderful word to say, *s'chach* is formed of a root meaning *to shade, to shelter, to protect*. Entering the forest, all of the trees become as *s'chach*, graciously offering of their shade and shelter.

I have been going to the same woods and the same place in the woods for years. I park by a rusted old fence, pressing it down with my boots and stepping over it. I make my way along a familiar path, carrying axe, saw, and pruning shears on my own now. I soon come to a stand of pine, the scent already touching the air, soon to be as perfume on my hands. Perhaps that is why I had forgotten to bring work gloves this year, better able to hold the scent of the forest and keep it with me. I put down my tools and pause, looking around at the trees and then up to the heavens, looking through the highest branches to the sky beyond, much as we are meant to be able to do from within the sukkah when we look up through the *s'chach*. I address the trees and offer a prayer of acknowledgement and gratitude, words inspired by the moment, varying somewhat each year according to my own sense of place and need. And so words emerged yesterday, as much as I recall them now that I am away from that place and moment: *Dear Trees of the forest, here we are again, I have come to be among you to gather s'chach for our sukkah. I am grateful to you for your selfless gifts of quiet majesty. As you help us, may we help you and all the beautiful creatures, the fauna and flora who are your neighbors and ours, needing each other. I thank you for the gift of your green boughs to provide s'chach to help in our fulfilling the mitzvah of the sukkah. May the sukkah that is of you and of us be a sukkah of peace to remind of the world we seek as a place of calm and peace, of cycles in life and time unfolding in nature's way, the way of the forest and of every tree that makes it so. Thank you.*

I then make my way, noticing trees I had cut from last year, trying to avoid those trees, not to overcut any one tree or area, perhaps my own way of forest management. So too, I try to cut only one or two branches from a single tree, proceeding in the way of an annual pruning. When I have gathered what seems to be enough, I gather up piles I have left along a path of my own marking. Pulling bundles of branches back to the truck, I leave my tools by a stump. When I have finished gathering, I return to my tools. I pause and consider the teaching of the stump by which they lie. The stump is hardly of wood anymore, almost entirely decomposed, a tree returning to the earth from which it has come, the forest reminding of the ways of people and trees, all part of the same cycle ever unfolding. As I walk, carrying my tools as props to remind of days past, the forest tells me to lift my eyes to the future, of days to come. I pause by a "nurse log" and smile at the beneficence to be learned in the forest, a tree of which little

remains, yet in its return to earth giving of itself to a small sapling rising from the old bough, nurtured by what was as it reaches for what will be. I sigh and smile, grateful for such gentle teachings of life in the afterglow of Yom Kippur. Touching my heart, I wave to the trees and make my way across the rusted old fence to the truck.

One verse in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ha'azinu* reminds ever so gently of damage done to earth and calls us to atone and make repair. At the very end of Moses' farewell song to the people, after which he will ascend the mountain and be gathered to his ancestors, his very last words call us to atone for damage done to earth, *v'chiper admato amo/and God's people will atone for God's earth*. As though anticipating the way we will come to damage earth, so we are called to the way of repair. Many translate the verse to read that God's earth will atone for God's people. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and early classical commentators point out, however, that the word atone in Hebrew agrees grammatically with God's people, not with God's earth. It is God's people, therefore, who as the ones who shall cause damage are the ones to bring repair.

Moses now ascends the mountain, where in death he shall be cared for by the Holy One, God as the *Chevra Kaddisha* to lovingly tend to the needs of the body's return to earth and the soul's return its source. Modeling the way of loving care for the dead, we learn from God the way of loving kindness that guides the work of every *Chevra Kaddisha* in caring for all of our dead, each one's life having been a song in many parts, as was the Song of Moses, as is the song of the forest. As each of our dead is gently placed into the plain pine box of return, scent of the forest and its cycles lingering yet, earth is sprinkled upon the one we have cared for, reminding that we are of the earth. Like the nurse log, we too return to the earth from which we have come, an eternal cycle that bids us look to the future and consider the needs of those who shall come along the trail after us. As though to so remind, the last words said by the *Chevra Kaddisha* to the dead are Moses' last words to all of us, *v'chiper admato amo/and God's people will atone for God's earth*. So may we honor the trees who give of their branches for *s'chach*, a promise of shelter for generations to come.

Shabbat shalom and Chag same'ach,  
Rabbi Victor