

Dear Chavraya,

My father loved going to work. He loved his job. I still remember as a child the early morning bounce in his step as he shaved and got ready to leave the house well before my siblings and I left for school. In truth, he enjoyed going out for breakfast, and to a particular “greasy spoon” for lunch. It was his job itself, though, that gave meaning to his life outside of home and family. He was in love with science, and specifically chemistry, from childhood. From washing glassware after high school, he rose to be the director of a clinical laboratory in Kenmore Square. His path is of another era, not one that could be duplicated today. He never went to college and never held a degree until after he retired and went to school, receiving then a degree in gerontology. He was entirely self-taught, taking courses here and there at night, but learning mostly through reading, through watching, by apprenticing, and by doing.

One of the hardest days in my dad’s life was undoubtedly the day he retired. He remained very active for many years, but he always lamented that he wasn’t working. Dad celebrated his ninety-ninth birthday this week, and only recently he said to me, “I wish I could still work.” When I tell him after a brief weekday visit that I need to get back to work, he shakes his head and says, “Work is good.” I have tried to understand over the years what gave such depth of meaning to my dad through his work. In part, I think it was his sense of accomplishment and pride in becoming a chemist through his own striving and tenacity. Having grown up quite poor, the fact that he could provide for his family was itself a source of pride. He also loved the interactions with co-workers. As the director of the lab, he looked out for them. Some younger former lab workers still come to visit him at Hebrew Senior Life, still joking with him now as he did with them so long ago. He is proud of the papers that he published, and he is proud of his scientific knowledge and the problem solving that he brought to the day-to-day work of a clinical laboratory. The fact that he was helping people with medical needs was never far from his awareness. That was probably at the heart of my dad’s sense of productivity and importance, at the core of what gave his life meaning through work

As my dad has aged and acquired length of years beyond what he ever could have imagined, he has lost that inner sense of productivity and importance. It doesn’t matter how much we tell him that we love him and how grateful we are to still have him in our lives, how much we still learn from him. It is his own inner sense of not being productive that weighs on him, even now at ninety-nine. In this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat B’chukotai*, a person’s productivity is assessed and given value as earning potential. In the very last chapter of Vayikra, chapter twenty-seven, as we prepare to conclude the third book of the Torah, we are told, *if a person utters their particular resolve [to give a freewill offering] in the form of a vow in your valuation of souls for God.../ki yafli neder b’er’k’cha n’fashot la’shem.* Specific amounts are then delineated for male and female based on age. The amounts are always more for males, reflecting the prevailing view of greater earning potential. Only in the elder years does the “pay gap” narrow, when women are seen to be more productive later into life than men.

It is a decidedly discomfoting passage, one that reflects a prevailing social reality that cries out for redress. Given that the context of this “valuation of souls” is entirely social, so too we are meant to address such inequity in our own social context. There is something else, though, that cries out for redress, which is one of the challenges offered to us through difficult, even “harsh” passages of Torah. We are meant to respond to the text and then to the context of our own lives. The deeper challenge in this passage is the very notion of valuating a soul, meaning a life, based on productivity. Such an actuarial approach is not the way of the Torah, and thus we are startled by these verses, and so we are meant to be. The rabbis are also startled. It is pointed out that these verses do not teach any *mitzvot*. In fact, we are urged not to make a vow of any sort. If we do of our own choosing make a vow, as in promising an offering to the Temple, then this is how we shall determine the amount to be paid to fulfill our vow.

Rooted in the holiness of each person’s creation in the image of God, commentators focus on the language of these verses. In the unusual use of the word *yafli* to indicate making an offering, we see from the same root the word *peleh/wonder, miracle*. Every soul is wondrous, a miracle of God. From the nineteenth century, the Karliner Rebbe says that all souls offer light to God, *she’ya’ir kol ha’n’fashot l’ha’kadosh baruch hu... , ha nikra peleh/and that is called a wonder*. Many centuries earlier, the Holy Alshich focuses on the phrase *n’fashot la’shem/souls to God*, teaching that all souls belong equally to God and are therefore just as important one to another, *ki la’shem hemah l’vado yitborach/for they belong only to the Blessed One*.

In the eyes of God, therefore, one’s value is not derived from their ability to work and the productivity that derives from their labor. All forms of labor are equally important in the view of Torah, as seen in the equal standing of all who labored to create the *Mishkan*, whether their task was great or small. So too, every soul is equally valued by God simply for its intrinsic value. There comes a time when one is no longer able to work, even as there are realities that preclude work at any age. It is one’s presence in this world that is holy to God, and so it should be for us, as we evaluate our own place and standing and that of others. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel offers such a simple and beautiful teaching of affirmation, “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.” So I shall continue to remind my dad. Perhaps suggesting that he really does understand, he said to me recently when I wished him a good day, “every day you wake up is a good day.”

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor