

Dear Chavraya,

My dad has always had a generally positive outlook on life. As a scientist in his very nature and identity, he embodied curiosity as a way of being, looking at everything closely, marveling at the fine details in a leaf, in a painting, in crystals of salt shown to us as kids through the lens of a microscope. He has always especially loved encounters with people, gregarious and outgoing, able to strike up a conversation with anyone. I remember conversations my dad had with small town gas jockeys when we went on family camping trips, or with sailors on a Spanish sail training ship open to visitors in Boston Harbor. For all of his curiosity and warmth, he could also be hard-bitten and cynical. He could yell as readily as he might laugh. Sarcasm might spew in response to another's opinion as readily as he might delight in a joke shared with the same person. It was so easy and instructive to talk with him about some things, creative things, anything of which one could ask how, or why, or what. It was much harder to talk about emotions, matters of the heart and of the soul. He was very much in that way a man of his era. At times a deep and opaque cloud seemed to descend, blocking out the wonders of a salt crystal, or the veins of a leaf, or the sunlight above. Similar to the ways of most of us, I came to regard the different parts of his nature as distinct teachings about life, reminders to me to take stock and be aware of my own ways and contradictions.

While quoting poetry and verses of song that spoke to the events of a given moment, my dad has never been one to offer pithy sayings as a way of advice or response to soothe himself or others. In these latter years, he has come to employ certain stock phrases or jokes, which in themselves are funny, even if increasingly predictable and oft repeated. Sadly, they often flow in to fill the empty bays and shore left by receding cognition. If asked by a doctor whether his arm was hurting, he would make as though hammering on his arm with his fist and say, "only if I do this." Whenever he is asked for insight into his longevity, he remarks with a laugh, "I cross the street carefully." Amused by most of his remarks, that is one that I don't like, that makes me bridle. As I'm sure for you, I have known too many lives cut short, too much pain suffered by those who crossed the street, as it were, with equal care. There has never been much recognition by my dad of the blessing that comes with each day, a gift beyond his own might and merit, his own doing and understanding.

It was gift to me this week, on the day of his ninety-eighth birthday, to hear from my dad that sense of recognition, of openhearted gratitude, in a way that I had never heard from him before. It has been a hard time for my dad and for all of us since his recent move into Hebrew Senior life, caring for him in our homes having become too difficult for my siblings and me. On the day of the move he said of his new surroundings, "I guess this is what happens if you live long enough," mournful words of lament that broke our hearts. They were very different tears this week. As I sat next to him on his bed and read him the birthday card I had made, loving words written with my mother's fountain pen, he cried and put his arm around me. When I asked him of the day and how he was doing, he responded with a saying as fresh as birth and its celebration, however many years later. My dad said with a smile, "Every day you wake up is a good day." Even amidst the challenges of dislocation in matters of mind and

matter that come with living long enough to be ninety-eight years old, tears of mourning and lament had become tears of acceptance and renewal.

Whether to live in the way of self-mourning or self-renewal comes as a choice and challenge in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'ha'alotcha*. Tired of their daily diet of *mannah*, yearning even for the fleshpots of Egypt, *the people were as if in mourning over themselves / va'y'hi ha'am k'mit'o'n'nim*. So too, the phrase can be translated as though they were complainers, as those offering lament, even slander. Not to recognize the gift of each day is slanderous, though so understandable and human at times. Some commentators respond harshly to our ancestors' lack of gratitude. But it is not just about our ancestors; it is about us. Responses such as that of Nachmanidies, the Ramban, become personally comforting as we see the desert journey as our own journey through life: *When they came into the great and terrifying desert..., they were pained within themselves, saying, 'what shall we do and how shall we live in this desert, and what shall we eat and what shall we drink?' It is the language of pain and lament for oneself/lashon ko'ev u'mitzta'er al atzmo.*

My father has come to an oasis in the journeys of his life. At times he speaks as though in mourning for himself, crying tears of lament, confused by dislocation and what feels to be a mirage of home. At other times, my father realizes that he is at home, this is where he is in the unfolding of his life. Surrounded by our love, gratitude awakened within, at ninety-eight he has offered a new saying, words of wisdom that can help us all to live more fully, "Every day you wake up is a good day." Happy birthday dad, and thank you.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor