

Dear Chavraya,

My parents gave a precious gift to me at the time of my rabbinic ordination. One of my treasured possessions, it is a pocket watch that belonged to my grandfather, my father's father for whom I am named, my grandfather who died soon after my father's Bar Mitzvah. He had purchased the watch second hand in Old Orchard Beach, Maine, where he had gone as an itinerant tailor to find work among the tourists. The watch is a relatively small, gold-plated Elgin with a side-stem. The hours are marked with Roman numerals, as seconds pass beneath the sweep of a small hand turning in its own circle of time at the bottom of the face. Though the words are also inscribed on my heart, on occasion I carefully open the back of the watch to read the words inscribed there, "From one beloved Victor, my father, to another, my son." When the watch is open, I look with awe at the whirring gears, each one with its own task and purpose, each one needed for the watch to function, each one needed in the marking of time and of our place in the great river's flow.

This Shabbos marks the second *yahrzeit* of my father, Harold Reinstein, Aharon ben Avigdor v'Sarah, *zichrono livracha/of blessed memory*. I am keenly aware of the passage of time, the turning of generations, the turning of life's seasons. Through the years of Nehar Shalom, making our way along the River of Peace, a beloved marker in time for me has been the writing of my weekly Shabbos letter to the "Dear Chavraya," to all of you. I pause as I write these two sweet words, savoring them and what they have meant to me through the years, two words suspended in time, held in a crystal teardrop, the whirring of gears calling us forward as time beckons. As we emerged into community, from early on I would send a simple email with words of Shabbos greeting and blessing, a brief word telling in its essence of the weekly Torah portion. Gradually, those brief words grew into letters. They became a context through which to share my own wrestlings with Torah and life, hoping that my wrestlings would speak to yours. There were times when some of you were in my heart and mind as I wrote, feeling as though I was speaking directly to you, to one of the personal realities among us. I came to feel that I was sitting with each of you as I wrote, engaged in conversation about the struggles within us and around us. I always delighted in thoughts shared in response to my letters, reminding me that these really were conversations. In the way of Torah and life, these are conversations that are necessarily incomplete, to be returned to at the kitchen tables of our own hearts.

Dear *Chavraya*, this is the last letter that I shall write to you as the rabbi of Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue. It is letter number six hundred and eighteen. It is a good number, five more than six hundred and thirteen, the number of *mitzvot* that mark the Jewish path in life. The span of five that lies between mark the bridge of Torah, the five books of our teacher Moses, the source of living waters that sustains us, the context of our wrestlings from which these letters have come. Telling of life, the number eighteen, the numerical value of the letters that spell *chai/life*, the precious life and the entire world that is each one of us, and so for every other human being, learning what it means to live in community, to honor every life, as part of the *chavraya*.

I recently searched out the word *chavraya* to see what others have said about this word so dear to me. My search immediately brought me home, seeing at the very top of the screen, Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue and the words, *Dear Chavraya*. As though handed the key to our own front door, I came to our website, to the section that says at the top, "WORDS OF TORAH," and then, more importantly, "TORAH SEEDS." Introducing all of the letters where they have lived through the years on our website is a passage that I wrote when I first began to weave this web of weekly connection. I share that passage with you now to remind of the letters' incompleteness without you, that the letters are as seeds that shall continue to grow and blossom with the continued growth and blossoming of the dear *chavraya*.

*Chavraya is an Aramaic term for a group joined together in common purpose for the common good. A synagogue community is a chavraya. Every Friday, as we approach Shabbos, I write a Torah letter to my community, the chavraya of Nehar Shalom. The writing of these letters has become an important part of the week for me and of my own spiritual practice. In a certain way, they have become love letters for me, feeling a suffusion of affection each week as I write the word chavraya.*

*I am grateful for the opportunity to share my own reflections on the weekly Torah portion and to engage and wrestle with issues that arise at the intersection of Torah and life. These letters are incomplete, waiting to be enriched with the insights of others. I offer them to you as seeds of Torah, inviting you to add the living water of your own insights. Together, an ever-expanding chavraya, we shall bring new blossoms to the Tree of Life that is Torah.*

In the turning of Torah, I would not have chosen this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Korach* (Num. 16:1-18:32) as the context for my last letter to you. It is a portion of great brokenness and strife, one that is painful to read. Korach, whose own voice we in fact never hear, gathers two hundred and fifty leaders from among the people to challenge the leadership of Moses and Aaron. It becomes a telling in which no one hears what the other is saying, a teaching on the nature of argument, of what works and what doesn't work if we would move an opponent from the distant fringe to a place of encounter. The letters of Korach's name, danced around to spell *rachok/distant*, offer an opening through which to ask of who he is deep down, as we all need to be asked in times of our distress. Unable to walk back from the edge of the abyss, unable to speak and to share with each other from places of depth, there is earth shattering consequence, the ground opening up and swallowing those whose voices are still needed in the fullness of community. The Torah teaches by laying out contexts and inviting us to enter and engage, to wrestle, to argue, to weep, and struggle toward wholeness. In the way of my own teaching, I would say yet again, the Torah is not about them and then, it is about us and now.

I have wrestled this year to consider what it means to think of Korach, too, as part of the beloved community of which Dr. King speaks. In the turning of time and Torah, we do not choose the place of our encounter with events of the moment. We learn to read Torah through the lens of life and life through the lens of Torah. We are living in a time of great brokenness, the earth itself cracking beneath the heartache of human strife and callousness, of hate and violence that

plays out at the edge of the abyss. For those of us who are white, in our inability to hear the soul-searing pain of Black people as it has played out through centuries, the pandemic of racism has collided with the pandemic of a virus, the same belligerence in the face of one and so for the other blocking the way to healing and wholeness. So too, in the way of community, whether on the grand scale of humanity gathered yet as one, or in the way of each small community that is meant to be a microcosm of the whole, we are meant to wrestle and to strive and to listen toward wholeness. Finding ourselves in the portion of Korach at this time of transition, we listen for its teaching as it speaks to us. In the holiest of communities, there will be times of stress and difference. The challenge is to listen and to honor each one, and to recognize each as having a rightful place. It is the essential lesson of the dear Slonimer Rebbe, that each one has their own unique task and purpose that no one else can fulfill, their own *yi'ud v'tafkid* that is needed to help bring the great *tikkun*, the great repair for which the world so thirsts.

In the way of Chassidic teaching to which the Slonimer is both heir and progenitor, the *Chidushei Ha'rim*, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Rothenberg, offers what is for me an especially poignant teaching, and especially so on this night of my father's *yahrzeit*. Regarding the importance of each one having a place, the *RIM* teaches in the context of *Parashat Korach*, *k'mo sha'on/like a watch* (which for him would surely have been a pocket watch), *all of whose parts are instruments unto themselves, and in every such place, ayn zeh k'li/there is no instrument/ad she'kol chelek/until each part/omed al m'komo/stands in its own place....*

Every single one is needed to form the *chavraya*. Each person brings of their own unique gifts and ways for the sake of the community, and for the sake of a greater human gathering. We are each as the whirring gears that turn the hands of time. As my grandfather's pocket watch tells of time turning through the generations, each portion of Torah a stopping place along the way, so have my weekly letters been for me a way of marking time through the years to now of *Nehar Shalom*. As the River of Peace flows, so may we come to the day that is all *Shabbos*.

In words I roughly recall and paraphrase from an old album cover of Joan Baez, *Dear Chavraya*, "I hope it will not embarrass you if I say, I love you...."

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor