



In Memoriam
CHAIM POTOK
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פעולה המשפט



CHAIM POTOK

————— Tony Avni

Eulogies

Rabbi Jeffrey Tigay	7
Daniel Segal	12
Rena Potok	14
William Holmes	20
Naama Potok	24
Akiva Potok	26
Adena Potok	29
Rabbi Lester Hering	34
Rabbi Neil Cooper	38

Memorial Address at Shloshim

<i>Aba's Hair Blown</i> , Naama Potok	45
<i>Thirty Days Later</i> , Akiva Potok	47
<i>Shloshim</i> , Naama Potok	52
<i>Shemirah</i> , Rena Potok	55
<i>The Summer You Died</i> , William Holmes	59

The eulogies presented here are from the funeral service for Rabbi Chaim Potok and the Memorial Addresses at Shloshim.. Adena Potok is to be thanked for making this remarkable material available.

In preparing this material for the website the booklet that was prepared containing the eulogies and addresses were scanned with an Optical Character Reader and the spellings corrected. Where there were words or phrases in Hebrew these have been replaced with [Hebrew]. Care has been used in seeing that both the text and pagination are true to the original publication. If errors are found please contact the webmaster so the corrections can be made.

CHAIM POTOK, 1929-2002

According to the Talmud, if a king dies any other Israelite can succeed him, but if a scholar dies, [Hebrew] , “we have nobody like him” (b. Horayot 13a). No two scholars are alike because no two represent the same combination of intellectual and spiritual qualities. Chaim possessed an absolutely unique combination of gifts that I don’t think is ever likely to be repeated. He was, of course, best known as a novelist, but he was also a rabbi, a scholar, a philosopher, an educator, a painter, and an editor. He received his scholarly training in Judaica at the Jewish Theological Seminary and in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. He served as a military chaplain and then directed Camp Ramah in California and the Seminary’s Leaders Training Fellowship. He taught writing and philosophy of literature at Penn and other universities. He was the Editor in Chief of the Jewish Publication Society and Secretary of the Committee that translated the Ketuvim for its Bible translation, serving along with Moshe Greenberg, Jonas Greenfield, and Nahum Sarna. It was Chaim, along with Nahum Sarna, who proposed that the JPS publish a Torah commentary, for which Chaim then served as literary editor. Most recently, he served as co-editor of *Etz Hayim*, the new Torah commentary that the Conservative Movement published last year and that is sitting in book racks in your seats. One of the greatest blessings that life brought to Chaim was that he was not only endowed with so many gifts, but that he was given the opportunity to use them all.

I first heard of Chaim in the sixties, before he published *The*

Chosen, when he wrote a valuable series of pamphlets about Jewish ethics, dealing with human nature and the ethics of such areas as business and advertising, language, law, and family. A couple of years later Chaim was one of 38 leading rabbis who took part in a symposium on the state of Jewish belief published in *Commentary Magazine*. There Chaim explained some of the themes that would become constant elements in most of his subsequent writing, both in his novels and in *Wanderings*, his book about Jewish history that traced Judaism's exposure to a succession of other great civilizations.

In the symposium Chaim wrote that "Theology has its origins in the anguish that is felt when one's commitment to a particular religious model of reality is confronted by new knowledge and experiential data that threaten the root assumptions of the model." That new knowledge and data were the modernity of every age and civilization to which the Jews were exposed. Chaim knew that anguish personally. His refusal to ignore modern thought, coupled with his love of Judaism and the Jewish people, led to his own crisis of faith, which he resolved by embracing both modernity and observant Judaism. This included embracing critical scholarship, the very approach that others regard as a threat to religion. For Chaim, critical scholarship made Judaism come alive by showing the unusual sophistication that went into the shaping of Jewish sacred texts. Chaim felt, as one of his characters later put it, "[I]f the Torah cannot go into [the] world of [critical] scholarship and return stronger, then we are all fools and charlatans. I have faith in the Torah. I am not afraid of truth" (*In the Beginning*). At the same time, Chaim rejected any attempt to splinter the universe into separate domains of religion and science. He decided to forge a religious life out of what he called "provisional absolutes," meaning that he was constantly prepared to alter his basic religious assumptions should critical thinking make this necessary. And finally, he insisted on a commitment to a universe that is intrin-

sically meaningful, and on the unity of theology and behavior, the need for a pattern of behavior that can concretize this commitment and infuse it into the everyday activities of man. As he put it: “A theology that is not linked directly to a pattern of behavior is a blowing of wind and a macabre game with words. And a pattern of behavior that is not linked to a system of thought is an instance of religious robotry.”

For most of his life, Chaim worked out these issues by telling stories. He was a master storyteller, and his novels expose us to individuals who struggle to remain true to the forms of Orthodox Judaism in which they were raised while being irresistibly drawn to modern intellectual or artistic paths that challenge those forms of Judaism. The novels are set against the moral, intellectual, spiritual, and artistic currents of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, Picasso and Guernica, modern Biblical scholarship, and the scholarly recovery of Jewish mysticism. His novels were learned, philosophical, and extraordinarily informative about all of these subjects and many more like them. For readers they were a rich curriculum in liberal arts and Jewish studies, but they were also gripping literature, and whenever I finished one I felt a sadness at saying goodbye to the characters and not knowing what would happen next in their lives.

At a party in honor of Chaim’s 72nd birthday, our friend Saul Wachs, observed that Chaim’s books “opened a window to the Jewish soul for Jew and non-Jew alike. I think all of us walked a little more proudly as Chaim’s books appeared. At last we had a voice that combined authorial majesty with a warm Jewish heart.” Another friend, Mort Civan, told of being in France and reading *Ha’Aretz*; when a woman looking over his shoulder noticed that he could read Hebrew and learned that he was Jewish, the first thing she said was, “Well, then, you must have read Chaim Potok.” Mort’s point was that to the world Chaim IS Judaism.

My wife and I got to know the Potoks personally when we came to Philadelphia and our lives became intertwined through a myriad of connections fostered by our shared seminary backgrounds, synagogue, day schools, our children, and professional collaboration. Eventually, I had the privilege of working closely with Chaim on the JPS Torah commentary when I wrote one of the volumes and he served as my literary editor, with all of the mentoring and deep friendship that the best of such relationships can foster. His skill and tact as an editor were remarkable. With his deep understanding of the scholarship and his respect for my colleagues and me as authors, he helped us make our writing accessible for non-specialist readers without cost to our meaning or to our own style. He did it again when editing the Peshat Commentary of *Etz Hayim*, but this time overcoming the greater challenge of boiling down the five volumes to less than half of one. There is no other person I would have trusted to do that except Chaim.

I saw in Chaim a true intellectual, a person who read constantly and voraciously about every imaginable subject. From our conversations I learned about literature, painting, and music. I also learned from him what discipline is. One day I drove by to drop off a chapter for him and I found him taking his afternoon walk. He came over to my car to talk and as he did, he quietly hit the stop key on his stopwatch so as not to miss a second of the time he had allocated for exercise.

Chaim was a beloved friend, and losing him is a great loss to me and my entire family. We shared so much with Chaim and Adena, and had such similar views of the world, that Helene once commented that she sometimes felt in talking with them as one does with a spouse—they could finish any sentence that we began. We loved Chaim's warmth and affection, his smile and his embrace. One of the joys of going to shul was looking forward to talking with him afterwards.

My children knew Chaim before they had any idea that he

was famous. In thinking about him now they were struck by the fact that artistic success and fame never altered his priorities or commitments. He still pursued his scholarship, attended the weekly Talmud class given by Professor Samuel Lachs, [Hebrew] and served as a [Hebrew] and Torah reader and gave [Hebrew] in synagogue. His success didn't please him half as much as dinner and conversation surrounded by his family. As a father, he was deeply involved in the lives of Rena and Bill, Naama and Akiva, and his grandchildren. One token of his deep involvement is the fact that between their academic and professional lives his children all pursued Chaim's commitment to both intellectual and artistic expression, each in a different field and medium. His lifelong symbiotic relationship with Adena was already a beautiful thing to behold when he was well. Her devotion and wisdom and sensitivity since his illness have been inexpressibly inspiring.

At the birthday party I mentioned before, a dozen or so friends and family members spoke movingly about Chaim. Everybody present knew of his illness, but that was completely in the background. Chaim was moved and responded very simply: He said that we live from minute to minute and nobody knows what's coming except the One who's in charge of it all, and then he said [Hebrew]

The intense media coverage in the past 24 hours has illustrated another Talmudic statement, [Hebrew], "If a Sage dies, all are his kinsmen , all go into mourning. That is surely the case with Chaim, who touched millions of lives. He was one of the most famous Jews of his generation, one who will be remembered for a long time. Those who knew and loved him personally and those who know him only through his work will always be grateful that he was part of our lives.

For more than ten years, Chaim, Adena and their extended family have davened on the High Holidays with a wonderfully intimate group of about eighty people at the Merion Tribute House. In many of those years, Chaim led a portion of the services with his rich, evocative voice, serving as the perfect Shaiiach Tzibur, emissary of the community, in its petitions for forgiveness and for a healthy new year.

This past Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were painfully poignant. Chaim had already been ill for over a year. He-and somehow we-knew that he would likely not live to see the next High Holidays. During the holidays, rather than arriving, as was his unfailing practice, at the very beginning of services, he came somewhat later-although, I hasten to add, not as late as Adena. The palpable closeness of the three generations of the Potok family-sitting together, praying together, and hugging together-was even more evident than in past years.

Chaim had been asked to lead Ne'ilah, the final service of Yom Kippur, a service whose persistent message is that, as the gates of judgment are closing, one is called on to make a final demonstration of his or her worthiness for redemption. The request for Chaim to lead Ne'ilah had been made as much out of love and respect as out of any expectation that, in light of his obvious weakness, he would be able to say yes. Yet, as Mincha closed and the sun began to set, Chaim decided, as he said, to try."

And summoning energy from the depths of his soul, he led the 45-minute Ne'ilah service with a beauty of voice and inten-

sity of kavanah, of meaning, that was extraordinary. No one there will ever forget Chaim's chanting the words that had such multiple meanings for all of us -and especially for him:

*Open for us the gates, even as they are closing,
The day is waning, the sun is low,
The hour is late. Let us enter the gates at last.*

Now the gates have closed for Chaim for a last time. But as they relentlessly did so, Chaim-with the extraordinary assistance and support of his family- fulfilled Ne'ilah's liturgical message and demonstrated his worthiness with special intensity. For, he and his family provided for all of us a model of how to deal with life's most difficult moments. In the past few months Chaim and his family, without denying for a minute the inevitability of his fate, focused almost exclusively on being with and enjoying each other. just two months ago, Chaim somehow summoned the energy to go cross-country to Akiva's graduation. just two weeks ago, with Chaim, his voice all but gone, expressing a desire to be "near the water," the entire family-all three generations -went to the shore for a week just to be together. And last Friday night, with Chaim too weak to get out of bed and drifting in and out of sleep, the entire family-all three generations -gathered near him, so that he could hear, to sing Kabbalat Shabbat, knowing that that would likely be his last Shabbat. Finally, just this past weekend, the entire family-all three generations -gathered around him so that they could say goodbye before he died peacefully in his sleep.

In these last months, Chaim and his family have truly faced the closing of his gates with a grace, elegance, majesty, and sanctity that even surpassed the beauty of Chaim's last Ne'ilah.

*The day is waning, the sun is low
The hour is late. Chaim has entered the gates at last.
May Chaim Potok's name be for a blessing.*

My father was a man of words. From a very young age, he crafted tales. During the depression, when there was no money for paper, he wrote stories on the wall of his bedroom. He told his mother he wanted to be a writer. She replied, “alright darling, you be a brain surgeon. On the side, you’ll write stories.” He wrote stories-but not on the side.

My father’s life was books. He was an avid reader. Until very recently, I never saw him without a book in his hand. He took every available opportunity to learn. On a few occasions, we sat in on graduate classes in English at the University of Pennsylvania together. These experiences enriched our relationship immeasurably. We became peers, colleagues, tossing ideas back and forth. We carried our classroom discussions home to the Shabbat dinner table, arguing the fine points of Joycean dialectic and the magnificently meandering techniques of Virginia Woolf’s experimental prose. He loved Penn. Two years ago, he was given the university’s Distinguished Alumni Award. In his acceptance speech, he expressed great pride in the fact that my brother Akiva and I had both attended Penn, and that I continue to teach there. He grinned in mock apology and went on to say, with a shrug, “my other daughter went to Harvard.”

A man of words. At the end of his life, words failed him. He lost his grasp, his exacting hold on the precise combinations, nuances, shadings of language. Ever tenacious, he reached for the words he could find, familiar phrases that grew shorter and shorter with time. He would frequently get as far as he could,

and then end with “And that’s it”-a phrase that became something of a signature for him. Gradually, he lost the ability to communicate, to read, to write. This last loss was the hardest on him. But as language slipped away, he became emotionally demonstrative. He learned to express himself with his eyes and hands. With his Neshamah.

My father was a man of culture. By that I mean not only that he loved the theater or the symphony-he did. Or that he knew his way around art museums on three continents-he did. I mean that my father loved human culture. He was something of an amateur cultural anthropologist. Of course, he did nothing halfway: even as an amateur he was quite proficient. When he traveled, he drank in foreign culture as one drinks water after a long thirst. When he found interesting people at his dinner table, he would mine them, asking probing questions about their history, religious and social practices, their world views.

The table was his field. It was the place where he tested his theory of core-to-core culture confrontation again and again. Peripheral contact did not interest him. He devoted himself to the core. My mother would carefully lay out the table like a painter’s palette, so he could choose the most vibrant and appealing, and create a canvas of cultural exchange.

My father was an artist, a painter. I remember when we first moved to Jerusalem in 1973, and opened the crates from the “lift,” one crate was missing-the one filled with unfinished canvases that my father had begun at home, in Wynnefield. He leaned heavily on the opened crates, looking bereft. I had never seen my father look so lost. He went out and bought new canvases, paints, easels. He walked through the streets of Talbiya, collecting the detritus of daily living in Jerusalem: Eshel lids, torn scraps of *Maariv* and *Ha-Aretz*, popsicle sticks, Bisli wrappers. Handfuls of sand from the playground at the corner. Shards of Jerusalem stone from one local construction site, or

another. He pasted them onto canvases and painted them into landscapes of Jerusalem. He poured the city into the paintings and made cubist collages. These canvases stood lined up on the floor of his painter's studio-cum-writer's study. They hung on the walls of our apartment. The canvases were emblematic of my father's approach to life-to pick up the detritus of the world, determine what was of use to him and make something aesthetic out of it, and discard the rest.

My father was a man of spirit, of deep and complex faith. Descended from a strong line of Hasidim, he had a powerful sense of the Jewish spirit-not only the spirit of the people, in a collective sense-but of the individual spirit, the Neshamah. When the world seemed particularly fragile, my father would sing a "Tikkun," a melody intended to repair the world. As he lay dying, his family returned this gift to him, and sang his Tikkun-a haunting melody handed down by his mother. Even when words failed him, he was still able to join in the recitation of kiddush, or of "Shalom Aleichem." This past Erev Shabbat, a small group of friends joined us for Kabbalat Shabbat at my parents' home. Our voices wafted up the stairs to him, where he lay in bed, listening. The spirit of Shabbat entered the house, and gave him peace. The spirit of Shekhinah entered his space, guiding him on the journey he was to begin.

My father and mother raised their children with a deep commitment to Jewish practice and ideals. Whether in Wynnefield or Jerusalem, they taught us that to be an observant Jew, a culturally identified Jew, was a privilege, an honor to pass on. And still, he raised us to question our tradition. For my father, asking the right kinds of questions was a sign of great intelligence-and he valued great intelligence. He did not suffer fools lightly. When you asked a good, and insightful question, you were rewarded with accolades-and with an equally good, and informative answer. His pedagogical training was to land

me in trouble in my Orthodox girls' school in Jerusalem, where I applied JPS-style bible criticism to my Tanakh class. I believe he was proud, when I reported to him that my teacher had scolded me for offering a scholarly view that ran counter to the prevailing approach of the school.

Twenty-five years later, my father taught me my Torah portion, to prepare me for my adult Bat Mitzvah ceremony. I will always cherish the Friday mornings spent at his left hand, chanting Torah and Haftorah trope with him. Though his legs defied him, he stood and read Torah on the day of my Bat Mitzvah last January. Later, I learned that he couldn't see the words in the Torah scroll-the Decadron had obscured his vision-but he remembered them well enough to muddle through by heart.

My father had a deep and abiding respect for religious faith and little tolerance for religious extremism. He struggled with his Orthodox roots. He remained profoundly connected to his faith through the intellect and through community. He valued this community and our synagogue community in Jerusalem intensely. He wanted to transmit these values to his children -use your mind, he seemed to insist, at all times. And stay connected to Jewish communal-and cultural-life. It will shape your existence.

And indeed it has.

My father was a family man. He was deeply devoted to his wife, my mother. Theirs is one of the great love stories of all times. Watching my mother care for him this past year, and watching his utter trust in her care is one of the most moving and inspiring things I have witnessed in my life. My father was intensely proud of his children, of what we have accomplished in work and in life; he knew that we would continue to accomplish great things, and more importantly, that we would be menschen, decent and caring human beings. He was in love with

his grandchildren. He was uncharacteristically animated when playing with them, tender when holding them on his lap, kissing them goodnight, reading them books. Even at the end, when his eyes were closed most of the time, he opened them to look at Maia and stroke her face; though his arms were weak, he strained to lift Erez onto his lap for more kisses.

I asked my children what they would like to say about their Saba.

Maia writes:

Dear Saba,

If you were alive right now at this moment I would hug you and kiss you. I didn't know that after you died it was so sad. You were a great storyteller. And very very fun to play with. I miss you reading books to me. I love you sooo sooooo much. And you loved me that much too.

*I miss you terribly and I'm terribly sad.
Love, your beautiful granddaughter Maia*

Erez asked me to say:

Dear Saba,

I love you. I don't want you to die. I like to play with you. Thank you for my cars. I love him and I want to play with him all the time.

Love, Erez

Words, art and culture, faith, and family-these are the measures of the man. The author, painter, husband, father and grandfather, brother and uncle, lecturer, teacher. At his 72nd birthday party last February, I quoted E.M. Forster's charge, "only connect." My father connected with the world both publicly and privately, drawing intellectual and emotional suste-

nance from the experience. At the end of his life, when he could no longer speak, his family fed him words. When he could no longer paint or draw, we described to him the changing colors of the bay at sunset. When his eyes failed, we painted distant birds on the horizon, his grandchildren dancing in the surf, skimming the ocean's surface, flying in their father's arms. When he could no longer read, his family read to him- contemporary fiction, *New Yorker* cartoons, James Joyce, *The New York Times*. When his spirit wavered, he wept. When his grandchildren kissed him, he reached for them. When he withdrew his interest from earthly things, we sang to him. We played him piano sonatas recorded by his dear friend Walter Hautzig. The music played. He was at peace.

I told my sister and brother yesterday that we were very lucky, we had two fathers: the private Aba, and the public figure. The one we shared with the world; the other was ours alone. He struggled valiantly through his illness, with immeasurable grace and dignity. These qualities of being he maintained to the end. We were blessed with his presence. We will be blessed with his memory. We will honor him with our lives, and with our love.

And that's it.

The first time I met my future father-in-law was a Sunday afternoon during Pesach (Passover). The clocks had sprung forward that morning, and not having realized it until too late, Rena and I rushed along the slight grade of City Line Avenue that ran from the train station to my future in-law's home, arriving late for lunch, warmed from an early, Spring humidity, and a little apprehensive about the meeting. It's been said that, "All beginnings are hard," but surprisingly, that day, the beginning was sweet, the seed for what would become a long-blossoming relationship sown with a gentle hand and kind words.

Aba greeted us in the dining room. As most of you know, he was an imposing presence, and that day was no exception, except that he was an imposing presence who was past ready for lunch. Over lunch, he was not particularly wordy, in fact, he was silent for stretches of time -a trait that would only become familiar (and understandable) to me much later, but was worrisome, at that first meeting, for an earnest young man. What was not worrisome though was-in-between the quiet-the warmth that came from his eyes, the increasingly engaging questions that indicated his curiosity, the lengthening of what began as a light lunch into a long meal, and the spontaneous invitation to return.

In time, that invitation would stretch into weekly, erev Shabbat dinners, months would stretch into years, years would bring marriage and children, and now, time ushers, too early, death. Those who know Rena and me-and Aba and Ima-know that

this brief summary glosses over the rich terrain that has been traversed since that distant day ... terrain not traveled by trains, or alongside humid, trafficked streets, but the not-often traveled roads of the mind, the heart, and the soul. These kinds of travels were the stuff of Aba's life, and even upon our first meeting, this truth was apparent. In his particularly unique way, he always was beckoning fellow travelers to walk with him, and the warmth and kind words that I heard from him sixteen years ago came from that place of beckoning. In the years that would follow, we would share, among other things, a journey that though different in its religiocultural transformations, emanated, at heart, from the same spiritual hunger and quest.

Given our divergent backgrounds, this remembrance of our initial meeting and the brief description of how our relationship evolved after it is striking for what it lacked. Aba's path was one absent of xenophobia, or any other type of dominant fear of the other. For one who so thoroughly lived within and operated from the core of his religious and cultural inheritance, Aba was extraordinarily unique in the manner in which he was drawn not only to those within but those outside this core. Individuals who, at least some of the time, operated on the periphery of their primary cores of influence were particularly fascinating to him, and it was them, he argued, who moved humanity forward, toward rather than away from one another. He spoke relentlessly about this in what he referred to as "core-to-core culture confrontation."

This wasn't a meaningless phrase or sound-bite to him. There we were, for example, those many years ago, representatives of different cultural cores experiencing a confrontation and molding it into something beautiful, something that changed my life. This was by no means unique to his relationship with me, however. He (and Ima) embraced my parents and created a beautiful relationship with them as well, a relationship that celebrated those things that they had in common, and explored and sought

to know better those things that were different. Yet again, this pursuit wasn't unique to relationships within the family. This was a practiced skill of Aba's, one that he literally existed to write about and experience for himself over and over again, whether locally or around the world.

I remember him speaking on this topic one evening a number of years ago at the Art Alliance in Philadelphia. He drove his arm into the air, twisting his hand in that familiar way as he made his point, gritting his teeth for emphasis, fully embodying his passion for this subject and its pursuit. Though challenged by it, into myriads of sleepless, middle-of-the-night hours, he was driven to work through the contradistinctions of the religious and the secular, along with the other contravening meanings of the various religious, spiritual, political, social, and personal confrontations we experience within ourselves and between each other, and he sought to engage others in this same effort.

Recently, Aba added another type of cultural confrontation to this list of those with which he struggled ... that of the body. A swirling mass of ravenous cells sought to live amongst his cells of order, memory, words, images, emotions, and thoughts. True to his ethic of facing these core-to-core struggles with honesty and focus, he fought this cellular-level cultural confrontation with the extraordinary grace and practical fortitude he had brought to anything else in his life. In many ways, this was the culminating work of his life, one that took what had been written on the page, or spoken in words, and lived it. I think I speak for many of us here when I say how extraordinary it was to travel with him on this final journey on earth.

Aba spoke often about paradigm shifts, how on the fulcrum of an epiphany, the map of life shifts and we find ourselves traveling in new directions. Aba, your life has led and will continue to lead to the paradigm shifts of countless lives. Your death will lead to a paradigm shift in our family. And you have begun a

new journey altogether. It is only fitting, at the moment of so many shifts, to read the quote from Keats with which you opened the pages of *Old Men at Midnight*:

*Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green,
There is budding morrow in midnight,
There is a triple sight in blindness keen.*

As you knew so well, in this world, we are all old men and old women at midnight. As we reflect on this truth, may we seek to simultaneously turn toward one other and seek God, remembering both the secular and the divine that pervades the universes inside and around us, and travel down new roads, together.

Thank you for being Saba to my children.
Thank you for being Aba to me.

My Dear Precious and Beloved Aba,

I can see your writing studio from my bedroom window where I write to you now. It is difficult to write about you in any tense but the present since you are part of my foundation, my soul mate. I cannot reconcile your physical absence. You are everywhere inside our home. In your paintings and books, your library chair, your gait. In the items you and Ima brought back from your travels together throughout the world. You are in the large chess pieces in a bay window and in the prints and watercolors that have been part of my consciousness since childhood. They traveled with us throughout several moves until we settled into our current home. The home in which you lived for the longest duration of your life and in which you died yesterday morning. When your body was shifted from its side and onto your back to be taken away for Shemirah, your limbs had set into a position that gave you an appearance of praying. In my mind you are still in your studio, writing.

You were a deeply private, shy, dignified, and compassionate man who survived by confronting his demons. You had spent a lifetime, together with Ima, in preparation for an untimely death, confronting the news and toll of your illness with ferocious discipline and an unyielding resolve to make use of every day you still had to write and to live. Working together on "The War Doctor," we sat in the comfort of your silence as you struggled with the language still available to you, bending

words to suit your meaning. Several months' prior, we had participated in a staged reading of "Davita's Harp" and together led a group discussion with university students in Milwaukee. We had become colleagues. I saw the beginning of a new relationship with you, which was cruelly and suddenly terminated as your illness set in.

Every Friday night in Jerusalem, when I was a girl, I walked with you to Shul. If I was running late, I ran to catch up with you. On occasion my hair was still damp from my shower. I held your hand all the way to Shul and back, and sat right next to you in the men's section.

This past Friday night, members of the Havurah gathered in our home for Kabbalat Shabbat. I sat next to you as you lay in your bed. You cried when you heard the "*Lechah Dodi*." You stroked my face and hair with your good arm. And I held your hand.

I am grateful to you, Aba, for your love and support, for challenging me, for your immense tenderness, sweetness, and determined strength. For your charisma, passion for life and laughter, and hunger for knowledge and learning, and for-together with Ima-bringing Akiva and Rena who, with Bill, brought Maia and Erez into my life. You and Ima shared a love so deep and unbreakable. I hope I may one day be blessed with such a love. Until then and beyond, I vow to honor, love, cherish, and care for Ima, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.

Rest in peace my precious Aba. I hope that by now you are embraced by Savta and Dod Shimon, and by Ima's parents whom you so deeply loved, and by your own father. I hope you are all holding each other, as those of us left with your absence will hold onto one another as we struggle to find ways to keep you with us, in spite of your departure.

Two and half years ago I had a vivid dream. I dreamt that I was standing here before you eulogizing my father. In the dream the location of the eulogy was the Nanuet synagogue, from which we buried my uncle, my father's younger brother, who died of this same disease six years ago. There, I eulogized my father, and I wept. I told everybody that I loved my Aba. I told them what a beautiful man he was, how proud I was of him. I talked about sitting at the Shabbat dinner table and listening to the fascinating and never-ending conversations that would take place with friends and family. I eulogized him, and I wept; I wept, and I pointed at the coffin and said things like, "This man... what could life possibly be like without him..." and tears were rolling down my face, and then I woke up. There were tears in my eyes. I had been weeping in my sleep. Tears were running down my cheeks. They woke me up! I had eulogized my father in my sleep! I sat up in bed and looked around the room and wondered if I should call home, but decided not to. About a month later my Aba was diagnosed with a brain tumor. I was not surprised. Somehow, I do not know why, I had been warned.

Cancer is, in its way, a very kind disease. It robs you of a parent slowly. It warns you. You get lead-time. A family can think, it can gather, make plans, talk about what is happening. Last Friday, Aba became bed-bound. He simply could not remain awake long enough to be brought down stairs. Not being able to join us downstairs for Shabbat dinner, we put Shabbat

dinner together and brought it upstairs to his room. And the family all sat around his bed and ate dinner and surrounded him with him with love, attention, and adoration. We said Kiddush over the Shabbat wine and he joined us, saying what he could, which was much of it!!! A week earlier he had actually led the Kiddush himself, and it was a pleasure to hear his voice again. He could barely form new sentences, but he could still *daven*, pray. On Monday, the afternoon before he passed away, we gathered around him on the bed, and sang zemirot, songs sung after Shabbat meals. Beautiful songs, songs about love, about Jerusalem, about the Sea of Galilee, one song about a sailing ship filled with sleeping sailors, that drifts off to sea! We sang to him. We sang to ourselves. We loved him, and we loved being all together, which is how he wanted it.

Aba. I am talking to you. I miss you horribly, and you only left yesterday, and I love you so much. What should I tell people, Aba? That this is strange? Have I lost my compass and my bedrock? Is life now without authority, and do I suddenly have no real memory of who I am? You wrote about silence, and maybe for a time during your life you found it difficult to talk to your son, but later on both of us worked very hard and we found our way to each other. I came back after college and lived at home for two years, and some might say that I was a touch afraid of the big blue world, not without truth, but I was adamant that you and I would form a friendship and break the quiet that was dominating our relationship. And so two years later when I went to California, it was knowing that you were now with me. That I could always come home to you and sit there and revel in your company. You told me then that if things didn't work out in California I could always come back home. That was only ten years ago. But I guess it's just not really true anymore, because the childhood home I left is no longer really there for me to come back to.

Aba, how your voice filled me with confidence. How hold-

ing your hand spread dignity throughout my soul and filled me with the peace of knowing where I belonged. You were my guide. You gave me advice with such wisdom. And how your judgments scared me. Why won't I be able to sit and talk to you anymore? Who will continue to teach me how to write? Mere will I put my arms when I want to hug you? I have lost my ally, I have lost my enemy, I have lost a stranger, I have lost my twin! When I couldn't figure out my writing, you would make suggestions and help. Sometimes you would even take over. We had to work on that one, too!

In some ways for me this is devastation, but in other ways for me, this is truly a rebirth. What will my life be like without my father? What kind of journey could this be?! I'm terrified. I am enraged that he is gone. I think that I am also excited to see what comes next!

Soon we will travel from this building. We will carry this box, this coffin to a cemetery, and we will do what I never really thought would happen to me, we will in fact put my Aba in the ground and bury him. What a dignified life. I can't even begin to fathom it. How many people has he touched. It amazes me.

I guess if I were to tell you about the love between a father and a son I would say that it is to be surrounded by your father's love as if by a bright white light, to be surrounded by it, but to find it utterly baffling and incomprehensible; and to cherish it.

I was privileged to spend 44 years of marriage with Chaim Potok-to develop a deep friendship of mind and heart, to bring into the world and help to shape 3 beautiful (now adult) children, to react critically to his work-upon his regular invitation, to swim with him in the various worlds of community, learn from him, teach him, argue, *shep nachas*, enjoy friendships new and old, and delight in grandchildren.

I miss his presence, his wit, his strength, his gentleness. I miss the power of his focused will, his sense of order, yes, his retreating into the *kedushah*, the sanctity, of his acts of creation. I miss laughing with him.

I miss learning from him, studying with him, talking things over, discovering new worlds in the physical realm-the travels we took, the people we met. Mostly the softening of his features when he looked at someone he loved-at his children, at his grandchildren, at a friend of whatever age, at me.

I miss swimming in the worlds of Jewish tradition and modernity, struggling to draw truths, witnessing the birth pangs of new ideas, doing much of this with various members of our family and with other friends, for we are privileged in the friendship of our children.

In the past few years, since the reality of inoperable, eventually spreading brain cancer entered his and our lives, Chaim developed a keener than usual zest for life, and a will to complete various projects of work. As long as his legs could carry him-even with the help of equipment-we enjoyed the music

of Tanglewood and the Philadelphia Academy of Music (we never made it to Verizon Hall), the plays of our two subscriptions, an occasional jaunt to the offerings in New York, and movies, movies, movies. In a nod to his youthful love of comics, the last movie we saw in a theatre was “Spiderman.” In the past couple of months, as we spent more and more time at home, he derived much delight from episodes of Sherlock Holmes and Inspector Morse. In fact, the good inspector’s walking-lifting his “drop foot”-became a model for him in struggling with the frustration occasioned by a weakened right leg. It worked for a time; and he seemed to enjoy the literary alliance.

Music filled our library often -especially Isaac Stern with the violin and our dear friend Walter Hautzig with piano repertoires. And Hazzan Pinchik’s rendition of *Roza di Shabbos*. And of course Frank Sinatra, whose LP versions wore out in Korea after so much playing during Chaim’s 16 months as a chaplain there.

As his body and the language -to -speech routes and paths became increasingly compromised, he found being in groups a frustrating struggle, and so enjoyed the company of a few friends at a time. Those were nurturing visits, some of them at home, some at others’ homes. And when the most recent MRI disclosed, in fact, the spread of tumor, at the Shabbat table at Rena’s and Bill’s home, he declared his strong desire-a need, I’d say-to spend a week on the water. In this instance we were looked after from on-high, and we found a large house on the bay at the northern end of Long Beach Island. The realtor, who was overseeing the adapting of her own sister’s home to wheelchair accessibility, saw to it that the Island Beach Patrol provided us with a dune buggy. Translated that meant that Kiv could push him a block and a half so he could partake of the ocean and her beach and witness children and grandchildren swimming and building sand villages. Conversations took place that week in various groups and in whatever settings we found

ourselves. Maia perched herself on a dune buggy tire at the beach; Erez curled up in Saba's lap on the deck. Then, at Kabbalat Shabbat on the deck, he mounted an enormous effort to stand and greet the Sabbath bride. "*Bo-ee kallah, bo-ee kallah.*" With help he made it.

These past months I was his computer assistant. As such, I was charged to read his e-mail and respond. Similar to earlier, hard-copy fan mail, most of the letters came from non-Jewish readers of all ages, people who found an affinity for and identification with his characters and their struggles. These letters reminded us of the Navajo lad whom we'd met in Southern Utah on a lecture tour for the Utah Endowment for the Humanities. He'd come up to Chaim and thanked him for giving him a handle to live in two cultures simultaneously and with self-respect. I remember the glow of joy and discovery on that boy's face, a good twelve years later.

I think it should be said that this creative man used his mind to improve, expand, shape whatever he touched, be it the raw material three young New Age Jews brought him as editor of JPS, which he helped them shape into the First and Second Jewish Catalogues; the development of a successful literary fund-raiser for the Free Library of Philadelphia, whose Rare Book Committee he chaired; or the gardens in front and in back of the apartment house that was our home in Jerusalem from 1973-1977. Mistaking him for a professional gardener, a neighbor asked if he had free hours for their gardens.

We, the family, have been blessed with a husband-father-grandfather-brother-uncle of precious qualities; the community with a teacher-citizen extraordinaire; the world with an honest thinking storyteller who knows and respects his worlds and their conflicts.

We note with grateful awareness the years of deepest friendship that grew with his editor, Robert Gottlieb, with his agent, Owen Laster, and with colleagues in Jewish scholarship. The

family deeply appreciates the expressions of friendship, support, and *hesed* by so many of Chaim's friends and admirers.

The family- including Chaim-were blessed with people whose goodness and soul brought us through these past years, months, and especially days with grace, skill, and extraordinary intelligence and commitment. They have our eternal gratitude: Drs. David Goldman, Kevin Judy, and Zelig Tochner of The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania; Peter C. Phillips and his assistant Gia Soto of The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Laura Jacobs; Rehab professionals Joe Shay, Dr.Teri Goldfine, and Seena Elbaum. The angel Anne Pinnock who gave special meaning to caregiving, and an Irish leprechaun in the person of Sinead from Jefferson Hospice. Joseph Levine; Sloane of Shalom Memorial Park. Our friend and chaplain Sheila Segal. We greatly and deeply appreciated the minyan of friends who brought Kabbalat Shabbat to our home and to Chaim's ears when he was no longer leaving his bed. He sang with Naama some of the *t'fillot*. It was an act of *hesed*. Our synagogue, Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El: Rabbi Neil Cooper, who graciously shared his pulpit today with our brother-in-law Rabbi Lester Hering; and executive director, Sharon Stumacher, who sensitively directed the many press and media requests, and who in general eased us into today. Our friends Dan Segal and Jeff Tigay, who shared mind and soul with us.

In looking for something a few nights ago I happened upon a poem I'd written to Chaim for his birthday about 40 years ago. I'd like to read it now.

My Gentlest Love

That day was blessed
When first you felt the
Air,

Then breathed of it,
So gaining the first step
Upon life's
Stair.

And each new breath
And every step you
Took
Brought life anew
To you, who dared to
Look.

The you I know,
The you that is and will
Be,
That you, my love,
Is always,
deeply, loved by
Me.

Happy Birthday
Your Adena

RABBI LESTER HERING

I suspect that no one in this synagogue knew Chaim as long as I did, other than his two sisters, Charlotte and Bella. We first met in 1944 at Camp Betar in Bloomingburg, NY where we worked as junior counselors. Chaim was a J. C. with his cousin Bella Baer (now known as Bella Bergman, who is married to Rabbi Benzion Bergman, Professor of Talmud at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles). I was an assistant on the waterfront. For three years, we had attended the same school but did not know each other. We were in the same 8th grade at Yeshivah Israel Salanter in the East Bronx on Washington Avenue and graduated at the same time; and we were in the same class at Talmudical Academy High School-but we did not meet each other until camp. In those years, Chaim was known as Herman. To his parents he was Chaim Hersh.

Let me tell you how he developed from Herman to Hy to Chaim.

In high school he was Herman. There, he excelled in all his studies as an honors student. He loved to sketch, and he drew an original comic strip for our monthly school newspaper. His artistic skills were already being developed in the midst of his self-imposed reading schedule. He won the American journal essay contest on American history, and his name and picture were plastered all over the school paper.

When he first came to camp, he was known as Hy; this was the name he preferred through his rabbinical school days. In camp, the only sport I remember him playing was baseball. Oth-

erwise he kept to himself, but absorbed all that was being taught about Zionism at Camp Betar.

Two years later, in 1946, I was in charge of the waterfront at Camp Betar and Hy was a full counselor. And who was now a Junior Counselor in Camp? None other than Hy's sister Charlotte. Hy's cousin Bella Bergman, nee Baer, was the Girl's Head Counselor. She had recently married Benzy Bergman, who was then a student in the Rabbinical School of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Hy started to spend time with Benzy, asking all sorts of questions about JTS and the Conservative movement in Judaism. That summer, Charlotte and I became rather close, and we started to date after the camping season. As a result, I saw Hy almost every Saturday night and in school on a daily basis.

As time went on, I continued my studies at CCNY and the Teachers Institute department of JTS, and Hy continued his studies at Yeshivah University. Periodically, when I called on Charlotte, Hy would pick my brain about the Seminary. We too became rather close to one another during those years. During Hy's senior year at YU he decided to go to the Rabbinical School of JTS. I had made my own decision during my junior year at CCNY.

I remember one day, as I was waiting for Charlotte, their father, of blessed memory, pulled me aside. He asked me about JTS. What type of a school was it? Do they study Talmud? Do the students wear Yarmulkes? Will Hy become an Apikoires? This was a man who was not a rabbi, but knew all of Shas by heart. The local orthodox rabbis in the community would come to him to ask where a certain discussion was found in the Talmud, and he was able to tell them immediately. When Hy was later ordained at JTS in 1954, his father walked around proud as a peacock, knowing his son had won the Talmud prize and the Hebrew Literature prize.

We roomed together at the seminary for the first three years.

After classes, we went to teach at two different Hebrew Schools. Hy liked to prepare his studies into the wee hours of the morning, sipping Southern Comfort, which I supplied for him from my father's liquor store. I preferred to do my studies in the early morning hours, and would fade out late at night, while Hy continued working, listening to Frank Sinatra and sleeping as late as possible the next morning. One night, it must have been about three in the morning, I heard scratching on the wall. I thought it was a mouse and woke up rather startled. There was Hy writing on the wall in the dark. "Hy, what are you doing?" I asked. He answered, "I just had a thought and I didn't want to forget it." Well, this became rather routine for Hy. Later on in life, wherever he went, he carried a micro-tape recorder in his pocket and constantly dictated thoughts into it so that he wouldn't forget them.

Once Hy was ordained and he met Adena, he became Chaim. She was his only true love. She fully understood Chaim and learned to live with his "mishegassim." It wasn't easy because he continued doing his writing into the wee hours. His highs and lows were there as he experienced his frustrations as a writer. But Adena, you were there to encourage him. You had complete faith in his abilities, long before Chaim was recognized by the literary world.

When Chaim wrote his first complete novel, he sent a copy of it to me. It was about Korea-he had served as a U.S. army Chaplain there. Men I finished reading it, I wrote to Chaim and said it was a beautiful piece of writing but it would not sell. No publisher in his right mind would accept it. Then I added, "Chaim, you are a rabbi, you are an excellent teacher, your field of expertise is Jewish philosophy, you are rooted in Rabbinics. Take your skill as a writer and write in your own milieu. Use fiction as your means to teach Judaism." He was rather angry with me and wrote back, "Lester, I am determined to be a writer, and I will succeed." He added, "Keep this letter and let us see what

happens in the years to come.” I am sorry that letter went astray. The next thing I knew, he wrote *The Chosen* and the rest is history. He rewrote his novel on Korea many years later and it was published under the title *I Am The Clay*. From my point of view, it is a tapestry in words.

Chaim the father, Chaim the uncle, and Chaim the family man is not too well known. While we were living in Pennsauken, New Jersey, all the Potoks would pile into our house every Pesach and sometimes on Sukkot and Rosh Hashanah. We were 11 people including his mother, of blessed memory. Chaim would get down on the floor and play with all the children. They would laugh and tease one another. Each one would get bear hugs from him and he was like a big kid. He loved his brother, Simon, of blessed memory, and his sisters, Bella and Charlotte. Stanley, Hindie, and his nieces and nephews—Shulie, Yoninah, Yehudah, Miriam, Tsvi, Aviva, Sheera and Ari—were all integral parts of his life. Mishpachah was important to him. He tried to be at every family gathering. Rarely did he miss a birthday party or a life cycle event.

We are all going to miss him, but especially Adena, Rena and Bill, Naama and Akiva. “Dos eppel falt nisht veit fun boim.” You heard from them all, and not only did each speak beautifully, but we were able to identify a great deal of Chaim through their wonderful presentations. Each of his children is an extension of his life as writer, lover of the arts, and one who reflected on the human condition. We are all going to miss him. We will miss his humanity, his wit, his laughter. We will miss him, period. And so I pray:

O Lord, have mercy upon Thy son, Thou Father of tenderest love and life. May Chaim’s life be now with his people, immortally held in the bond of life. In Gan Eden, in Paradise, lifted from earthen grave to bliss, as he now rises to a destined life. Amen.

I was inundated by a flood of thoughts and emotions as I stood this past Wednesday on this pulpit looking at the simple pine box before me. During that moving memorial service, so many beautiful, touching, and insightful comments were made by family members and colleagues as they reflected on the life of their beloved Chaim Potok. As I stood and thought of the very close relationship and affection which I had for Chaim, as I thought of the towering intellect, the deep thinker, and the mentor whom I had the privilege to know, I was struck by the simplicity of the *aron*, the coffin, which was his final resting place.

In this week's Torah portion, an aron of a different type is described. In this week's *Parashat Ekev*, Moses describes the *aron*, the ark in which the tablets of the law would reside. Later rabbinic commentaries offer two different possibilities for the construction of that *aron*. One suggests that the *aron* was in fact three separate pieces, an outer chest of gold, a wood chest inserted into the outer chest, and a third, inner gold lining. The second opinion envisions a wood chest that was overlaid with gold on the outside and on the inside. Either way, the wood was never seen. The *aron* was gold outside and inside.

Perhaps the reason that gold was used to construct the ark in which the tablets were kept, was to remind us that these tablets were of ultimate value and more precious than any other material object in the world. As I gazed at the *aron* before me earlier this week, it had no gold or ornamentation of any

sort outside or in. What adorned this plain pine casket, was the man, the life, the deeds and the words of Chaim Potok

As we mourn the loss of Chaim Potok I extend condolences to Chaim's family: Adena, Bill and Rena, Akiva, Naama, Charlotte, Bella, and Hindie. In Chaim's memory, I would like to take this opportunity to add a few words and thoughts to the many very beautiful and eloquent presentations that have already been made. I shall limit my comments to those inspired by the plain wooden *aron*. I limit my comments to the idea of "wood" and specifically "trees." In Hebrew, tree and wood are the same word: *etz*.

The tree is a rich symbol in our tradition. The image of the tree also represented, at least for me, part of the impact that Chaim made upon me. The tree, that image, is one I shall keep in my mind's eye as one way to remember the life and impact of Chaim Potok

The Torah is often referred to as the Tree of Life, *Etz Hayim*. Torah was, in fact, the life blood of Chaim Potok. Chaim was certainly a novelist, a critic, an essayist, an editor, a reviewer, an author of numerous works, stories, articles. But, first and foremost, Chaim Potok (Hebrew) was a scholar and student of Torah.

As a child, he studied Hebrew, Torah, and Talmud. These were his life-long pursuits and loves. It is significant that among the works that culminated his career were two monumental projects in which he had a major role as editor: the five-volume *JPS Torah Commentary*, in which he edited the works of other eminent scholars, and *Etz Hayim*, "Chaim's Tree," the one-volume Torah edition published less than a year ago, to be used in synagogues throughout the world. When that edition was published, we dedicated its arrival on *Simchat Torah*, with Chaim bringing the first volume of our new books into our Sanctuary.

For Chaim Potok (Hebrew) Torah was his *Etz Hayim*, the tree

that gave him, his family, and all who knew him, strength and grounding. That Tree of Life allowed him to grow, just as he brought new growth and new life to our Torah. He brought us beauty and richness and holiness through his words of Torah. *Etz Hayim* is the first tree that I shall always associate with Chaim Potok

One of the most moving addresses I had the privilege of hearing Chaim deliver was given several years ago, here in our sanctuary, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Camp Ramah. I had asked Chaim to reminisce about the early years of Ramah and his involvement with Ramah during his youth. He chose to share with us the story of his first Shabbat at Camp Ramah.

He began by describing the world of his youth, the world of the Yeshiva, of Talmud, and of serious study. He described the world in which he grew up as weighty and intense. But Chaim left that world to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary. While at the Seminary, he was encouraged to attend Camp Ramah during the summer. When he arrived at Camp Ramah, he found knowledgeable, committed, devoted, and spiritual Jews, speaking Hebrew and living a Jewish life in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania.

He described how, on his first Shabbat at camp, the entire camp assembled under a tree. He painted for to us the picture of hundreds of young people, dressed in white, singing harmoniously and praying together. That moment was transformational for him. This image of young contemporaries praying beneath a tree as they welcomed Shabbat represented a different, new, creative Judaism he had never before experienced. It was a moment of light. It was liberating and modern. It was, for Chaim, as he described to us on that anniversary Shabbat, the most spiritual and moving moment of his life to that point. That Shabbat changed his life.

As you know, Chaim Potok (Hebrew) went on to a career that included many years of service and devotion to Camp Ramah. It was at Ramah that he met his beloved wife, Adena. He served as the Director of Camp Ramah in California and continued to work for Ramah all through the years. But that tree, the symbol of nature and growth, the symbol of a new Judaism of growth and spirituality, of a fresh new approach to our ancient religion, remained with him through the years. That image of gathering to welcome Shabbat in white, with song and psalm, became a permanent fixture in his mind. That tree, under which he prayed *Kabbalat Shabbat* at Camp Ramah, is the second tree I shall remember.

In 1993, Chaim wrote a book for children entitled *The Tree of Here*. The book is about saying goodbye. It is the story of a boy, Jason, whose family is moving. Jason needs to say goodbye and the book explores how difficult it is to say goodbye.

In the book, there is a flowering dogwood tree that represents the roots and permanence which Jason associates with the home he is leaving. Although that dogwood tree would remain, although his old house would remain in the old neighborhood, Jason and his family would move and establish a new home elsewhere.

Jason is sad. He cannot take with him his friends, the people in his neighborhood, or Mr. Healy, the gardener. But he takes with him a sapling, a small flowering dogwood tree, which he will plant when he arrives at his new home. And that new tree will grow tall. Its roots will grow deep and new flowers will bloom. And in that new sapling, Jason finds comfort.

As I said goodbye to Chaim Potok (Hebrew), as I looked at that simple wooden *aron* in which he rested, I thought of *Etz Hayim* and the Torah that Chaim Potok(Hebrew) taught to us. I thought of that tree at Camp Ramah, which represented the new life and spirit of Judaism that Chaim embraced and articulated through

his work and through his life. And I thought of *The Tree of Here*, the tree we thought would always be there for us, tall and strong.

But it occurred to me, as well, that through the works and ideas and friendship of Chaim Potok(Hebrew) , he had given us saplings, trees, shoots, ideas, memories, and inspiration to cherish and to plant for ourselves. And in that which grows and blossoms in the future from those new trees, we will remember the life, the work, the friendship, and warmth of our teacher, mentor, husband, parent, grandfather, and sibling, our *Etz Hayim*, Chaim Potok (Hebrew). May his memory always remain for us a blessing.

Shabbat Eket,
July 27, 2002

MEMORIAL ADDRESSES
AT SHLOSHIM

ABA'S HAIR BLOWN

July 17th, 2002

I would speak of your illness as a cruel irony. I'd identify your relationship with language as "A man for whom words bowed in submission." But I now understand that throughout your life you have struggled and wrestled to bend words and shape them-you are a man by whom words were bent and this struggle shaped your walk, your gaze, your state of mind and tone of voice. You did battle with the beginning of every novel, and I remember how fatigued you looked about two and a half years ago, right before we knew of your diagnosis, when you stepped out of the passenger seat and I embraced you before entering 30th Street Station to return to New York. Ima had driven us. I asked if you were okay. You looked haggard; your hair was blown in various directions by the wind, your eyes looked strained. You looked thin and pale.

"It's the novel," you said to me. "I'm battling with this one."

And I think you clenched your teeth on the "t's" in "battle" and your fist shook in the air. It was the first time I saw the physical, emotional, and mental toll that writing took, and the only time I sensed that it was beginning to wear you down. I saw it as a beast that was gaining an upper hand and you were beginning to weaken. The physical toll I looked at that afternoon became evident to us with the news of your brain tumor. And you never stopped struggling with language. You still fight to shape it. You are still alive. You continue to battle and you do not give up.

And Aba, you never did. You took in everything and never let go of words and your faith in their link between your solitude and the world.

THIRTY DAYS LATER

It's been thirty days. It feels like it's been a year already; on the other hand, thirty days is not that much time, and it seems too soon for a commemoration. Many of us here are still in a bit of shock. And I, of course, have only begun to absorb what has just happened. He's gone. I am angry at his absence.

There is also the vaguely comical sense that we have made some minor mistake somewhere. If we could only erase a little, re-write a little, if we could hit the red re-do button that hides somewhere on the side of the house, then voila! He's back! "What?!! No, no, no! They were just confused! Dead; yes, very funny. Ha, Ha!" as he walks with his quick trot up the staircase to his office.

Personally, I am forgetting. The image of his face, that glowing vision of love, that fascinating face that welcomed me back to Philadelphia with such love every time I returned from Los Angeles, that face is utterly escaping me. I cannot see it. I cannot experience his face from my memories.

I certainly have memories. I could tell you stories about his teaching me to read English on the porch of our Jerusalem apartment. It had a view of the Dead Sea on a clear day. I could tell you, among the lessons he taught me, that more hands make hard work go faster. Also, that at the time he told my eight year-old self, "Don't waste a second. Every second you waste, is a second you will never have again, is second closer to death." And that, years later, when I ran that by him he wondered what in God's name he might have been thinking. "Did I really say

that?” That locution went the same way as, “Never Force anything in this world!!” said to me after I broke the brand-new ice cube bin, in the brand-new refrigerator, while trying to force ice out of the new ice tray. And also, “Do it right, or just don’t do it,” which he obviously believed in, but which perhaps had an intended nuance that was lost on an adolescent. And even on a thirty year old. But in all of this, I remember facts and not faces. And my emotions do not resound from these memories.

Immediately after he passed away, memories flooded my mind. Visions. They came easily, vividly. The house was charged with beauty and memory. It was as if something wonderful, and incredible had happened.

The night before he passed away, we had him sleep on his side. It helped him with the difficulty of breathing that is part of the reversed birthing process, shall we say, of passing away, the hard breathing of reversed labor pains. The next morning my mother knocked on my door, and she told me he was gone. When I went into the room, there he was still resting on his side, and my sisters and my brother-in-law were already there. I approached him, and I tell you all this because it is truly difficult to communicate to you how peaceful and rested my Aba looked! He was truly peaceful! He was rested. He never looked that rested in his life. And we sat there holding his hand, saying goodbye, and just sitting there with him. And Slowly, as I sat there, I was touched by a sense of such simple ease. It was as if I was back in high school, I was still a teenager, being cared for by my Ima and Aba, and it was just a lovely summer day with nowhere to go and nothing to do... and I was at rest there next to my father. I walked about the house that morning. It was cool, very cool throughout the house. Incredibly pleasant. I later learned that it was actually very hot and muggy that day, but the *house* was cool and pleasant, and perhaps it was being kissed goodbye, as were we. In our discussions later that day, the family noticed that we were all remembering not the past two

years-with their sadness, pain, and stress, and with hope straining plausibility-but that memories of the life before that time were now flooding our minds. But discussing, unfortunately for me, made it not so. And my mind shut down, and all I have now, are the past two years...

Perhaps what I can do is tell you where he will most vividly be absent. Perhaps I might trace the absence and find his presence there!!

Shabbat. Shabbat is what I will miss. The Jewish conversation around a Shabbat table is the pulse and joy of life. Politics and philosophy, stories of travels, and of Jewish history. Israel and Eastern Europe, Literature and Science. Thought and relaxation. Shabbat dinner at my house was watching my father and my community in fonts of knowledge, flowing forth with excitement, wisdom, cleverness, and sober mindedness. And it seemed at that Shabbat table that my father knew it all. Or, certainly most of it. Well, that was definitely true when I was a child: at five-my Aba simply knew everything; and it even continued when I was nine and couldn't come up with a question that he couldn't answer; then past my thirteenth year, and then into my twenties, through college, and some of graduate school. What a pain! I remember one Shabbat in Shul when I found a printing style in the Torah-reading of that week that did not make sense to me. So I asked my Aba, "What is this?"... and he did not know. I asked Sam Lachs, "What is this?" and he did not know. And so then I asked Jeff Tigay, and HE didn't know.... What a great and unforgettable day!!! What more could I possibly ask for!? I had found a question that they could not answer!!! And of course I have no memory whatsoever of what that question was, but I do remember that several months later, Benzi Bergman answered the question.

If it was a quiet Shabbat table, there was always his hand to hold, or his keppe, his bald head, to stroke, and these are tactile memories that thankfully, I hold very vividly. Beyond any of

this, there is Ritual Shabbat. Kiddush, Ha-Motze, with my Aba sitting at the head of the table-and no matter if it was just me at the table with my folks, or a table packed so full that there were barely enough chairs in the household-his presence made it a household, made it a family. And that is what one misses, I guess, about a father. Now the family scatters about re-conceiving itself. Trying to understand what this means, this word, "Family," if there is no father to ground it, to trouble it, to answer all its questions, to give it physical and financial security.

After my Aba passed, I was even excited to see how the world might look from the new front lines, as its were. Now, I'm not so sure.

My father didn't much like being on the front lines either. He would often wake at four or five in the morning, and just stare at the ceiling, as the questions would bang around in his head. All the worries, and concerns, and fears. Abas are fun. In a way they keep your very worst fears from ever needing to be considered because they do it for you. Now that I am beginning to wake up at four or five in the morning with my own little stress attacks, now that I am having this sleep-devouring experience, I'm not so sure about these front lines. They could get messy.

Even if my memories are presently without a face, even if they are not vivid these days and do not reach beyond these past two years, I still know that my Aba faced what we all face: the day-to-day struggle of creating and managing life. And he did it strongly, with vision, intention, devoted to his goals and objectives, set upon his intentions, deviating somewhat-though far less than most-but sticking to the path until one task was done, and then another, and then another. He had faith in me, so I will have faith in myself. He was determined to fulfill his vision of himself; I must emulate that determination in a manner true to my character and ability.

Perhaps, one day, when I am less nervous about my lot in life, less uncertain about my ability or about my station, perhaps in an unsuspecting moment the memories will come pouring forth again, and then in his company, I might turn to him and the two of us will share for the moment the joyfulness that we felt merely at each other's presence. And I will remember that he knew how proud I was of him, and I will fully enjoy the memory of his pride in me.

SHLOSHIM

Aba,

I was reading the translation of the Kaddish, the way the adjectives precede the subject (God) in Aramaic, and I wanted to talk to you about the language. I miss you and still see the sing song shape of your frozen prayer dance as they rolled you over from your side, atrophied, and onto a sheet where you were wrapped, a white one-a white sheet-and your prayer broke through the soft fibers and etched out your form, extending itself to all of us. To Ima and Rena, Akiva and Bill, Maia and Erez; you were with us-still, unmoving and reaching out and we were right there with you. My beloved precious Aba. There are no words to articulate this third week since they took your body away, since God took you from us in language and nuances-in the shape of your smile and the gravitational pull of your eyes. And you remain, forever, emblazoned in my heart, my soul, my thoughts, my movements. In the things I have learned from you, the things I studied with you, the things we taught each other-in a drawing I brought home from school and shared with you. Your pride. Your pride in me. The moments I would see you after some time away. You and Ima both, waiting for me outside by the fountain at Lincoln Center. Your embracing love, from both of you-it was palpable and I feel it now. Its memory is present.

The night you read a section from "Moon" upon receiving

the O. Henry Prize. I met you and Ima before the ceremony and the three of us embraced-all in love with one another-the power and magnitude and fire and light of our love, pulling us into a fold of three in which there was room for us all. Three people hosting the ceremony stood next to us and glanced at one another.

“That’s nice,” one of them said.

And it was.

May God help me to retain this embrace, this threefold hold of Ima, Aba, and Naama and give me the strength, in moments of despair and temporary blindness from hope, to see clearly how deeply you loved all of us. How keenly you loved your children, your son-in-law, your grandchildren and Ima. May we retain the tenacity of your love and dignity and dig into it, dip into its well during moments of rage and recognition that we are helpless in the face of terminal illness and impending death.

May you remain with us always, in ways we have yet to discover, and may you bring us, together with God’s help, into a seven-fold embrace that with nurturing and care will grow in numbers. May our times of anger be resolved into comfort, and may we make peace with the helplessness we have keenly tasted. May it enforce upon us all the life, the precious gift of living, that we are privileged to hold in our hands, and may your loss be a constant reminder of the gifts that are available to us every day.

Your gentle, deeply compassionate and dignified soul, coupled with the gifts of your voracious and creative mind are in each of us. I thank you and Ima for nurturing the union of your brilliant minds and compassionate souls in your now adult children. May God remind us of the strength within each of us and assist us when we cannot reach it, or lack it, to reach and grow and become increasingly resilient in kindness, compassion,

comfort and dignity; so that in praising your memory we prize your offspring, their loved ones and offspring, and your spouse and remember that loving one another is a gift we are not helpless to unwrap.

RENA POTOK

SHEMIRAH

They took you from us gently,
rolled you,
wrapped you in white,
gathered you up in careful arms
and carried you down,
past self-portraits, paintings of Jerusalem,
your “Brooklyn Crucifixion.”
Pausing silently at the door,
we followed you out
saw you safely tucked
watched as wheels crunched driveway,
rolling you away away away.

And as my children tucked into their beds,
learning loss in language all their own,
two sat-
watching over you -
old friends who’ve walked this path before,
who sat with you in life, in prayer,
held your hand at death’s doorstep.
One, whose silently weeping face I glimpsed
amid the prayers of Friday night
that rose up to your bed
and made you weep
the week before you died.

As we wrote deep into the night,
of you and love and longing,
two sat-
detoured from late-night poker game,
whose proceeds help the needy.
While wives and children lay
snugly wrapped in sleeping quilts,
curly-haired heads resting on soft
downy fluff of stuffed pillows -
they watched over you.

And two, and two-
artist, friend, scholar, and one more.
You said to him, "I plan to be around
to dance at your wedding,"
and you did- a little Hassidic twirl
in your wheelchair
turning turning, your lifemate moving
wheels on parquet floor to wail of clarinet
and drumming of enraptured palms pressed
to one another.

As we floated into the abyss,
the hollowed-out spaces carved
by early, disbelieving grief,
two sat-
mother and son,
their bond as strong as hemp.
They have raised each other,
are kindred spirits,
soul mates soon parted
by the bittersweet start of his life
without her steadfast by his side.

As we slept a little,
or not at all,
two sat-
your companion in words,
who captured your last most eloquent days,
giving us the gift of your thoughts
on death, on living, of God.
And her life's mate, no stranger to loss,
whose summer of tears
is but one year past.
He has passed the mantle of mourning
to me.

And two-
longtime friends whose brother shared
my year abroad
and a flat on a Jerusalem street,
by turns sun-drenched and spring-rain chilled,
and once, ground to a halt
by three inches of soft, powdery snow.

As we rose from our beds
and donned garments to be rent
by my uncle's borrowed blade,
one sat-
death's handmaiden,
a midwife to your journey,
who taught us how to set your spirit free,
and held our wounded souls in her healing hands.
Whose voice washed over you in prayerful song.
Guiding you in death's final intimacy.

Mother and son,
husbands and wives,

companions all in penitence and play-
these guardians at death's gate
prayed with you in life,
broke bread and learned with you.
In death, recited psalmist's chants
or sat in hushed silence
beside your quiet body.

Wrapped in prayer shawl
and pure white robe,
you lay tranquil, still.

And you were not alone.

THE SUMMER YOU DIED

The summer you died the grass curled to a delicate
Crisp as drought lumbered in like a slow-moving
Animal and rolled up whole sections of aquamarine,
Leaving powdered silt-what the mind's eye paints
In sienna brown, but what is really a buttery gold,
A color that almost chokes your eyes.

The summer you died the skies pulsed with water,
But not the kind that slakes a soil's mortal thirst.
It rained down in layers, flooding the air until it
Stopped just above the ground, slivering into shoes,
Then clothes, then hair, and feeling like a moist
Weight inside of me even at night. Mostly at night.

The summer you died people came to us gently, some
Not at all; and others called from behind friendly doors,
Mindful of the heat. But people, present or absent,
Can't bear up a private weight; it stays right here, heavy
And taunting as the water in air, wet as a turning clay mass
Crumpling inward between intractable Creator's fingers.

The summer you died the remembrance of wars you
Fought over the soul were reflections in water-about
You, but not you-words that had to be spoken, but
When spoken, remained like hydrogen and oxygen
Aligned in twos and ones but not alighting on tongues
Of grass to rouse them to lazy, late August life.

The summer you died the present and future burned
Like Colorado wildfires. It couldn't happen on this day,
In this month. This must be the past, back when we walked
On wooden feet, like we do now, limbs slanting at impossible
Angles and bodies held to earth by a weight as heavy as
Wet air on butter-gold grass lying over you so quietly.

The summer you died we waited for soaking rains that
Never came. We waited for you, for you to stop by
And see the children, to ask what we'd been up to lately.
And while we waited, where the hot earth, forever hopeful,
Has opened itself always to a treacherous sky, pools of salty
Water darkened our shirts in circles just above the heart.