

Dear Chavraya,

Living in diverse realities, we try to make sense of each. Seeking the wisdom that each one offers, to know the unique teaching of each journey and place along the way, we yet try to identify that which is constant from journey to journey. The constants offer a strand to hold from one reality to another, from one journey to another, one world to another. In the constants we recognize ourselves, soothed by the familiar, by that which doesn't change. We are challenged by what does change, that which is new and different, that which defines a reality we haven't known before. Knowing that all is part of the greater reality of life and its seasons, perhaps we can draw comfort even from that which is different, from that which represents change from one reality to another. Even when unsettling, change is part of a greater whole, a greater reality, itself a constant. Each subsequent reality is no less real than what came before, its own virtues there for us to discover in time, and so to wrestle with its challenges. One way or another, each new reality becomes home, for however long we may therein abide.

There is one word that I have come to resent, to rail against, in our current reality. It is perhaps the most frequently used word other than "Zoom." It is the word "virtual." I find myself beginning to decry this word, even impolitely interrupting its almost being said. I find myself suggesting, at times too forcefully, that there is no such thing as "virtual," only different ways of being real. From a dictionary search, the word to be avoided is from the Latin "virtus," meaning strength, virtue. Already, the word has denied itself in the way we use it to suggest that something is not real. Every moment has its own strength, its own virtue, therefore its own reality. Defined as "being so in effect or essence, although not in actual fact or name," that which is virtual is real in its own way, having its own essence.

When we meet on the screen, for instance, whether to learn, to pray, to work, our words are real, even if occasionally distorted. The words we say to each other carry the same emotional content; hold the same concerns, as if said in physical proximity. However much we wish we could be in the same place, our words still express who we are and the reality from which we speak, seeking to bridge the distance to another, hoping to elicit words that tell of the other's reality. We can be in the same place and still be distant, even made further apart if the needed words are not spoken, or hurtful ones instead. An online class is still a class, a gathering to comfort mourners still a vessel in which to hold tears in the interplay of words and silence. As much as I yearn to be back together, whether in the shtibl to pray, whether around the JP Licks learning table, I have been touched by a depth of connection among us in these days that is palpable and real.

Every reality, every place and moment in time and space, has its own Torah to teach, that which we can only learn in that particular moment. As much as we may wish to be free of a painful reality, it too has its own Torah to teach. In searching out a given moment's Torah, we become active shapers of the reality in which we find ourselves. We become seekers and makers of meaning, activists, rather than those passively buffeted by that over which we appear to have little control. That over which we have control is within us. So too, we have control in

the way we apply the constants, the knowledge and truths that we have carried and that have carried us from one reality to the next, one journey to the next, in the shaping of our lives. As our ancestors made their way from Egypt, the desert trek is never described as one journey, but is always referred to in the plural, teaching of life as a series of journeys. There are constants that we carry through the journeys of our lives, the journeys that have formed who we are and that have brought us to the journey of this time and place.

Learning the Torah of this time and of our journey through it, seeing Torah through the lens of life, our experiences offer a window into Torah itself, revealing new teachings about ourselves and about the world in which we live with others. Seeing life through the lens of Torah, long familiar teachings now turn in new ways, opening to new depths and applications. I have been startled before the breadth of teaching that emerges from Torah to guide us on the journey through this time of the pandemic. I have come to appreciate more deeply a beautiful teaching of the rabbis about Torah itself and our relationship with Torah and life, *hafoch ba hafoch ba d'kula ba/turn it, turn it, all is within it*. So we ask, what is the Torah that we are learning in this time? What are we learning about ourselves, about the world, about Torah and life in the turning of time?

I find myself continuing to wonder what it means to live in the moment and yet to look beyond it. In our physical isolation we come easily to feel trapped in this moment, so hard to look beyond, and yet that is what the experience of previous hard realities teaches us to do. There is nothing virtual in that, requiring strength and virtue to face and shape the reality of this time. It is all held in the tension between the names and realities of the two Torah portions that become one in guiding our way through this week. In the turning of Torah and life, this week's Torah portion is *Parashat Acharei Mot-K'doshim* (Lev. 16:1-20:27). Beginning with a looking back to a moment of great pain, the sudden death of the two sons of Aaron, *aharei mot* means "after the death...." In the word *acharei/after*, there is hope and encouragement, lifting our eyes and hearts to look ahead. Yes, we are in a hard reality, but we are bidden to look ahead to after this time.

Parashat K'doshim speaks both to the vision and the way, of the time to come and how to get there. The portion begins with one of the Torah's greatest challenges: *Be holy/k'doshim ti'h'yul/for I God your God am holy*. The way then opens before us, what seems to be an impossible challenge made real in human terms. Toward realizing the vision, *mitzvot* become as sign posts along the way. The commandments that follow the challenge to be holy bear almost entirely on our relationships in the human realm. In the way that we treat each other, so we come to affirm our relationship with God. After the shattering of life as we know it, whether for Aaron in facing the deaths of his sons, or for us yet held in the grip of the pandemic, we are still to look beyond and still to do justly. In good times and hard, from within the midst of harsh reality and after its passing, we are to leave the corners of our fields for the poor and landless, to leave the gleanings that fall from the plow, to pay workers on time, not to oppress, but indeed to love the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. The way to the vision fulfilled, from within this moment and beyond, unfolds through this

portion in the way of love as Rabbi Akiva's great principle of Torah, *and you shall love your neighbor as yourself/v'ahavta l're'acha kamocho*.

Love is never virtual, nor the caring of one for another. Life is real in all of its moments, abiding values joining us across distance and uncertainty. The values that we live and their ways of expression during this time are real, helping to soften the isolation and the worry. They are real now because they are always real, a bridge between now and then, the vision and the way. Love and caring are the constant that we know to be true, the strand we hold, if not each other's hand, in making our way from one reality to another, from this moment in time to the next. From journey to journey, each one real, in the way of our living in this moment, we learn to look beyond.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor