

Dear Chavraya,

I have wanted to write for some time about the Torah of transitions, about the stories, the teachings, the insights and emotions that emerge as we make our way forward as *Nehar Shalom*, each of us and all of us. I admit that I often find it easier to just keep going with the day-to-day needs of community and life. The day-to-day needs continue and need to be addressed. That is the essence of who we are as a community. At the same time, it is important to be able to talk about how we are feeling, of our concerns, our fears and frustrations, our joys and excitement, our hopes and prayers. In the midst of so much good that is unfolding and of so much that needs to happen, the emotions that we carry often get put to the side. With this letter, I want to acknowledge the fullness of the journey that we are on and all that we carry as we make this journey to the future.

I had thought that I would wait a bit longer still to write of our transitions, but then we came to this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Yitro* (Ex. 18:1-20:23), and I felt moved to share some thoughts now, even as I am sure that I will share more further along on the path. *Parashat Yitro* is in its essence about community, its organization and its challenges, its meaning and its beauty. At the outset of the portion, with the very first word, in fact, a question is raised. Moses' father-in-law is moved to come and visit his son-in-law and to bring Moses' wife, Tziporah, to her husband, and his children to their father. The portion opens with the words, *va'yish'ma yitro/and Yitro heard....* Much is asked about what it is that Yitro heard. This is a question for us as we seek to receive the Torah of transitions, teaching that will help us make our way. What is it that we hear, within ourselves and through the stories that are told about the legacy that is ours? At whatever point we became part of the journey of *Nehar Shalom*, the stories belong to all of us, even as we create new stories.

As we hear the stories that come of our own experiences and as told by others, we come to know of our essence as a community that has worked mightily to be a place where all are welcome. We have sought to be a synagogue community that unabashedly has woven together traditional Jewish practice with progressive social and political values. We have underscored the meaning of inclusivity and equality in all realms in eschewing a set dues structure and High Holy Day tickets. One of my greatest joys has been to welcome strangers on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur and to soothe their discomfort, assuring them that they belong. As we follow the River of Peace that flows out into the world and joins us to other communities and peoples and needs, so we look after the needs of those among us, kindness made manifest in the pursuit of justice and the comforting of those who mourn.

In the way that Yitro heard, so do we need to listen deeply to the soul of who we are, pausing to hear the river song and our own part in it. For all of the ache that I feel in stepping back from leading this community that I love, I try to hear as Yitro did something that is deeper than the details, something deeper than place and person. *Nehar Shalom* represents an idea and values that need to be lovingly tended. We have together brought something very special into the Jewish world and the world that is all around us. It needs all of us to carry forward the vision

and to give shape to the way if the values we have nurtured shall blossom into the future.

We know well that it doesn't just happen, that goodness and possibility don't just emerge. How different the world would be if that were so. And yet, how much more beautiful in our making it so. Yitro sees all that Moses is doing and he worries, telling Moses in effect that he is doing too much and will burn out: *What you are doing is not good. You will surely become weary, you, as well as this people that is with you, for this thing is too difficult for you. You cannot carry it out all alone...* (Ex. 18:17-18). Yitro then gives such important advice to Moses, telling him how to create structures of shared responsibility and leadership. I think of our own community, of all the holy work that so many people are doing to carry us forward to the new place in our becoming who we are and yet can be. There is always need for more hands, for more hearts and more minds, needs becoming invitations that call on each one's gifts to come forward. Each one is needed and each one is important.

One of the most beautiful expressions of who we are and can be when gathered together in common purpose and caring comes in this portion of Yitro. As we arrive at the edge of Sinai, about to receive the Torah that gives purpose to our freedom, God says to all of us as one: *you shall be to me a 'kingdom' of priests and a holy nation/v'atem ti'hi'yu li mam'lechet kohanim v'goy kadosh!* In the way that the Slonimer Rebbe teaches, that each person has their own unique task and purpose in this world, so in this community, each one is needed if we are to play our part in being a 'kingdom' of priests and a holy nation. The blessing of each one's presence is needed, each one as a *kohen* to guide the way. As we make our way on the journey of *Nehar Shalom* each one brings something that is uniquely needed if *Nehar Shalom* shall fulfill its potential as a needed part of a people struggling to fulfill its own holy potential.

God understood, as did the rabbis, and as do we, that it is not easy to make transitions. It is not easy to take the next step in a great journey. Introducing the challenge and call to be a 'kingdom' of priests and a holy nation is one small word, *v'atah/and now...* On that small word, a poignant teaching emerges, a teaching that speaks to the *now* of every challenge: *And now..., take it upon yourselves now. For all beginnings are difficult/kol hat'chalot kashot.* I first heard that teaching from my dear relative Benny as I sought to find my way in New York as a bewildered first year rabbinical student. *Vicky*, said Benny, *kol hatcholos koshos.* And so I continue to hear it in the way that he said it, his Yiddish accent so warm and encouraging, yes, all beginnings are difficult, and you will make it, you will find the purpose and meaning toward which you strive..., keep going.

As we come to Mount Sinai and the giving of Torah in this ever so full portion of Yitro, we stand together to hear the Ten Commandments. As the rabbis wondered what Yitro heard, so they wondered what each one of our people at Sinai heard in that moment so filled with awe. Drawing on Psalms (29:4), they note with delight the strange formulation of how God's voice was heard at Sinai, *kol ha'shem ba'ko'ach/God's voice was in the strength.* Noting that in its ambiguous tone *the strength* is not about God, but rather about us. God was heard at Sinai,

the rabbis teach, *ba'ko'ach shel kol echad v'echad/in the strength of each and every one*. The rabbis later explain that to mean that the Torah was heard according to each one's own unique way of hearing, according to each one's unique experience and way of being in the world. In order to hear the Torah in its fullness, we need each other.

As we make our way forward, sharing among us each one's own way of hearing and being, may we learn from each other the Torah of transitions. For all of the difficulties of new beginnings, there is also the sweetness of accomplishment, and the opportunity to know deep meaning and possibility. I look forward to sharing more along the way, yes, acknowledging concerns, feeling at times nostalgic and wistful, perhaps overwhelmed for all there is to do, yet wrapping all of that in our hopes and joys and in pride for all that has already been accomplished. I look forward most of all to becoming in time one of the *kohanim* among a 'kingdom' of priests, all of whom together make us a *holy nation*, and so for us in microcosm, a *kehillah k'dosha/a holy community*, the ever unfolding community of *Nehar Shalom*.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor