

Dear Chavraya,

With my father's loss of short-term memory, there has come to be a new depth in the nature of his recall and sharing of matters long ago. I have heard many of his stories before, some many times before. To my amazement, however, there are suddenly stories that are unfamiliar to me, raising new questions about my dad's life and about our family, and about the world and times in which his life unfolded. There is a new emotional dimension to my dad's sharing as well. I have often been surprised by the lack of emotion in his telling of life tales over the years. He cries very freely now when he tells of the war and of growing up quite poor, of the death of his father soon after his Bar Mitzvah. So much has constricted in the parameters of my dad's life, including a sense of purpose and meaning. To some degree the loss of short-term memory has helped to cushion the awareness of other loss. In addition to tears more freely shed, there has also been a new brightness to my dad's smile and a new eagerness to sit at the table and respond to questions. In our eagerness to ask and to hear, there is a new sense of purpose to his telling.

There is a thread of life that runs through the last four *parshiot* of the Torah. With the commingling of Yontev and Shabbos in the span of these Torah portions, and without opportunity to share thoughts on each of them individually in the coming weeks, I find myself approaching them now as though one. This week's portion is indeed two that are one, *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech*. The remaining two are *Parashat Ha'azinu* and *Parashat V'zot Ha'B'racha*. In *Parashat Vayelech*, Moses poignantly says to the people, *I am one hundred and twenty years old today; I will no longer be able to go out and to come in/lo uchal od latzet v'lavo; moreover, God has said to me: 'You shall not pass over this Yarden.'* There are three parts to this one verse, and three expressions of wisdom: 1) Moses acknowledges his age, 2) Moses acknowledges the realities that come with such a ripe age, and 3) Moses quietly accepts that life will go on without him. There is a point when every person arrives at the Jordan toward which they have journeyed, but will not cross it into the future.

While Moses acknowledges so simply the realities of life, there is a strangely contradictory statement made about Moses after his death, words offered as though to eulogize. In *Parashat V'zot Ha'B'racha*, the last portion of the Torah, we are told, *Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye had not become dim and his freshness had not departed.* How can both of these expressions about Moses' life, one said by him and one said about him, be true? The two verses offer two different truths that find reconciliation in *Parashat Ha'azinu*. On the eve of his departing the people and life, *Moshe Rabbenu*/Moses our teacher speaks honestly of an external truth, the reality of his physical being. In words about Moses, we are told of an inner truth, the undimmed inner vision that brought meaning to each of his days. In the song of his life's summation, appearing in verse in the Torah itself, Moses sings to the people: *Z'chor y'mot olam/Remember the days of old; understand the years of the generations; Ask your parents so that they may tell you, Your elders so that they may explain it to you/z'keynecha v'yomru lach.* In Moses' own words of wisdom, his place as an elder is affirmed among the people, even in those days of waning strength.

The elders of every generation are a source of memory from time before we were, and a source of wisdom that comes of life fully lived. The wisdom that we would acquire and share does not come suddenly with our elder years, but by living life meaningfully through all of our days. Of the word for elder, the rabbis created an imperfect acronym to convey a perfect truth, understanding the word *zaken* as *zeh kanah chochmah/one who acquires wisdom*. Offering practical guidance, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches, *all the time that one is aging, to that which has been gained every day of one's life, a person should add what comes to them with every subsequent day*. Our lives fully lived are like a string of pearls, each day's wisdom added to the strand of our days.

From the meaning acquired through his own gathering of days, in *Parashat Nitzavim* Moses exhorts the people: *I have set life and death before you, blessing and curse. U'vacharta ba'chayim/Choose life, so that you may live—you and your children*. Here is the essence, the wellspring, of what it means to live with eye undimmed. We cannot choose the length of our days, but we can choose to live in the way of blessing, to affirm life and meaning in the days that we have. In the very next verse, the Torah offers its own *perush/explanation* of its own teaching, of what it means to choose life: *to love God, your God, to hearken to God's voice and to cling firmly to God; for that is your life and the length of your days/ki hu chayecha v'orech yamecha*. To love God, to love people, to walk humbly in God's ways, doing good and doing justly, this is the true measure and length of our days.

As we come to the edge of a new year, may it be as a land of promise before us. We cannot choose just what will be, but we can choose the way of our journey through the year's days, as through all the days of our lives. The Book of Life is open each day, and the quill is in our own hand. To tell the stories of our lives in the gathering of our years with all the fullness of laughter and tears, so we need to live them in the time that is now.

My heart is filled with love and appreciation for all of you, for all that we do and strive to be in becoming a holy community. May it be a year of sweetness and harmony, of health and peace, for ourselves and for our dear ones, and for the world and its people, so thirsting for peace.

Shabbat shalom and Shannah tovah,
Rabbi Victor