

Dear Chavraya,

I try to imagine the archaeologists a century or so from now, scratching their heads, bemused, as they make their way through the cobwebs of my study. It is a room, it seems, closed off from time, too difficult for anyone to have made order or sense of how it was left. The books are still there, waiting to be caressed, to be opened, communed with, each one a portal to other times, voices long still waiting to be heard.

One of the archaeologists notes the pile of torn paper on my desk. "Look at this, all these half sheets of paper, sections of writing on the back. The pile suggests they were for scrap paper, maybe he couldn't afford a pad of paper, or maybe he was trying to conserve paper and save trees. Yeah, it's sure too bad more people didn't do that, we'd be a lot better off now."

"I wonder about all of these wispy slips of paper peeking out of books," muses the other. "Should we go through them all? There seem to be notes on many of the scraps." And all of these books not on shelves, perhaps set aside, waiting to be read, waiting to be studied, some project he had in mind? Ah, here are some extra large slips of that torn paper, maybe something here to investigate, maybe that is what he had planned to do, just never got to it. Looks like he had a lot of dreams, a real dreamer, so many lists, not too much checked off from those lists."

"Look at this prayer book just sitting here, more of those slips of paper. Wow, this is fascinating, it looks like a shopping list, yeah, milk, almond butter, gluten-free granola, oy how boring. Ooh, and a love letter from his wife just tucked in among the prayers. Is this just for him or is he trying to tell us something? Think about it, a blurring of distinction between the sacred and the profane, all as one, part of the sacredness of life." "That sounds like something he might have said." "Hey, you can't just read his wife's letter." "Why not? It's old, from so long ago." "That doesn't matter, love is never old. It's like they're talking to each other now, and we shouldn't be listening, so close the book."

"What's all this? The folder says "High Holy Days 5777." Wow, those sermons are from 2016, they've been sitting here for more than a hundred years. Why weren't they ever put away? Was there something about that year? There is some stuff here from the following year, actually from several more years so why did he leave all of this material out? Really, maybe he just never got around to cleaning up, maybe it's all a bit mischievous, just wanting to confuse us, to throw us off track." "No, I think there is something deeper. There is a note here, something about a life-changing experience, a trip with other rabbis to Germany. Not just a trip, it says, *A Journey of Remembrance and Hope*."

"Listen to this, seems he anticipated our question: ("Wait a minute, how come you can read that if I can't read the love letter? Because in a way this really is for us, meant to be shared, even if it is about his own struggles, his own conversation with his soul. The love letter is just between him and his wife.") "So let me read...:

*It is hard to let go of words already said, of ideas and experiences you wish to hold, so much more to be drawn from them. And yet, it is hard to say more when you feel that you've said all you want to say, when there seems to be nothing else..., even though you know there is no end to what can be, needs to be said. When there is no end to feelings, to consciousness, to events in the world all around, there is always so much more to say. It is hard to let go of words already given wing, experiences already lived and shared, yet new words wait to emerge like flowers in the spring, rising up to tell of where we have been and where we wish to go, reaching for the sun. "*

"Hey, be careful of all that shmutz on the desk, there may be some important organisms there, might be able to tell what he liked to have for lunch. It seems from some of the crumbs and napkins that he liked to eat at his desk, or at least it seems that he often did eat at his desk."

Yes, I have been cleaning my desk today, sorting and filing, pausing to reflect. It is a metaphor for the season, a time to take stock, to sort and file within, taking time to reflect on where we are and where we have been, and, most of all, where we are going. We have just begun the month of Elul, the month of turning as we approach the *Yamim Nora'im/the Days of Awe*. The Slonimer Rebbe draws teaching for Elul from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Shoftim*. He sees a hint in the first verse of the *parsha*: *shoftim v'shotrim titen l'cha b'chol sh'arecha/Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourselves in all your gates....* He then goes on to teach:

*There are different gates, every day in a person's life is as a gate joined to that day; and every Rosh Chodesh is a gate; and there is yet the great gate of Rosh Hashannah, the gate of the entire year. The matter of a gate is surely a place for self-reflection, whence is one going upon entering, and for what purpose is one entering? This is the task of Rosh Hashannah, a time to reflect, to engage in an accounting of one's soul. This accounting is in its essence not about the past, but about the future, how to enter into this gate....*

It is helpful and necessary to reflect on the past, but not to stay there. Standing in the gate of now, we hold the past and the future. Sorting and filing, removing cobwebs and shmutz, however enticing it all may be to future archaeologists, we need to be able to go on. If at times with tears and sighs, we look ahead, called to see the sunshine above, rising toward the light like little flowers in the spring. In its essence, life is not about the past, but about the future, though we journey along a path shaped in the present with meaning, purpose, and joy. May we each pause in the gate of our own needed reflection, with vision then illumined, continuing together on the journey to a new year.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor