

Dear Chavraya,

I could not have realized the significance then of an early fall Sunday afternoon's journey in 1974 on the upper west side of Manhattan. I set out on foot to walk from my student apartment on West End Avenue to the spacious warmth of an apartment a world away further uptown on Riverside Drive. Bridging worlds across years of life and wisdom, I was going forth to encounter a part of myself for which, as a young rabbinical student, I sought grounding and context in Jewish tradition. Having discovered the Jewish Peace Fellowship, a Jewish pacifist organization that is part of the greater umbrella of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international religious pacifist organization, I had been put in touch with an elder rabbi and pacifist, Rabbi Isidor Hoffman, to whom I journeyed on that day.

I had begun to explore Jewish teachings of nonviolence in high school with my rabbi, Rabbi Meyer Finkelstein, *zichrono livracha/his memory be a blessing*, as part of claiming conscientious objection to the draft. As a college student during the Vietnam era, I was further exposed to nonviolence as a way of life and, from that grounding, a way of social change. Drawn as a rabbinical student more fully to pacifist thought, I now sought deeper understanding of Jewish teaching to support what was becoming a central part of my life and being. Rabbi Hoffman, *zichrono livracha*, had been the Jewish chaplain at Columbia University for more than thirty years prior to his retirement. Most importantly, he was a pacifist and one of the founders of the Jewish Peace Fellowship.

It is in the context of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Lech L'cha* (Gen. 12:1-17:27), that I often recall Rabbi Hoffman's warmth and graciousness and the depth of his impact on my thinking as it continues to this day. My encounter with Torah as a sourcebook for nonviolence, a context, a proving ground and laboratory of life in which to wrestle with choices and ways of response to violence, began on that afternoon in the apartment on Riverside Drive to which I had journeyed. *Parashat Lech L'cha* begins with those words spoken by God to Avram. The two-word phrase is on one hand a strong imperative to go forth. On the other hand, it is mesmerizing in its layers of meaning. Translated literally, as done most fully in Chassidic teaching, it means *go to yourself*. In that way it becomes a call to discover yourself, to journey into the world and discover your own path and place. The journey of the Jewish people that begins with Avram and Sarai is recapitulated in the journeys of each of our lives as we discover our path and purpose in this world. *Parashat Lech L'cha* is the starting point of the Slonimer Rebbe's signature theme, that each one of us has a unique task and purpose in the world that no one else can do: *no other person is able to repair what devolves upon their fellow to repair. And thus, every person has their own task and purpose through which they are to bring repair in their lifetime/she'l'chol adam yesh et yi'udo v'tafkido oto alav l'taken b'chayav*.

Down through the years, as Avram goes forth with his large family together with his nephew Lot, great herds of livestock between them, a transitional moment is reached. We stand with them at a divide that is meant to teach of our own task and purpose in life, a moment in which to consider how our own way of *tikun* for which we have come into the world might contribute toward the bridging of

divides among people. As the Slonimer teaches, none of the stories in the Torah are meant as simple stories, *ayn sippurei d'varim b'alma / not merely as words of stories*. So we come to a moment fraught with possibility and risk, a teaching story that Rabbi Hoffman invited me to enter as a participant on that fall day of a long ago journey, from Riverside Drive to a desert land of human strife no different than our own.

The Torah tells us, *v'lo nasa otam ha'arets lashevet yachdav/and the land was not able to bear them that they might live together because their wealth was too great and they could not live together...* (Gen. 13:6). It was to Avram's response in this moment that Rabbi Hoffman directed me. The expected response in most contexts of strife, particularly in regard to land, is that the adversaries would fight, that battle would surely ensue, and yet, there would be no battle between Avram and Lot. The Torah points out, *so there arose strife between the herdsmen of Avram's herds and the herdsmen of Lot's herds*. Avram then says, *please let there be no further discord between me and you..., because, after all, we are kin...; is not the whole land open before you...? If you go to the left, I will remain at the right; if you go to the right, I will remain at the left."*

Avram had modeled another way of response to conflict. Though imperfect in its requiring separation, Avram showed himself to be courageous and confident enough to cede ground in order to gain ground. Ceding ground of rock and soil, he gained the high ground of peace and reconciliation. It is an essential principle of nonviolence, offering the unexpected to throw an opponent off balance and thereby offset a violent response, described in nonviolence literature as "moral jiu-jitsu" (Richard Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*). That we are all kin underscores the irony of ever raising the sword against another. This was the essential teaching that Rabbi Hoffman helped me to see on that day, though I had only understood part of the story. Through the years, though clearly a teaching story, I had understood the incident of Avram and Lot as a single incident, of which there are many similar ones in the Torah. As I have come to read Torah as a sourcebook for wrestling toward nonviolence, a web of internal connection has emerged that joins what appear to be singular incidents and sets them in the full context of Torah. As stories that teach an underlying ethos, they are no longer singular incidents, but are part of an overarching and integrated whole. I have sought to set such stories within a Torah ethos of nonviolence, each story and incident as part of a flowing stream of nonviolence that begins with God's gentle breath upon the water that birthed a world into being.

Further questions beg to be addressed. In the ambiguities of its teaching stories and of what is left unsaid, it is the way of Torah to challenge prior assumptions, whether in regard to Torah itself or in regard to life, which is the very context of Torah as *Torat Chayyim/the Torah of Life*. What if Lot had chosen to settle in the other direction, and Avram had to face the violence and cruelty of Sodom and Gomorrah, the wicked cities to which Lot had attached himself? As Avram become Abraham later argues with God on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, had he by circumstance lived among them, might he have found a way to speak to their hearts and weave strands of a common humanity through which change might have come? Or, in the way of quiet resistance, would he

have sought only to preserve his own humanity in the face of all that would challenge it? We are left to think about what we would have done, and about what is ours to do in seeking to challenge violence and resolve the conflicts in our own lives and times.

With this year's reading of *Lech L'cha* and in reflecting on Rabbi Hoffman's teaching and its abiding importance to me, I have come to see new and deeper connections in Avram's modeling of another way. Seeking their company and comfort, I have met commentators along the journeys from Riverside Drive who wrestle with one of the questions that has troubled me. Why did Avram and Lot need to separate? An ancient midrash suggests that it was *because of the judges that were among the shepherds / mipnei ha'dayanim she'ha'yu beyn ha'ro'im* (Torah Sh'laymah). There were none with the wisdom and understanding by which to adjudicate the differences among them. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a powerful teaching from nineteenth century Germany, challenging us to consider what it means to share resources and to quite literally find common ground: *It was not because they had too many herds or because there was not sufficient pasture land for both of them. If all had been combined into one herd, one household, the land would have been sufficient....*

In learning to live together, to be as kin, however much we struggle, in the way of Avram and Lot, and so too in relation to the land itself, then the land will be able to bear us. The rabbis offered the Land of Israel as a model, a place of great strife and great hope through time. As the very place of Avram's ceding of ground to gain ground, they offered a beautiful teaching and a name for the Land of Israel that desperately calls to be reclaimed and renewed today. The rabbis compared the Land of Israel to a deer, calling the land *Eretz Ha'tzvi/Land of the Hart*. The name of a book by Arie Lova Eliav published in the shadow of the Yom Kippur War, it is an ancient vision made new, yet to be fulfilled: *just as the skin of the hart cannot hold its flesh, so the Land of Israel when it is inhabited can provide space for everyone, but when it is not inhabited it contracts...* (Gittin 57a).

Continuing the journey that began with its first steps on that early fall day in New York, the legacy of Rabbi Hoffman's teaching continues to unfold for me. Even then, Rabbi Hoffman made the connection between a Torah model of reconciliation and peace between Jews and Arabs, a conflict between peoples that already seemed endless in 1974, the same year *Land of the Hart* was published. As lessons from the Land of the Hart, out of the strife between the herdsmen of Lot and the herdsmen of Avram, Torah lived in real time, a nonviolent way is offered toward the resolution of conflict. Encountering nonviolence as a stream that flows through Torah, each story joined as part of a greater whole, the land itself waits to expand in our ability to be present together. Learning from those who came before, we are guided to discover the way of repair that is uniquely our own, each one needed, that every place shall become as the Land of the Hart.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor