

Dear Chavraya,

Seeking an entry point to where memory might still be tapped, an inner space still open to the rays of sunshine that surrounded us, I asked my father what he remembered of Pesach in his parents' home. We were sitting in a sun-filled atrium at Hebrew Senior Life during Pesach and it seemed like a possible way of connection, memories of long ago and timely in the moment. I knew from many prior conversations what he might say, images held in my own mind as faded family photographs of an earlier time. I expected him to tell me of his mother laboring to clean the house, of his father sitting on a pillow and of hiding the afikoman for him to find, of how he as the youngest would ask the *fir kashes*. My father began to respond slowly, but not at all to my question, going instead to where he needed to go. He followed scattered sparks of light as they illumined sparse spaces of painful memories, of questions long held, still seeking answers.

"My father was quite observant," dad said. Something in his voice, and in the way it trailed off made clear that he was not about to take me to his childhood Seder table, not about to give me another faded photograph of long ago. After a long pause, he said of his father's observance, "it didn't do him much good." I winced, feeling all of his pain and my own in that moment. I knew so clearly what he meant. His father had died of pneumonia at fifty-two years old, soon after his youngest son's Bar Mitzvah. I reached for dad's hand, not trying to answer the inevitable question of why, held for so many years, but only to comfort him for the death of his father, the man whose name I carry. After a time, acknowledging the pain held by his fourteen year-old self, I softly said to dad, "maybe it did do him much good, maybe his observance really meant something to him and made his life richer. If only he had lived longer, but maybe he found important meaning in his life through his observance." My father nodded his head, a familiar way of acknowledging but not agreeing.

As I held dad's hand, I felt guilty in dwelling on my own pain in that moment. It was a familiar pain that came of a long standing realization that dad had never understood what drew me to the rabbinate, of what inspired my own religious life and spiritual seeking. However much we spoke of it in years past, the same questions were always there without needing to be asked, and here they were again. I was pained also for my father's inability to understand his father or his son, and in that moment I felt a bond that I hadn't known before with the grandfather I never knew. My dad cries easily now. We cried together.

By the time I left my dad that Pesach afternoon, I knew that he was no longer thinking about his dad or our conversation, or of the memories that had been called forth. Returned to the album in the house of long ago, the memories of his dad would remain until rekindled by sparks spun of another conversation. I could not put aside my dad's struggles, though, ruminating through Pesach on the unasked deeper questions of faith and observance, the meaning of a spiritual path in the world. I continued to hear and cry for my dad's rueful reflection, "it didn't do him much good...."

As Pesach unfolded, the same questions played out in a very different context, not so much as questions, but as responses to what my father's questions might

have been, simple responses of faith in the face of tragedy. I was privileged to witness an email sharing from within the Talner community that touched me deeply. As I have often shared, the Talner shtibl influenced the spirit of Nehar Shalom in a special way. A Chassidic rabbi wrote to the community seeking prayer for his granddaughter, born many months pre-mature in Israel. Regular updates were sent of the infant's condition. Once she was named, I included prayers for the little one, Chaya Ahuva, in our Shabbos saying of prayers for healing. Then the news came that this tiny person had died. The rabbi, writing as bereaved grandfather, wrote in his email, "All teffilos (prayers) and ma'asim tovim (good deeds) accomplish; just not always exactly as we, limited human beings, would like." A day later he shared an email from his son, the baby's father. I share that beautiful letter below with you, a gift of so much love and pain. I wish, if only through the holding of his hand, I could convey its essence to my father. I share it here with you in this week of *Parashat Acharei Mot*. The words mean "after the death," referring to the death of the two sons of Aaron. Later in the *parasha*, the Torah says of the commandments, *va'chay ba'hem/and you shall live through them*. So the commandments are meant to do much good, not in sparing us from death and sorrow, but in the enriching of life all along the way of its living, helping us to go on in spite of sorrow. I offer these words as comfort to two Aarons, the Aharon of long ago and the Aharon who is my father, as words of comfort and encouragement to all of us. I share with humility the words of Chaya Ahuva's *tatty*, her daddy:

Chaya Ahuva's Legacy

Chaya Ahuva was only with us for a short time but in that time inspired a tremendous amount of love and selflessness. Even before she was born, people stopped their busy lives to do chessed, organizing tehillim groups, and offering rides and food. People who were dealing with their own pain looked outside of themselves and asked us what they could do. People let us know about mitzvos that they were taking on, davening slower, saying brachos out loud. Strangers showed genuine concern. People who were at a minyan where I asked people to say tehillim were coming over to me days later to find out how things were. We received fresh eyes. Eyes that see the love, kindness, and self sacrifice for others.

We've been getting asked what people can do to perpetuate Chaya Ahuva's memory. Her short time on this earth was completely surrounded by love and caring. I ask for help to keep that going, to help transform the world so that it more resembles her experience on it.

That friend you haven't spoken to in a while? Give them a call just to say hi.

That crossing guard you pass a few times a day? The bus driver, taxi driver, waiter at a restaurant, smile and say thank you.

Say brachos out loud with a moment more of kavanah. (G-d definitely deserves appreciation!!)

Be there for people on THEIR terms. (I speak from personal experience when I saw that a warm smile and a hug can be life saving. The people I appreciated the most were those who got in touch to let me know that they were thinking of me and that they were there for me whenever I was ready.)

Let's reach out and connect with each other. Let's see what we can do to make

someone else's life better and richer.
Sincerely,
Chaya Ahuva's Tatty

So may our way in the world do much good for ourselves and for others, adding depth and meaning to our lives in the time we have, unfolding as a blessing in generations to come.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor