

Dear Chavraya,

Journeys in the world become journeys in Torah, and journeys in Torah become journeys in the world. It is thus that Torah is called *Torat Chayyim/Torah of Life*, or *Living Torah*. On my way downtown last night, entering the subway station I stopped at the automated kiosk to put more money on my Charlie Card. As I stood there, following the machine's prompts, trying to offer pleasantries even if they weren't returned, a man clearly in need came up to me and asked if I could spare a few dollars. I offered some pleasantries to him as well, though after a brief exchange I'm not sure if I didn't prefer the non-response of the machine, a thought that itself made me sad. I realized that I didn't have any small bills, just two larger ones. I apologized to the man, explaining that I didn't have anything that I could give him. I was awkwardly holding my wallet in one hand and my Charlie Card and a credit card in the other. He became rather agitated and abusive, raising his voice, pointing to my wallet and saying he could see that I had money. After a short time, he snarled at me and stormed away cursing at what in that moment, I am pained to think he must have felt as my lack of kindness.

Later that evening, as I made my way to the T for the trip home, a man approached me as I stood at a busy downtown street corner waiting to cross. He too was clearly in need, making me wonder of what lessons I was meant to learn on this journey of street corner and subway station Torah. A large, bearded man, his voice almost jovial, he extended his hand as he asked, "can you help me out brother?" I sighed, feeling particularly pained, knowing nothing had changed in my wallet, offering apology and good wishes as the light changed. He smiled and wished me well, his words received as a blessing. Suddenly, I stopped as I stepped into the street, turning and hurrying after the man as he stepped from the other corner. I asked him if he could wait a moment and I would run into a store right there on the corner. He smiled and said, "sure, brother." I went into the store and waited a few minutes in line until I could ask the cashier to change one of the bills in my wallet. It wasn't as big as I had thought it was, making me wonder if I should just have given it to the first man, or at least to the jovial man waiting outside. Having already gotten change, I came out and gave a few dollars to the man. We shook hands and again he wished me well. There was not much difference in his jovial demeanor and warmth from when he had blessed me earlier, even though I had given him nothing. We had now each given something to the other, though I felt that I had received more.

As I continued on my way to the subway station, lost in thought, I tried to understand the two different responses, really the four different responses that had played out in my interactions with the two men, messengers of God meant to awaken something within me. There were two very different responses to me from each of the men, and there were two very different responses from me to each of the two them. I wondered if I had failed to find some way beyond words to have shown kindness to the first man. So too, I wondered how much his gruff and abrasive manner had affected me, causing me to shut down the flow of *chesed/loving-kindness* from me to him. To the degree, sadly, that the manner of the first man may have influenced my response in a negative way, the manner of the second man may have influenced my response in a positive way. Taken

together, a teaching on the way of encounter emerges, the way of words and manner to touch the heart of another.

As I walked, comforted in knowing that at least now there were smaller bills in my wallet, I reflected on this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chayyei Sarah* (Gen. 23:1-25:18). The name of the *parsha* means the *Life of Sarah*, yet it opens telling of her death. Death becomes the ultimate lens through which we learn about kindness. As Avraham looked after the needs of his beloved wife, bringing words of eulogy and tears, purchasing and preparing a burial place, we see enacted the greatest love, that for which there can be no words of appreciation, deeds therefore described as *chesed shel emes/deeds of loving-kindness and truth*. The words *chesed/loving-kindness* and *emes/truth* appear a number of times in the portion, underscoring the nature of our deeds as the true measure of life, deeds of kindness as markers of truth along the path formed of our days. This is how we are to understand the poignant phrase in the *parsha*, *Avraham was old, he had come through the days/Avraham zaken, ba ba'yamim* (Gen. 24:1).

Of kindness as the light upon our path, that which makes our days truly count, the Slonimer Rebbe offers a beautiful and challenging teaching on these words that describe Avraham as coming through the days. Reminding us that Avraham is associated with the attribute of *chesed*, the Slonimer teaches that to come through the days means to do an act of kindness every day, *she'b'chol yom tzarich la'asot ma'aseh chesed/for in each day one needs to do an act of loving-kindness....* Bringing home the point by way of warning and challenge, the Rebbe says, *d'yom she'eyno oseh bo chesed, lo nech'shav k'yom b'chayav/a day in which one does not do an act of kindness is not considered as a day in one's life....* In relation to *ahavah* as love between people in relationship with one another, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch describes such *chesed/loving-kindness* as love translated into action. In that way, *chesed* can be expressed and activated in relation to those whom we love in our lives as family and friends and in relation to those whom we love as fellow human beings, all of those who teach us living Torah on street corners and in subway stations.

As I sat on the train coming home, quietly reflecting on unexpected teachers in unexpected places, as in "The Sound of Silence," Simon and Garfunkel continuing to remind, "the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls." I opened my phone to learn *Daf Yomi/the Daily Page* of Talmud. Following a seven year cycle, now in its thirteenth cycle, Jews throughout the world learn the same page on the same day, joined across time and space by ancient words as new as the light-emitting device held in my hand. I smiled with delight as I encountered the beautiful teaching that a child in utero knows the entire Torah, all of which is forgotten when an angel taps upon the upper lip as we emerge into life (Masechet Niddah 30b). In the warmth of rabbinic telling, the small cleft above the upper lip known as the "philtrum," a word I learned from my dad the scientist (z"l) long ago, reminds of learning left behind, womb wisdom meant to become world wisdom. As the train rumbled along, I then read of the oath that a child is made to swear before leaving the womb, an admonition from the beginning, from before we can know its import, that is meant to follow

us through life: *t'hi tzadik v'al t'hi rasha/become a righteous person and not a wicked one....*

As journeys in the world become journeys in Torah, and journeys in Torah become journeys in the world, street corner wisdom and subway station Torah, so I made my way and wondered of my interactions that night. I wondered of kindness shown to one and not to another, if somehow each was part of a greater whole meant to help me learn the Torah of life. As each person's soul is admonished to be righteous upon entering this world, our deeds of loving-kindness become fulfillment of the promise. Expanding our own self-righteous sense of what it means to be righteous, we learn to embrace others who also promised, and in their own way fulfill, teachers we might otherwise fail to meet at the street corners and subway stations of life.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor