

Dear Chavraya,

Thoughts come unbidden, not always clear from where, like a bird on the wing, only to delight in their willingness to alight. Words of Torah danced before me, seeming to have a life of their own, which they do, finding it difficult to focus, to take them in, to make sense beyond the surface, beyond the familiar. A tune began to emerge, and then words coming to consciousness, *Dona, dona, dona, dona...*; and then more, as I found myself singing softly and crying, *on a wagon bound for market, there's a calf with a mournful eye, high above him flies the swallow winging swiftly through the sky....* As in a time warp, long years gone, I was sitting in a camp circle of a summer's night around the campfire. We were singing a song that has become part of the Jewish folk canon, and beyond, through the early singing of Joan Baez. It is a song filled with contradictions, tensions that did not touch me then, only the yearning and the beauty, the unfairness and the irony. The flames danced before us, the sound of a guitar; many voices as one, wholeness in the circle.

My eyes opened, as I alighted back at my desk, blinking, wondering still how it is that I had taken such flight. Through prism tears drying, I began to focus on the verse before me, *u'kratem dror ba'aretz l'chol yoshveha/and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants* (Lev. 25:10). There, in this week's Torah portion, a double portion, *Parashat B'har-B'chukotai* (Lev. 25:1-27:34), a verse familiar to all as holy words incised into the Liberty Bell, I saw the still quivering branch from which I had taken flight. The word for liberty, *dror*, is a word of layered meaning. It means "liberty," as in the freedom to take flight, to be free like a bird. And that is its other meaning, *dror*, a *sparrow*, a *swallow*.... I began to understand the thought that had come to me, carried through time on the word for liberty that can mean bird, as in sparrow or swallow; swallow, that was it, as in a long ago camp song and a circle of wholeness.

The refrain in the song is not one of wholeness, words that disturbed me long ago: *How the winds are laughing, They laugh with all their might, Laugh and laugh the whole day through, And half the summer's night...; Dona, dona, dona, dona....* "How cruel," I thought, "why would the winds be laughing so, rather than crying?" The tears that I had cried in flight through time were for both the wholeness and the brokenness, each remembered and felt again; warmth beyond the fire that touched an impressionable soul, the injustice of inequity, a bird so free, a calf bound on an altar as wagon bumping along through time; a later image of cattle cars unmistakable in the weeping mists of time. The song was originally published as a Yiddish theatre song in 1941, though I don't know if there was a conscious association with our people then as calves bound for the slaughter.

So it has ever been, wholeness and brokenness in painful dance, the swallow above, the bound and fettered below, the swallow calling us to sing its song of liberty. That is the call that we are meant to hear, that the Torah calls us to hear, *proclaim liberty throughout the land....* It is a song of health, of wholeness, of justice. Whether heard through the song of Torah, or as the peal of a great wounded bell with a crack in it from the very beginning, the call to justice is heard more often than not in the breach. The context of the Torah's call is one of wholeness, brokenness too in the portion, but not to laugh, only to sing for each

one's freedom, not mine alone, nor yours, but freedom for all together. The Torah sets out a plan to remind for whom the bell tolls, that it tolls for all of us, whether all shall be broken or all shall be whole, in the sacred cycle of seven, "free at last, free at last, thank God 'amighty, we are free at last...."

The call to proclaim liberty throughout the land follows immediately on the commandments for marking the seven-year cycle that brings us to the *Sh'mita/Sabbatical* year, when the land is to lie fallow, given its rest from all human use and abuse. In the seventh year, people, too, given rest from use and abuse, all to be free at last. There is to be no planting and no harvesting for gain, only to gather from the fields what grows of itself to sustain; landowner and stranger gathering together, rubbing shoulders as equals, aware now that the earth is the Lord's. And in the fiftieth year, to the sound of a great shofar, seven cycles of seven complete, land to return to original owners, debts released with release of the land, each one to return to family and home, at peace, a great circle by the fire.

In the tension between the whole and the broken, the free and the bound, neither we, nor the farmer understands. It is not to be one or the other, nor of blaming the bound; *"Stop complaining," said the farmer, "Who told you a calf to be? Why don't you have wings to fly with, Like the swallow so proud and free?" Dona, dona, dona, dona....* The Torah's call is expansive, in proclaiming liberty each of us is to feel the burden of the other's chains, to cry and then to fly: *Calves are easily bound and slaughtered, Never knowing the reason why, But whoever treasures freedom, Like the swallow must learn to fly...; Dona, dona, dona, dona....*

The message of Torah, for this time and always, is that we must learn to fly together if all are to be free. On our verse, *Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants*, the essence is brought home, brokenness merging into wholeness, in a remarkable teaching of Rabbi Ya'akov Yehoshua Falk, the *P'nei Yehoshua* (1680-1756): *It does not say for all of its slaves, but "for all of its inhabitants," for in a state in which there is no freedom even for the least of its inhabitants, all its inhabitants are enslaved. We experience freedom only when there is no slavery at all in the state. Slavery is a plague that afflicts both the slave and the master as one.... Thus, "and you shall proclaim liberty to all its inhabitants," for through the liberation of the bound, all inhabitants of the state shall become free.* The Torah's call for freedom as shuttled forth by the *P'nei Yehoshua* is a universal call carried through time on wings of the human spirit. It echoes through the Civil Rights movement, giving voice to other calls for liberation, words of Fannie Lou Hammer, "nobody's free until everybody's free;" and similarly of Rev. Martin Luther King; and so the earlier call of Emma Lazarus, as though commentary on the broken chains upon Lady Liberty's feet, "Until we are all free, we are none of us free."

It is that of which the sacred cycles of seven are meant to remind, freedom cannot be for one, but only for all, rubbing shoulders as equals in the fields of life. Through the lens of this time, in the harsh light of plague and pandemic, we see in stark relief the inequities that belie the verse upon the liberty bell. We see clearly now that all are not equal throughout the land and all are not free, and so none of us are. To proclaim liberty is to tear down the walls of injustice that block

the vulnerable and disenfranchised from entering the fields, the migrant, the poor, peoples of color, the undocumented, Bible's orphan, widow, and stranger. In the *haftorah* for this Shabbos, the prophet Jeremiah (17:11, 14) offers challenge to those who think by their privilege they are free, *one who gathers riches but not by right shall leave them in the midst of their days....* For the sickness that plagues society as it does the human body, Jeremiah then pleads, *r'fa'eni hashem v'eyra'fey/heal me, O God, then I shall be healed; help me, then I shall be helped, for You are my praise!*

May healing come to all of us, healing of body and spirit, of individual and society. When this plague finally lifts, may we all have a place in the circle, all to be warmed equally by the fire, each one celebrated for their own being and attributes, each to soar like the swallow, but in their own way. How mightily the winds will laugh then, only for joy.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor