

Dear Chavraya,

We celebrated a milestone in my family this week, my dad's one-hundredth birthday. We gathered as a family on Memorial Day, remembrance somehow a fitting framework for looking back on such a long life. There were not many of my father's friends to be present, most long gone from this world. Isabelle is the only one remaining, herself quite spry at nine-two. There were some of my dad's younger lab colleagues, now in their seventies and eighties. Pat is the one we were closest to. She spoke of how my dad took her under his wing as a mentor and friend, becoming a father figure to her as a young woman without much family to draw on. She was often in our house, leaving her Pete Seeger records with us when she went to Afghanistan as a Peace Core volunteer in the mid-sixties, a lasting legacy of music for which I am still grateful.

No one was more amazed than my dad to have come to this moment. For weeks he has commented on turning one hundred, often asking, "can you believe it?" With more obvious health problems than my mom, he never expected to outlive her, let alone by so many years. He never did much to take care of himself, eating whatever he wanted, joking that he would only run if a bear was chasing him. After my mom died, he removed the large manila envelope from his dresser drawer with my mom's name on it. It contained instructions to guide her on the path forward without him. In truth, it was mostly financial information. Dad was not much for reflective or philosophical words, at least not then. In his elder years, he has become much more reflective, much more ready to share the wisdom of long years. I think of the words by which the Torah describes Abraham in his old age, *Abraham had become old; he had come through the days.../v' Avraham zaken ba ba'yamim* (Gen. 24:1). The rabbis ask why both phrases are used, if he is old, then isn't it obvious that he had come through the days? What is not so obvious is the same challenge that faces all of us in the process of living and aging, to see the meaning in each day, not simply to age in years, but also in days, thereby acquiring wisdom. In the word *zaken/elder*, the rabbis see an imperfect acronym, *zeh she'kanah chochma/one who acquires wisdom* (Kiddushin 32b).

In coming through the days, my dad wasn't one to take much time to share in the way of reflection. Imparting wisdom in other ways, he modeled full engagement with life and people. He has always lived with an excitement for life, drawing from a deep well of curiosity and a fascination with people, delighting in the common and the ordinary, waking each morning eager to go to work. His curiosity for all facets of life and the world around him became from a young age the source of his calling as a scientist. It was that which he most shared with my mother, science becoming the language of love. My parents would often pause along a wooded trail on one of our frequent family hikes to debate the genus and species of flora. Even as I came to recognize a deeper depth to what helped him live so long, I was often upset, as I was even on his birthday, by his almost flippant response to the question of longevity. Seeming to emerge out of his own wonderment, more in response to an inner question than one asked by others, he often says, "I crossed the street carefully." Having known too many beautiful people who died well before their time, including my mother, I often wince at such a reductionist, almost callous assessment, thinking, "would that it were so

easy." And yet, as in other ways too, I have come to realize that out of my own needs I have likely been too demanding and unforgiving regarding such ways of thinking and speaking that are my father's. Someone suggested recently, that perhaps it is his own way of saying, "who knows, how can anyone know?" There are deeper realms that beckon, calling through the years to be examined, more gently now, though not at a time of celebration. I am grateful that dad has lived long enough that questions of the past come more gently now, less threatening, loving held, strands in a weave of wholeness.

As my dad approached his three-digit birthday, and now having arrived, I have reflected on a strange teaching in *Pirke Avot*. The rabbis muse (Avot 5:21) on what is achieved at different ages and stages of life, *at five years study of Scripture...*, *at thirteen the commandments...*, *at eighteen marriage, at twenty a vocation...*, *at sixty old age/zikna...*, *at eighty g'vura/encompassing strength*. For one hundred years, however rare such accomplishment might have been, and perhaps for that reason, the rabbis say something that has troubled me: *ben me'ah k'ilu met v'avar u'vatel min-ha'olam/at the age of a hundred one is as though already dead and having passed away and ceased from the world*. I have reflected on my own experience of relating to my dad at this age. There is often a sense of experiencing something that is otherworldly, of lives and worlds, of roles juxtaposed and reversed, no longer in the way of this world as it was at the beginning, of parent caring for child. At times, the only parallel I have found is the way of caring for a small, vulnerable baby. I worry for what could happen when I bend dad's arm to help him into a sweater. I fear that he might fall if I let go of him for a moment in helping him from his bed to his "chariot," as I speak to him of his wheel chair. When I cut his food or put it on a fork, I joke of such special service in order to minimize awkwardness, a discomfort not present for a baby, and, in truth, no longer for my dad, not in the way of this world. And yet there are times when rays of memory break through, when he engages, animated, even joyous in a memory recalled. When we wake him from a nap, he often stares for a moment, then perhaps to laugh or cry on realizing it is me, sometimes needing to hear my name to be sure. The delight is multiplied when Mieke is there as well, and then such brilliant sunshine if grandchildren should be home and come to visit. And when we speak of great-grandchildren, he laughs and says, "all my grandchildren are great."

Delighting in such awareness when it comes, there is a sense that dad is straddling worlds. Here, but not in the way he once was, with wonder and gratitude we accept that as inevitable at this stage, welcoming each day of his continuing presence. Though with words that are jarring at first, I think it is of amazement from which the rabbis speak, wonderment at how someone could still be in this world at such advanced age. And yet, we offer as a blessing to people that they live to be a hundred and twenty. Now that my dad is approaching the proverbial age to which Moses lived, I think more about what such old age means. In one commentary to the statement in *Pirke Avot*, there is both a sense of blessing and of reality, *when one has merited such an age, it is as though their soul cleaves to the upper worlds and has become separated from this world and its desires* (Tiferet Yisrael). In that separation, dad no longer has any fear of death, not something he seems to really think about. Of wisdom acquired in

coming through the days, when I asked dad recently if it had been a good day, he responded with feeling, "any day you wake up is a good day." Living in the moment, he delights in the simple gift of another's presence. A soft word or a squeeze of the hand draws a smile from dad, and words once sparingly said come so easily now, "I love you."

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Naso*, the portion of my father's birth, Aaron blesses the people with the three-fold blessing with which we bless our children at the start of every Shabbos...: *Y'vorech'cho Ha'Shem v'yishm'recho/May God bless you and keep you, may the light of God's face shine upon you and God be gracious to you, may God's face be lifted unto you and God grant you peace/v'yasem l'cho shalom*. Once I became a father and as I began to so bless each of my children from their first Shabbos in the world, I wished that my father would bless me. On one Shabbos long ago, I tried to ask him to do it, but it became too awkward in the coaxing and guiding. As I bless my children and grandchildren, I still imagine my father's hands as though upon my head. He has come to his own way, though of blessing us. As we surrounded him with love at his birthday, he returned it. Not once, but twice he asked to speak as we gathered around him. He began to cry and said, "You all mean so much to me." Last night, the night of June 1, 2017, one hundred years from the day of his birth, he kissed me and said, "I love you, son." Words once said, ever renewed, whether from this world or the next, I take his blessing with me into Shabbos, and into the days of the week, and into my own coming through the days.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor