

Dear Chavraya,

As we make our way through this strange and difficult time, we find new strengths and new opportunities. We learn to draw from our own inner wells and are blessed in realizing that they are deeper and richer than we might have thought before. We laugh, we cry, we sigh and sing, wondering how long this might all be. Our vulnerability, as we open up to it more honestly, perhaps, than at other times, becomes its own source of strength and insight. We are strong, even when not. We are resilient, even when, especially when, we are strong enough and brave enough to ask for help. We are here for each other, and that is the hallmark of community, now and always.

We understand the necessity of “social distancing,” and we rebel at the very thought. Many have sought other ways to frame the need of being apart for the sake of health. A local hospital director suggested, as others have, that we speak of it as “physical distancing.” Socially, we are deeply connected, even if physically apart. I have thought of certain words and their wisdom these days received from my dear mother, her memory be a blessing, offered in a very different context. As we gathered at the airport, about to return to Victoria, British Columbia and take my parents’ grandchildren across the continent and more, my mom would say through the tears she valiantly tried to choke back, “you can live next door to each other and be far apart, and you can live far apart and be very near to each other.” That is how I am trying to see these days, acknowledging, at times through tears, the pain of being physically apart from each other in all the ways of our gathering as a community, and yet, because we are a community, being so close to each other.

Community and closeness is a deep thread that wends through and weaves the tapestry of this Shabbos, the garb of the *Sh’china*, of the Shabbos queen as she arrives on this Shabbos. Three interwoven themes of community and wholeness become as one this week. This week’s Torah portion, a double portion to insure there are enough to go around in a non-leap year, is *Parashat Vayakhel-P’kudei*. It is the quintessential portion of community in the Torah. *Vayakhel* is a verbal form of the word for community itself, *K’hilah*, from the verb to gather and to include, all of us gathered and included as one. It is a portion bursting with excitement as the *Mishkan/the desert sanctuary* is completed. The people are all involved, bringing so much of their own most precious belongings as offerings of the heart for the building of the *Mishkan* that the chief artisans, B’tzalel and Oholi’av plead for the people to stop bringing, already having more than enough. The enthusiasm in working for the collective good is palpable. Through wisdom, skill, generosity, and inclusion the goal is accomplished, *l’chaber et ha’ohel li’h’yot echad/to join the tent together so that it should become one* (Ex. 36:18).

It is ultimately not about the tent becoming one, but about our becoming one. It is made clear in the blessing of the new moon that also gives of its themes to this Shabbos. Of themes interwoven, this Shabbos is *Shabbos M’vorchin/the Shabbos of Blessing*, the Shabbos before *Rosh Chodesh/the new moon*, when we bless the coming month. It too is about becoming one. Looking to the heavens, we learn of oneness in the moment of the astronomical Rosh Chodesh, the moment called the *Molad/birth*, the birth of the new moon, of new possibility and hope. With great

fanfare, as I like to do it in Yiddish, we announce the time of the *molad*, the most perfect of moments in which end and beginning are as one in the complete alignment, the conjunction, of the sun, the moon, and the earth. In that moment we cannot see the moon, for it is hidden, the light of the sun unable to glance off of it. That moment has been for Jews throughout time a moment of faith renewed, knowing in the face of all difficulties that the moon would re-emerge and journey again toward fullness, so calling us to trust that we too would do the same and journey again toward fullness. In announcing Rosh Chodesh, we draw on the same word of joining as in the joining of the *Mishkan* as one, *l'chaber/to join*, singing out, *chaverim kol Yisrael/all Israel are joined as friends*. In the siddur of the Holy Ari, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, z"l, the blessing of the new moon indeed ends with the words from our parsha, *May we be redeemed with eternal redemption, to join the tent together so that it should become one*.

And this Shabbos is also *Shabbat Ha'Chodesh/the Shabbos of the month*, the last of the four special Shabbatot that precede the month of Nisan and the coming of Pesach. Each of the four offers of its own theme to help us prepare for the freedom journey that we are about to make together. With *Shabbos Ha'Chodesh* we prepare to set out on the journey. In the ancient land of Israel, representatives from communities all around the land prepared now to set out on the journey to Jerusalem to be there for Pesach. Even when we can't all journey together, we do, all joined as one even when apart, all near, joined as friends, like the sun, the moon, and the earth, like the *Mishkan* become one. The additional Torah portion read in shuls throughout the Jewish world on this Shabbos morning, in the times when we can gather and be in shul, bids us to look ahead. As we read from Exodus, chapter twelve, verses 1-20, the rabbis delineate two P'sachim, two Passovers. The first is the Pesach that was the actual Exodus, the going out from Egypt that is called *Pesach Mitz'rayim/the Pesach of Egypt*. The other is the Pesach observed every year by every generation ever since that is called *Pesach l'dorot/Pesach of the Generations*. The rabbis speak of a third Pesach that will only come through time in the unfolding of the generations if we take our part in its birthing, we as the midwives in bringing *Pesach l'Atid/Pesach of the Future*, time of the complete redemption, time of swords turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks.

It is so hard to imagine Pesach this year, and yet we shall, and in our thinking, our praying, and our sharing from the heart, we shall look ahead toward *Pesach l'Atid/Pesach of the Future*. Pesach of the Generations as we observe it in the coming years will feel like Pesach of the Future simply in our being able to be together, remembering when we could not be. On this Shabbos of *Shabbat Ha'Chodesh* we look ahead, keeping faith that we shall make the journey and that we shall arrive and say *mir zeinen doh/we are here*. We shall look to the moon and know that like the moon, we too shall return to fullness. And in the call to community as in the name of this week's Torah portion, *Vayak'hel*, we shall remember and affirm that we are a *k'hillah k'dosha/a holy community*. In this time of physical distance from each other, we are yet very near.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor