

Coming through the Days -- To Behold the Meaning in every Time and Season

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My father's voice trembled as he sought to find the words and the strength with which to say them. Distracted by a sound, he tried again, wanting with all of his being to rise to the occasion, to say something befitting the meaning of the moment. Some fifty people were gathered in the room, all leaning in to hear the words they hoped would come. Finally the words came, carried on tears, his own and ours, "you all mean so much to me." Born on June 1, 1917, it was my father's one hundredth birthday.

The meaning of the moment was palpable, most present never having celebrated a one-hundredth birthday. We were touched by a collective sense of awe. No one was more amazed than my father in having come through the days of his life to arrive at this moment. For weeks he had 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. After my mom died, he tenderly removed the large manila envelope from his dresser drawer with my mom's name on it, as though a sacred text. It contained instructions to guide her on the path forward into new times and seasons that would be without him.

In truth, the legacy contained in the manilla envelope was primarily one of financial information. Dad was not much for reflective or philosophical words, at least not then, though at times becoming very serious, as though acknowledging it was not his usual way, offering in such moments an insight gained from his own life to help us on the way of living ours. I have wondered, though, wishing it was still possible to ask, if perhaps there had been a love note included in that manilla envelope. In his elder years, he has become much more reflective, much more ready to share the wisdom of long years. I often think of the words by which the Torah describes Abraham in his old age, *And Abraham had become old; he had come through the days.../v'Avraham zaken ba ba'yamim* (Gen. 24:1). The rabbis ask the obvious question, why are both phrases used? If Abraham 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 all along the way, in every time and season of our lives. In the word *zaken/elder*, which is not meant, in fact, to refer only to an old person, 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. Acquiring and imparting wisdom in his own way, Dad has always lived with an excitement for life, drawing from a deep well of curiosity and a fascination with all things human, delighting in the common and the ordinary. His buoyant spirit seemed often to float above the tribulations of the world and awareness of his own struggles and memories of pain. He would wake each morning eager to go to work, meaning found in the obligations and responsibilities that define so much of our lives, sadly experienced too often as drudgery and burden. As much as dad loved his job, even now sharing how much he misses going to work, he also loved summer vacations. Planning trips months in advance, meaning emerged from all the loving details, meaning both anticipated and spontaneous. Heading out on the road to begin a family vacation, the car packed with camping gear, I remember dad once striking up a conversation with the man pumping gas to fuel us for the journey, offering commiseration to the man that he wasn't on vacation too. Sitting in the car bemused, my siblings and I witnessed meaning in the making, and so it has remained, a memory and its meaning held in a long ago human connection. Dad's curiosity for all facets of life and the world around him became from a young age the source of his calling as a scientist. Through the lens of a microscope, he brought the smallest details of life into focus, embracing meaning in all the ways he encountered it.

As experienced by those present on that day, joined by a collective sense of awe, dad's one-hundredth birthday offers a lens through which to examine the details of our own lives. Being in the presence of one who has come through so many days also offers a mirror. Turned just right, as my dad would do with such care, the mirror beneath the stage of a microscope, where the slide is placed, reflects light upward, allowing intricate details of life to be illumined from beneath and seen from above. In the mirror of one hundred, I have also imagined myself standing in front of a mirror that is across from another mirror. Looking into the mirror in front of us, we see ourselves reflected in the mirror behind us, as though going back, back, and back, seeing multiple images of ourselves, each one staring back as though through time, a constant revealed in the sameness of the mirrored reflection of who I am. *V'Avraham zaken ba ba'yamim/And Abraham had become old; he had come through the days....* From the moment we are born, we are aging. Whether or not we live to one hundred years, the challenge in Coming through the Days (is to Behold the Meaning in Every Time and Season) is to see and embrace meaning all along the way.

Sometimes it is hard to embrace meaning, to see meaning from the very midst of life's complex web. Sometimes it is hard to speak of meaning at all, sometimes (perhaps) sensing just a faint glimmer, as light from a distant star. Sometimes it is scandalous and cruel to speak of meaning at all, as though there is greater purpose to the storms devastating so much human life. There is warning in the storms of earth's sickness at our hands, of earth's crying out, but there is no meaning that speaks to why these lives in particular of those whose worlds have been turned upside down. These are difficult days, the journey of these ten days from Rosh Hashannah to Yom Kippur. The themes shock us, so much held up to us as mirrors of a different sort,

words that shake us and make us look where we prefer not to look. Who by fire, who by water? These are difficult days in themselves, and sometimes more so. During these days of turning, of seeking life and renewal, word came of a young person's suicide. So painful to reflect on meaning, meaning that was utterly absent for a person for whom meaning should have shined like the morning sun. News this week too of a younger rabbinic colleague's spouse discovered only recently to have a brain tumor, and now so little time. Word came of disease ravaging a friend's body, discovered only recently, hoping and praying through these days. How to read the words of this season, how to hold them, the words and the people?

Of a man in sanctuary, whose wellbeing we have taken as our own, of politics and policies that hunt and hound good people, we offer embrace to human beings all. How to sense and see the meaning in all that assails this country and touches all of our lives? The hate and the hubris, the chilling fear of nuclear war, the demeaning of people by race and origin, by sexual and gender orientation, people who stand up or kneel down to remind of the way that has been lost, the racism and anti-Semitism. In the beginning and in the end and all along the way, life is about people.

I have been feeling my way through these days, through this time and this season. How to keep going with the living of day to day life, with day to day details, when there is so much to do, so much to hold, yet to see the meaning in the details that would seem to distract and yet are of the essence? Meaning doesn't just happen. We need to notice it and nurture it, calling forth its sparks, breathing them into flame. Or perhaps meaning does just happen, in the way of a tree falling in the forest with none to hear. We need to be there, to be in the forest, making our way together, listening for the tree that falls, for people in need, for all the strangers, seekers, and stragglers, for meaning in the making, coming through the days.

As I have come to recognize a deeper depth to what helped my father 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, including all of those whom I worry about now, 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?" Perhaps that is its own offering of meaning in the face of absurdity, one that I was never able to receive before in the way of my father's offering. In the mirror of one hundred, I have come to see a little more clearly my father's ways of struggle with life.

There is something in my father's way that I both envy and admire. In the mirror of one hundred, I have tried to think about his way and mine. He has always been able to compartmentalize in a way that I am not. He could go to work or on vacation and either one became his world, bringing his colleagues or his children into that world, leaving the rest of the world outside. There is something important for me to learn in

that way of compartmentalizing, of being able to say in the moment to those we are with, "you are the most important part of my world right now." For me, as much as I might try to make it otherwise, the rest of the world is always with me, intruding, impinging, pleading regardless of what else I am doing. For better or worse, the rest of the world is part of my family too, because we are all family. How then to hold the world with all the love that we learn in holding those closest to us, to see the beauty and the possibility in spite of all that would block it?

Of dad's way and my way become as one in seeing and holding meaning, I was startled by the reflective wisdom he shared when I came to visit one afternoon and woke him from a nap. As he came to, I asked him if it had been a good day. In a remarkably lucid moment, awareness of mortality held with gratitude for still being alive, he responded with feeling, "any day you wake up is a good day." His words took my breath away, a profound teaching too easily disregarded, teaching that joined us then and shall continue to in my own coming through the days. Living in the moment, dad delights in the simple gift of another's presence. A soft word or the squeeze of a hand draws a smile from dad, and words once sparingly said come so easily now, "I love you."

That is the essence. Meaning is rooted in love. Dad says "I love you" to everyone now, to anyone who stops to say hello, to a nurse who holds his hand or gently strokes his furrowed cheek, to anyone who smiles and says, "have a good day....," and so from his waking it already is. The flow of meaning is blocked by hate, damned as cursed and stopped cold, whether by walls of words or of concrete and steel, creating borders between people higher and deeper than invisible lines in the sand. Whether of right or left, hate and its ways impedes our coming through the days to a time of meaning revealed among people, of the way we are meant to be as God's children everywhere.

Speaking at a Sanctuary press conference this week to announce the presence of a holy guest in a house of God, as of the *ushpizin* we invite into the sukkah, I did not know what I was about to say as I was called on as the first speaker. Thinking I had time to gather my thoughts, instead they gushed out, raw and immediate. "We are gathered here in love," I nearly cried, reflecting my own raw emotion. "We are here in love for those in need, for our guest now separated from his family, for all of those demeaned and denied. We are here in love for those who oppose us. Our love for humanity includes all people, each one created in the image of God." Going into the depths of where we are, we encounter the depths of meaning.

It has been hard to come through the days, these holy and challenging days, hard to make the journey through them, hard to be a vessel in which to receive their flow of meaning, living waters from the depths. Going into the depths of where we are, we encounter the depths of meaning. This is not the *d'rasha* I had intended to give as I looked ahead from the journey to arriving at these days of awe and turning. So much better than "sermon," *d'rasha* means seeking, turning within and sharing of the search, of self as held beneath the lens of time or in the doubling of mirrors facing that go back and back and back. I had anticipated something more in the way of

exploring the day to day ways of finding meaning in our lives in the mirror of dad's one-hundredth birthday, seeking wisdom from one who has lived so long, wisdom to help us in our own coming through the days. I had imagined a much simpler way of reflection on matters no less important, in a way even more important in the midst of all that swirls in the world around us, ways to stay grounded. If we would keep going and be inspired by meaning at the core, then still we cannot forget to look at the simple and fine, to marvel and say "wow!" as when seeing a lock of a child's hair beneath the microscope, or even our own saved in love's locket from then, or a rose petal so fine, flower held still on a thorny branch to see beneath a magnifying glass. Nor can we fail to raise our eyes to the night sky and thrill at the twinkling stars above. To dream and to play, to laugh with voice as full as that of lament. To sing, to sing, to sing, as I shared on Rosh Hashannah from the poet Bertolt Brecht: *In the dark times, Will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.* And as we sang together on that first day of the year, first steps of a new journey, from the singing prophet of love and hope, of justice and peace, Pete Seeger, of blessed memory, *My life flows on in endless song...; how can I keep from singing...?* He sang too that we should *talk of love, not hate things to do..., tell the people that you saw me passing through.* And so we make our way, coming through the days.

One day among them all, simply called *Yoma/the Day*, the journey of Yom Kippur is one of hope and renewal. It is a journey from death to birth. We go to the depths and then return. It is not to break us down, but to build us up, to strengthen and prepare us for coming through the days beyond. Abstaining from the ways of life, from food and drink, from sex and bodily care, as in mourning not even to gaze in mirrors of glass, to see ourselves reflected instead in God's mirrored image in the faces of one another and in the mirror one hundred years. With the falling of night when the shofar calls us home, we make our way together back into the flow of days and into the ways of life.

Each one has a place on the journey, each one is needed. A little child shall lead, children everywhere reminding of why we do this work, of why we labor with love to make this world a better place. In love's labor's gained for the sake of others, we come to wellsprings of meaning that give of their sustenance to keep us going. And in moments of grace and beauty, *chen*, the same word in Hebrew for both, often joined with *chesed/kindness*, we are touched by simple reminders of meaning that could be at any time, but in these times give us extra pause to laugh and cry with delight for the little child who leads.

Standing by the shore of Jamaica Pond following *Tahslich* on Rosh Hashannah afternoon, a man approached me with his three year old daughter in his arms. As we spoke, the little girl shyly extended her hand, held hesitantly in the air at first, and then with a smile brighter than the setting sun ever so gently touched my face and patted my cheek. I was so touched, so moved by this simple act, the three of us laughing as I held the little girl's hand to my face for another moment, eyes closed, thank you, thank you little one. Touched by all the meaning and beauty of a gift so freely given, of *chen v'chesed/grace and kindness*, I thought of the first steps in coming through the days, from then to now, from the sorrows of *Tisha B'av* to the renewal of

these days of awe. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches of our challenge, so real in that moment of a little girl's gentle touch, to turn the mournful dirges of *Tisha B'av* that are called *kinot* into the repair of *tikun*, all the same letters, and danced around just a little bit more, for the sake of every precious child, every *tinok*. Coming through the days, from now to then, the meaning clear, its light to guide, *And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, And the leopard shall lie down with the kid; And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them...* (Isaiah 11:6).

Whether in the way of a three year old unknowing, or in the way of a one hundred year old, perhaps also unknowing, every person has their own way of *tikun*, their own way of repair, the reason for which they are in this world. That is the proof of each one's uniqueness and special meaning, the very fact that they are in this world. It is the signature teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe, the *N'tivot Shalom*, as he is known from the title of his works, *Paths of Peace: There is no person who is just like another person, from the creation of the first human onward. There is not a single person who is able to repair that which another is meant to repair. Thus, each person has a mission from above that is their own, to repair something specific. It is for this reason that a person has been brought down from the upper world to this world below and no other person since the creation of the world is able to repair that which is theirs to repair* (N'tivot Shalom, Parashat Re'eh). The Rebbe teaches that our task and purpose and way of repair is different in each stage of our lives, changing as we make our way in coming through the days: ובכל תקופה לתקן / משתנים הענינים שעליו לתקן / *u'v'chol t'kufah mishtanim ha'inyanim she'alav l'taken/in every season the matters change for which we are called to repair*. The greatest blessing and source of meaning is to know our own unique task and purpose in this world and that specific matter for whose repair God smiles upon us and says, "you can do it, that's why you are here." In matters great and small, whether in the way of a child's smile or an elder's wisdom that tells of each day's meaning, every one of us brings a unique gift to this place and time and to every place and time in all the seasons of our lives. As our task and purpose changes in our coming through the days, there is a constant that tells of who we are, the image of God smiling all the way back and all the way forward in the facing mirrors of life.

As we come to Yizkor, may their memories be the mirror in which to see the meaning of our own lives. At times because of them with gratitude, at times in spite of them in all of love's complexity, it is our responsibility to see ourselves as clearly as in God's smiling affirmation of who we are, each with all of our uniqueness as a gift that we bring to the world. While most have sadly not lived to one hundred, some having barely begun and some not even, dad's words can still touch us with their wisdom. In the hard times, we still need to pause and hold the meaning of the moment, and say to those with whom we gather, as he did that day, "you all mean so much to me..." So hard to believe or say in seasons of sorrow, when seeing life through a veil of tears, our greatest task then to repair ourselves, yet to hold the abiding truth somewhere within of an elder's simple words, "any day you wake up is a good day." With eyes and hearts open with wonder and awe, and doors to the stranger and those in need, on paths of peace in Coming through the Days -- To Behold the Meaning in every Time and Season.

