

Dear Chavraya,

I received news this morning that a colleague with whom I was close when we were both young rabbis in British Columbia suffered a debilitating stroke this summer. I was stunned, my eyes filling with tears, as I saw him in my mind, his tall, lanky body carrying him ever so gracefully, his soul always seeming to dance, to sing, to laugh and delight in little things. A person who never seemed to need the ground beneath his feet to find traction in life, Ronnie fairly floated, a mystical presence, yet so rooted and aware of human pain, reaching out with warmth and kindness, genuinely fascinated by the life experience of all whom he encountered.

Because it is truly Torah of the heart, and *Torat Chayyim/Torah of life*, I am moved to share with you words from one of Ronnie's daughters describing her father's condition.

Five weeks ago, my father Rabbi Ronnie Cahana had a severe and rare kind of stroke in his brain stem. His mind has been severed from his body; a quadriplegic, on a respirator, with a fully functioning and brilliant mind. They call it incomplete Locked-in syndrome (in French: maladie de l'emmuré vivant – walled-in-alive disease).

(The movie the [Diving Bell and The Butterfly](#) paints a clearer image of his condition, although he has regained much facial movements and can now mouth as well as use his eyes for communication).

My father, ever the spiritual poet, has through a process of blinking out letter by letter, been insisting on communicating endlessly day and night, despite being in the hospital. As my father's mouthpiece my mother, siblings and I facilitate for him to blink out long spiritual messages and sermons, letters in multiple languages and now aphorisms and poems as well (LOVE IS KISSING AWAY THE OTHER'S FEARS).

My father speaks much about the division of body and mind, and how special he is to have the outer limits of human experience sparking through his fingers. Most people in this compromised physical condition ask for death, sometimes using all their life force fighting for it. My father has only said let me show you how to live, from the very first instance of occlusion.

Ronnie's own words, blinked and mouthed so slowly into form through his wife, Karen, and his daughters come from the deepest imaginable wellsprings of faith and reflect the breadth of his soul. They are the words of the teacher, the *Rav*, offering response to one of life's greatest challenges, living in the face of calamity, sustaining faith, transcending what would seem to be the insurmountable, yet knowing God: *I want you to know that this too is healige (holy in Yiddish)..., I am in a broken place but there is holy work to do.*

I can't stop crying as I read these words, words of a daughter and of her father. They touch me to the core. I share them with you and tell you of Rabbi Cahana

because of the life teaching that flows from him to us, even as he lies in a hospital room in Montreal. When I paused this morning to make what I thought would be a quick check of email, I had been reflecting on this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*. I had been thinking about the commandment in this portion concerning the bringing of the first fruits of one's harvest, the *bikkurim*. Upon completing what was meant to be an expression of gratitude, the Torah says, *And then you shall rejoice in all the good/v'samachta b'chol ha'tov that God, your God, has given to you and to your household*. The bringing of *bikkurim* is accompanied by a perplexing requirement; it is only valid if accompanied by *an offering and a song / korban v'shir*. Before hearing of Ronnie, I had already been wondering, but what if you are not in a place to sing, what if you are going through a particularly hard time, how can a song be required to fulfill the mitzvah? I thought of a favorite Rebbe Nachman teaching, *a niggun and musical instruments have the great power to raise a person up to the Holy One*. If we can just begin to sing, just begin, the song will start to raise us up, to bring us out of the narrow place we are in.

But what if you are where Ronnie is? Can one sing even then? In the beginning of a letter to his congregation, Ronnie offers an answer:

*Most Holy and cherished Congregation Beth El,
To the Compassionate One, the Most High Constant and Pure, who breathes meaning
and truth into life. You have allowed me another verse of one more song, one more kiss to
a loving life.*

Please hold in the song of your heart and in your prayers, Rabbi Ronnie Cahana,
Harav Ronnie David Zishe Hacoheh ben Hinde Aliza.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor