

Dear Chavraya,

What shall we make of these days? What are the lessons that we shall learn? To realize that we have the opportunity to make something of our experience and to learn from what we are going through is empowering. In the midst of a reality over which we have so little control, there are choices that are ours to make. The way that we choose to respond to the situation in which we find ourselves becomes its own way of giving personal shape to a collective experience that at times threatens to overwhelm. Are these days of isolation and separation simply an interruption in the flow of our lives? Or can this time be a bridge that joins our days, the days as they were before and the days that shall come after? In the silent space of solitary experience, and yet of common pause, how shall we each search out the lessons and insights that are ours to scribe on the parchment of our lives?

It is a teaching that comes not with the words of this week's Torah portion, but in the silence that lies between words, a silence lovingly held in *Parashat Sh'mini* (Lev. 9:1-11:47). So in love with Torah down to its smallest details, the ancient scribes counted every letter and every word of Torah. So it is that in *Parashat Sh'mini* we know that we have come to the very middle of the Torah as marked by both letters and words. Of the middle in letters, the very middle of Torah is the letter *vav* in Vayikra 11:42, the letter *vav*, a letter of joining one to another, the conjunction *and*, here writ large, standing out from the midst of a word. And soon before that, marking the middle of the Torah in words, two words taken together. Moses is searching. It is a painful search, angry, disjointed, space opening in which to calm.

Moses has been searching, even frantically, for the goat of a sin offering, the goat meant to be ceremonially eaten by Aaron and his priestly sons as part of the rite of atonement on behalf of the people. Grieving for two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, struck down on a day of glory, killed before the altar for bringing "strange fire," the very words suggesting mystery, the incomprehensibility of human tragedy, Aaron is not in a state of mind and heart to consider eating a sacred meal. Dispensing with ritual in the absence of intention, he consigns the entire offering to the fire instead. To his brother's effort to explain the unexplainable, to give greater context as though to justify the unjustifiable, Aaron remains silent, *va'yidom aharon/and Aaron was silent* (Lev. 10:3). Aaron's silence points the way to a greater silence, the silence of the heart, the silence that is at the heart, that is the heart, silence that speaks louder than words.

As the scribes count the Torah's words, we come to the very middle, to the heart of Torah. The middle is formed of two words that tell of Moses' searching, *darosh* | | *darash/searching* | | *he searched*. Clearly, two words cannot form the middle of the Torah in words. The rabbis teach that *darosh* marks the end of the first half of the Torah, while *darash* marks the beginning of the second half of the Torah. The very middle of the Torah, therefore, is the silent space between the two words of searching. From that silent space, the very heart of Torah, we look back to search out all that has been, seeking to make sense, to distill wisdom; and

we look ahead, searching out glimmers of the future as it disappears into the unknown, sparks of faith dancing on the edge of uncertainty.

From the silent space that lies between, whether experienced as a pause in the journey or as a part of the journey, how to be in that place is a matter of choice. It is unsettling, if not frightening, to be in a place of pause, a place in which there are no words to guide, only words to encourage us to search, to really search, *darosh* | | *darash*. It is the place from which faith emerges if we tend its seed, watching over it, delighting in the gentle, joyful strength it gives. Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain, 1855-1926, Rebbe of Sochatchov, known as the Shem Mi'sh'muel, teaches on the silence of this parsha, the silence of the silent spaces of Torah and life, *d'mimah sh'murah al chizuk ha'emunah/silence protected is the strength of faith*. In silence, faith is nurtured if we allow it to be. From generations earlier in the Chassidic line, the Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Rebbe Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sadilikov, grandson of the holy Baal Shem Tov, taught of the creative possibilities that might emerge from silence, teaching that from that silent place of seeking emerges great insights of *torah she'b'al peh/Oral Torah*, the teachings of human struggle and engagement with Torah and life. Similarly did his nephew teach, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, opening us up to the depths of Torah to be found in the *challal ha'panu'i/the hollowed out space* of time set apart, when we can either sink into the depths, or make music as from a hollowed reed that becomes a *challil/recorder*.

That is where we are in these days, choices offered as gifts, choices become a living line to grasp as we journey into the music of silence. Of silence framed by words of searching, these days can be of meaning if we allow them to be. For all of the pain and worry, the loss and fear, endeavoring to do all that we can to help each other, it is yet for each of us to bravely enter the silence of our own hearts, as the Torah beckons us to enter its own innermost heart and there to be with the silence. This is not a time apart, but rather it is part of the journey of life, a time that bridges what came before and what shall come after. As words of Torah, each one lovingly counted, the days that came before are precious, and so shall be the days yet to come, even more so when touched by faith freshly nurtured in silence.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor