
My Father, Louis Finkelstein

Hadassah Davis

I

Louis Finkelstein loved to tell stories. My son Ernie writes:

Grandpa was the most wonderful storyteller I have known. When I was small the stories were about Nurdunk the elephant, Purdink the lion and me. A few years later, I remember, he told enthrallingly the tale of Elijah the Prophet. But the great days of storytelling came when I was an adult. Particularly at a Shabbat lunch, with just the family, he would start, and story would follow story. Stories about his family, especially his father; of his colleagues; of his experiences in the Bronx and at the Seminary; of his encounters with famous people; of the early beginning of the century in Brownsville; of the great rabbis of Eastern Europe and of America. . . . Over the years I must have heard thousands.

Ernie not only listened to my father's stories; he wrote many of them down. One story takes us back several generations.

When Grandpa's father was in his last illness at the hospital, Grandpa was visiting him and thought to cheer him up by asking him to tell a story of Rabbi Israel Salanter. [Israel Lipkin known as Salanter, (1810–1883) was both a student of ethics and an exemplar. He founded a moral movement based on the study of traditional ethical literature, and when cholera swept Vilna in 1848, he worked in all the most dangerous relief activities. When the Day of Atonement fell during the epidemic, he ordered the congregation to partake of food, and he set the example by publicly eating.]

Grandpa's father told the following story: Once Rabbi Israel Salanter was in the middle of giving a talk when his favorite student, Rav Isaac walked in. Salanter said "Rav Iz'l, you're late", and then continued with his talk.

Shortly after, Grandpa's father died.

The following Shabbas, Grandpa was with Prof. Lieberman and Prof. Ginzberg, and, after talking to them for a while, he fell into thought.

Ginzberg said to him, "Louis, you are pensive. Remember it is Shabbas, and forbidden to mourn."

Grandpa answered, "It's not that. I'm puzzled by a story." He told the story of Israel Salanter, and asked, "Why did Salanter insult his student that way?"

Ginzberg and Lieberman replied together: "It was a compliment! He called him Rav Iz'l to show him honor. It was understood that if Rav Iz'l came late there was some good reason for it. Israel Salanter was saying, 'You're late, Rav Iz'l. I missed you.'"

Frequently my father, retelling the story, reflected: "You see how easy it is to misinterpret events unless you understand the whole context. *They* knew immediately what Rabbi Salanter meant. . . . And yet we try to understand old texts!"

I myself have told this story and wondered about it. As I type, I realize that for forty years I have visualized Rabbi Salanter and his audience at Howard Mumford Jones lecturing to the students of English 1. Probably my father transposed the situation to classes at the Seminary. In either of those situations the student would have been embarrassed. My father would not embarrass a student; he would think it sinful. And yet Rabbi Salanter was the model of compassion.

The past eludes us. We get it wrong. We filter its happenings through inappropriate perceptions. In preparing this memoir, I reread my father's letters to me. Like old snapshots in the bottom of a drawer, some of them record events I would have sworn never happened. But there they are. I struggle to accommodate them, hoping that, however imperfectly translated, these stories of the past will illuminate the present.

II

Among the papers that my brother found as he sorted through boxes after my father died was a copy of *The New York Times* dated the day his first child was born (that was me). The lead story of that day, January 2, 1923, describes Al Smith's inauguration as governor of New York, when "thousands hailed him as the next President of the United States." In New York, Al Smith, a Catholic born in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, was a hero to immigrants and their children and grandchildren. But in national elections, "American" meant Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. Ethnicity was suspect. In 1928, when Al Smith ran for President against Herbert Hoover, anti-Catholic prejudice did him in.

In the generation for whom being a religious Jew went with speaking broken English, Louis Finkelstein was an odd duck, a walking contradiction of accepted stereotypes. He observed the 613 mitzvot and went around the house chanting passages from "The Lady of the Lake" and "Paradise Lost". Men of his age were clean-shaven; beards were gray or white; his was the only black beard.

He had the courage of religious conviction and the strength of personal idiosyncrasy. And yet, when I was a little girl, my father often referred to

himself as Caspar Milquetoast, the Timid Soul who would buy a new hat rather than retrieve his old one that had landed near a sign saying "Keep Off the Grass." Laws, however trivial, were to be obeyed. People, however unreasonably demanding, must be deferred to. LF's custom of deference was so strong that years later, it was a Seminary joke that the Chancellor reserved the right to enter the elevator after everyone else, and to be the last to leave.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in my childhood, my father, in the bosom of his family, was very demanding and needed to be deferred to. As a boy, he had been the only one of eight siblings to have a room to himself. He was the one for whom the house had to be quiet if he were sleeping or studying. Throughout his adult life, he suffered greatly from insomnia, and still more from the fear of it. His fear of sleeplessness spilled over into dietary restrictions. Meat was too heavy to eat at night; fried fish for dinner would keep him awake. For a few years, he took periodic rest breaks at a Seventh Day Adventist Sanatorium in Melrose; and from these excursions he brought home Protose, Nutose, and other vegetarian concoctions.

This cautiousness of life did not keep Carmel, his wife, for whom music was the breath of life, from occasionally inviting friends over to play chamber music. Whether Beethoven duets or Mozart quartets, they were all "Noise" to LF, an intolerable interference with his study or sleep.

His vulnerability remained throughout his life, but his ability to allow for it improved. When he was seventy-five, he wrote concerning a proposed summer visit:

My eccentric habits, not only of waking and going to sleep at crazy hours, but of working, eating, not eating, etc., do not appear at their grimmest in the course of short visits. But I feel certain I would be difficult medicine to take for more than a week, if not for less. As your love, and Phil's and the children's are the most prized possessions I have, I dare not risk them; and know only too well that I would if I camped on your doorstep. Therefore, if I come to Martha's Vineyard, I am going to get a shanty, like the one I had when I was visiting Prof. Lieberman, and live there, visiting you and Phil and the children, when, as, and if you will let me do so. . . .

Much of this sounds irrational, I am sure; but my life, except for the part clearly controlled by the Torah, is irrational, and has been for so long, that it is hopeless to try and change matters.

And this self-knowledge was part of the maturity reflected on earlier in the same letter.

The Talmud maintains that no one really understands what his teacher is saying until he, the pupil, has passed forty. The Gerash [an honorific nickname for Prof. Lieberman] maintains that this proved true in his case; for he only now begins to appreciate comments which the late Chief Rabbi Kook made, and which at the time seemed commonplace and unimportant to him.

I must admit that the same applies to me. The reason I so often now quote my father, Prof. Ginzberg, and Dr. Adler, is that many of the things they said at the time, which seemed of no great significance,

have proven valuable as I rediscovered them in the hard school of experience. But there is an advantage I think in having something to rediscover; when you finally hit, you feel more sure of yourself, and also can express what you discover with greater clarity.

The example my father set in continuing to learn is, of all his gifts, the one I treasure most.

III

In the late spring of 1931, Cyrus Adler, then president of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, persuaded Louis Finkelstein to leave his post as Rabbi of Congregation Kehilath Israel in the Bronx and work full-time at the Seminary, combining administration with teaching.

LF's move was probably prompted partly by financial considerations. In the Depression that followed the stock market crash of 1929, people who had been solid pillars of support to Kehilath Israel found themselves bankrupt. One member, who had been a prosperous manufacturer, was reduced to making wine, which though close to vinegar, could be sold for sacramental purposes. The Seminary, by contrast, seemed a stable source of income, and by that time, there were two children to be looked after, and a third on the way.

Nonetheless, the decision was not made without internal conflict. In July LF wrote to Herbert Bentwich, his father-in-law, from Gunn's Grove, Lake Pontoosuc, Pittsfield, Mass.:

I was very happy in your rejoicing, although I have accepted the post with many misgivings. I have come to like the rabbinate and the congregation which I served, and on the other hand, fear the perils attaching to administrative duties. In the rabbinic phrase they are "waters without an end"; one never completes one's task; there is always more to be done; and my friends all warn me, as my conscience does, that I stand in much danger of losing the opportunity to do the research I so much enjoy doing, and which I think is ultimately more useful to the Jewish people than any other kind of practical activity. But the Rubicon is crossed, and we must make the best of the situation as it is now.

For a few years the situation "as it is now" seemed more or less as it had been before, at least in terms of family activities.

Although we moved from the Bronx to New York, fall, winter, and spring were school days for me and for my brother, whether at P.S. 61 on Crotona Park East, or at P.S. 165 on 109th street in Manhattan. My father went off to the Seminary just about every morning. He walked from our apartment at 612 West 112 street, along Broadway to 122nd street. Monday through Friday were workdays; on Shabbat, there were services; on Sunday, there was usually something that needed doing.

The seasons were marked by Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Succot in the fall, and by the arrival of Pesah in the spring.

The summer months, on the other hand, were different. We vacationed as a family. Usually we rented a lake shore cottage for about ten weeks, leaving

the city in the middle of June and returning in time for the High Holy Days. This meant that we left before the public school term ended, and/or returned after school had started. I loved being in the country after the other summer visitors had gone. I bicycled along the dirt roads, now empty of traffic and still full of blue-violet flintstones.

My uncle Maurice and his family often rented a cottage next door, and while Maurice's law practice did not allow him the extended holiday that my father had, he came up on weekends, and for an occasional week, so that he felt present, and my father had someone to talk to. There were also visits from other members of the extensive Finkelstein family. Hink, (the youngest brother), then an impecunious young lawyer vacationing with his wife Tess in nearby New York State, once drove up for a day with a car whose passenger door did not close very firmly. The ride I took with them, clutching the car door closed as we rattled into the village a mile away, remains the closest I have come to being part of a Marx brother's comedy.

Grandpa Finkelstein said he lived all year on the joy of the week he spent with us in the country.

In the country, my father would set up a folding table on the porch. There with his books, his papers, his typewriter, he spent long undisturbed hours working. He lived one of the lives he most enjoyed, studying and writing. His books *Akiba* and *The Pharisees* were the fruits of those hours.

In the summer of 1935, my father was polishing the final draft of *Akiba*. He invited Maurice Samuel, whose writing he admired, to come up and help him. One day I tagged along and listened as they went for a walk along the lake. As they talked, they looked back at the miraculous survival of Jewish life after the destruction of the Second Temple. Then they looked around at contemporary Jews and wondered what, if anything, would survive their own lifetimes. Maurice Samuel saw only trouble ahead. He pointed out that Hitler was in power and threatened great Jewish communities in Germany. Jewish settlement in Palestine was weak; the notion of a Jewish State there was a chimera, a pipe dream. And in America, Jews were drifting toward assimilation. Jews of their generation knew much less than their fathers had about Jewish practice and belief; they seemed to care nothing, and were not encouraging their children to learn or care. It was reasonable to suppose that within fifty years Shabbat and Kashrut would have vanished from the American scene like horse-drawn carriages. Jewish religious life would be at an end.

My father did not deny any of this, but he quoted his father, "We must leave a little bit to God."

IV

Ideals are incomplete. Events do not happen as imagined.

Nine years after LF undertook with uncertainty to work in Seminary administration, he had expanded his scope of responsibility beyond what any one at the Seminary had conceived.

In *The Pharisees*, he attributes to the Pharisees of second century Palestine and the Puritans of seventeenth century England some common characteristics:

a strong sense of duty; an astonishing talent for self-discipline; a hunger for learning; an inner, partially unrecognized, urge for freedom; a curious mixture of idealism and realism; and, above all, profound but carefully concealed affections; hatred of the ornate and devotion to the simple.

Apart from historical accuracy, these qualities constitute a self-portrait.

LF's broad intellectual interests, his ability to hear various opinions expressed, and his faith in communication gave rise to the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion. He believed in the value of expert knowledge; and he had great hopes that if experts shared their knowledge, new insights would emerge, new public policies might be shaped.

His conviction and his hope were contagious. They reached people as diverse as the astronomer Harlow Shapley and the theologian Jacques Maritain. They also pulled in financial support from a variety of benefactors. In September 1940, eighty philosophers, scientists, and theologians convoked the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life. The program listed Louis Finkelstein among the convokers; since the meetings took place at the Seminary, he was also the host.

In 1995, the interdisciplinary nature of such a conference seems commonplace, but in 1940, it was radical. In the then-prevailing mood, philosophers concerned themselves with logic, scientists looked at definable operations, and both groups considered theologians outside the pale. LF's intellectual/spiritual ecumenism, his energy in pursuing ways to realize his dream had brought the Conference into being.

For the next thirty years, the Conference met almost annually, sometimes in New York and sometimes in Chicago. Participants discussed from differing points of view themes of common concern. A row of volumes was produced and widely distributed. None of this would have happened without the organizational and administrative talents of Jessica Feingold. She and a host of others, mostly women, took LF's ideas and translated them into happenings. But that is another story, one of which LF was at least partly cognizant. In July 1967 he wrote from Israel:

On our way to Hebron we saw the usual sights (that I had not seen for forty years) of an Arab, seated on a donkey, which was otherwise unburdened, and the two wives walking behind at a respectable distance, carrying extremely heavy loads, far heavier than it seemed to me I could manage in that fiery sun. A little later we saw a young man, perhaps seventeen, astride such a donkey, with his mother, likewise burdened, walking behind him. I was getting full of righteous indignation, when I realized that I had made people work pretty hard myself; and that I do not regard myself as a savage when I make Mary do all the Pesah cleaning for us, while I just walk in for the *seder*. So my righteous indignation did not last long.

In 1978 Phil Davis, putting together a book that would present the underlying dreams of various arts and sciences, wrote to LF asking about the dreams of theology. He answered:

[As] for the dreams of this particular professional religionist. They are really questions that I often ask myself, although in my youth, I used to put the issues more positively, as things which I hoped myself to help realize in this tough world.

1. Can we ever develop a civilization in which everyone, or almost everyone will be devout in his own religion, and totally committed to its theology, and yet tolerant and understanding of all others?
2. Can we develop a world in which to ask this question is not considered heretical?
3. Can we develop a civilization in which the most pious people are also the most moral? (Some of them are now, or were a generation ago, like Rabbi Israel Salanter.) But it ought to be axiomatic that a religious person behaves properly and lovingly towards his fellow men.

This vision motivated much of LF's public life. The pluralistic dream of diverse particular pieties going hand in hand with universal human ethics was central to The Institute for Religious and Social Studies. It combined American ideals with the prophetic/rabbinic tradition.

In 1947, LF edited *American Spiritual Autobiographies*, and included a sketch that his father had written in Hebrew, and that he (LF) translated. Simon J. Finkelstein writes eloquently of what America meant to him.

Nothing I can do in the service of God can begin to reflect the thankfulness and sense of obligation which comes over me when I consider that He has redeemed me from the dungeon of Tsarism into which I was born and in which I was reared, and brought me to these shores.

. . . The feelings that overwhelmed me when I was admitted to American citizenship, when I first voted for an American president, when I watched my eldest child being registered in a public school, are ineffable. It was the breaking of dawn after a long dark night. America represents for me a closer fulfillment of the Biblical doctrine of human equality and the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself than I had expected to see on earth, short of the coming of the Messiah himself. . . .

Yet throughout my life in America I have also felt a sense of loss . . . [In] the relationship of the individual to himself, my native village of Slobodka often seems to me to have had an advantage over the metropolis of New York.

These feelings shaped the world in which LF grew up. They remained at the back of his heart.

V

Maurice Samuel, who had known my father well when they were both young, said to him in later years: "Louis, I know you are a scholar; you always were; and I understand that you have become an administrator; administration is a skill a person can learn. But how did a timid soul like you become a successful fund raiser?"

My father laughed when he repeated the story. Metamorphosis is always

magic. The caterpillar enters a cocoon; and after a while a butterfly beats its way out.

Apart from the skills and energy of his associates and the force of his hope and conviction, my father's success in promoting his projects was helped by his looks. Harlow Shapley claimed that when LF first came to see him at the Harvard Observatory, his secretary came back to his office and said, "Our Lord is waiting to see you."

He also used humor. He once began a speech to a gathering of Jesuit scholars by saying, "There are three English adjectives that are used pejoratively, which, if understood correctly, would be words of highest praise; Phari-saical, Puritanical, Jesuitical." After that the audience was putty in his hands.

And then there was his disciplined and determined courtesy.

In this connection, my father told a story of Rabbi Isaac Elhanan (Spector) (1817–1896), a great rabbinic authority, chief of the Jewish community in Kovno, Lithuania, who was particularly significant in my grandfather's life.

When Simon J. Finkelstein was a boy of twelve, on his way to hear Rabbi Isaac Elhanan speak, his leg was fractured by a log that fell from a construction site. On the day before Yom Kippur, the venerable Rabbi came to the hospital to visit the sick; hearing about the accident, he placed his hands on Simon's head and said, "You will live a long life and become a great rabbi in Israel."

In Kovno there was a Reform shul, known as the "Choir Shul." Being progressive and patriotic, they decided one year that the shul should fly the Russian flag. When Rabbi Isaac Elhanan heard of this, he was aghast at the sacrilege, and he let the members of the shul know that if the flag didn't come down, he would leave Kovno.

So the Choir Shul had a meeting. The general feeling was that they could not possibly be the cause of Rab Itzhak Elhanan leaving Kovno, so, if he felt so strongly about it, the flag would have to come down. One man, the richest man in the community was opposed; he said "Let him go! He's not our rabbi, and he can't tell us what to do." However, this man was defeated and the flag came down.

A few days later there was a *bris*, and the Rabbi was there, and the rich man was also there. The Rabbi was shaking hands all around, and he also shook hands with the rich man. The people who all knew the story were appalled. "You're letting the honor of the Torah lapse," they objected. "It will be useful," the Rabbi replied.

Some years later a Jew who had worked on the fortifications of Kovno was accused of selling the plans to the Germans. Under the Tsars, as under their successors, a person accused and arrested for a crime was as good as convicted, unless some powerful influence could be asserted on his behalf. The only man in the Jewish community with that kind of influence was that same rich man, who was a close personal friend of the governor. So Rabbi Isaac Elhanan went to see the rich man, to ask him to ask the governor to make sure that the accused got a fair trial.

The rich man was very reluctant. "You're asking a very hard thing," he said. "To interfere in a case of treason is very difficult. After all, I'm also a Jew."

"There are times when one has to do dangerous things," replied the Rabbi.

"Well, I'll do it," answered the rich man. "But you should know I'm only doing it because I remember that handshake."

The rich man's efforts were successful. The case was investigated fairly, and the guilt turned out to lie with two Russian soldiers.

Louis Finkelstein was a master of the useful handshake.

He avoided quarrels, even when he strongly disagreed with people's views. In fact, he not only avoided fights, he actively sought reconciliation in the face of injuries given or received.

Reinhold Niebuhr disapproved of Sunday prayer meetings at the Nixon White House, and published an article saying that the practice contradicted the constitutional separation of church and state, whereupon *Time* magazine quoted him as condemning, not only the practice generally, but the participants Billy Graham and Louis Finkelstein personally.

Billy Graham's followers responded to Niebuhr with hate mail.

LF, on the other hand, wrote a letter, to which Niebuhr, who had been his colleague and neighbor for many years, replied:

"... You rightly suggested I didn't mention you by name, and I forgot that the press would supply it. I did of course question the advisability of a compliment to the President in what I call his unofficially established religion in the East Room of the White House . . . It isn't frequent in my public experience that a man to whom I had inadvertently done some wrong has rewarded me with such a rejoinder. . . . My gratitude for the nobility of your letter, for our long friendship, for the cause of prophetic religion to which we both stand committed. My hope is that in the few short years allotted to me, it may be possible for us to see each other personally and 'square accounts.'"

It must be admitted that my father's need to avoid confrontation could also have a down side. In his eighties, he needed to replace a person working for him at home who had become unreliable in her comings and goings. He refused to speak to her—"I have never fired anyone in my life!"—and found someone else to do it.

VI

In the fall of 1958, LF was sixty-three years old. People at the Seminary thought it would be good for him to take a break of several months. At first he planned to be away for a full semester, beginning in January 1959. Things came up, and his departure was postponed. Finally, at the beginning of April, he embarked on the Queen Elizabeth for the first extended vacation he had taken in almost twenty years. He stopped in England for a week, and then flew to Israel.

LF was deaf to music, except for liturgical melodies; art meant nothing to him; he hardly ever attended theatrical performances of any kind. But he appreciated diverse moral and human possibilities.

He wrote from Jerusalem:

There are very few people (I have so far met none) who are at once at home with the simple pious Jews of Meah Shearim, and also with the labor leaders, and other occidentalized people, who control the government and represent 80% of the younger community. I love them both and am treated like a long lost brother in both camps. The trouble here seems to be that there is no *argument* between the groups. Each reads the other out of Judaism and civilization. Yet both are really highly civilized, very much dedicated, and essentially good. They just belong to different centuries. So since they cannot argue, having no common language, they fight, or get into a squabble about a swimming pool for both sexes.

Later, on his way to Rome, he reports:

I have picked up in Israel the following (a) a sunburn which deludes everyone into thinking I am looking well, as indeed I am feeling; (b) several faculty people; (c) some potential future faculty people; (d) a small library; (e) a *tallit*; (f) and most important serious perplexities and confusions. It is clear that Judaism has its best chance to survive there; but it is also clear that the confusion in America regarding such matters as religion, is absolute clarity, compared with the contradictions and confusions there. I cannot deny that I was deeply touched by the piety I saw in some synagogues; and it is of course wonderful to see so many children know the Bible virtually by heart. It is also true that there is far more adult studying, and serious reading going on in that tiny country, than in any comparable community in America. But the hunger of the people, especially the younger ones, for some kind of debate about religion is stifled; because everyone is afraid to touch the prickly subject.

Family life seems much happier and sweeter in Jerusalem than in all but the best homes in America. The relationship of children to one another and to parents, seems, on the whole, better. Maybe the carrying over of this intimacy into the synagogue and every other institution makes for a sort of lack of order, which confuses the observer from abroad.

This morning I went to shul, as usual at 5:30 A.M., and I must admit I was stirred by the affection of so many people, whom I have seen only a few times, at prayer during the past month. I wonder whether that friendship would survive a longer stay!

And on June 7 he wrote:

This is my final morning in Rome. I am glad that I came here, for I really have gotten to love the people and the city. The people are in general not book learned—but they are delightful—and their delightful qualities break through even to me who cannot understand what they are saying.

There is nothing here in a material way which, say, a fourfold increase in wealth would not cure. But alas, I think that such an increase would also rob the place and the people of some qualities which are very beautiful. In these poor countries family ties seem

much stronger than among us. Having little else to enjoy, the people enjoy mutual affection. And who will say that that is not really better than movies, etc?

There is also a kindly, generous quality which I noticed both here and in Israel, which, in America is translated into the automatic, ritualistic writing of a check, but here, and in Jerusalem has a spontaneity and life which touches me greatly. It is hard to define the difference. But having grown up in poverty myself, but in poverty which was combined with great generosity, I feel at home here in this respect (as I did in Jerusalem) and am brought back from the atmosphere of "drives" and formal, almost meaningless, giving to that of real human love. Maybe I am idealizing, but I really think not.

. . . On the other hand it is true that the total circulation of all the newspapers, (i.e. in all Italy) is 4,000,000. This may be in part due to poverty, but I suspect it is also in part due to illiteracy. But curiously enough (and that is what is so hard for us in America to understand) the illiterate is not really ignorant. He knows a great deal, and thinks a great deal.

More than scholarship, or administrative skill, or diplomatic techniques, LF's broad human sympathy enabled him to reach individuals and sometimes to move large groups of people.

David Finn tells a story:

LF persuaded Chief Justice Earl Warren to spend a weekend at the Seminary and study the wisdom of the Talmud with the scholars there.

On Sunday morning a large crowd of scholars and lay people connected with the Seminary gathered to meet and hear the Chief Justice.

In the course of introducing Warren, LF mentioned self-deprecatingly that he knew he was accused of having a messianic complex. Then he said, "It is true. I want to make the world a better place!" As he spoke he lifted his arms, his voice trembled. The audience, David tells us, was transfixed; they would have followed him anywhere.

VII

My father retired from his post as Chancellor of the Seminary in 1972, at the age of 77; to his increasing surprise, he lived for another nineteen years. During that time he devoted his energies to study, writing, and prayer. For a few years he continued to teach. He worked through a new edition of the *Sifra*, which was published in four volumes, of which the last appeared in the year before his death.

The external world gradually shrank away. His walk to the Seminary became slower and less frequent; so did his walks to the 110th street shul. Then he could only walk to the corner of West End Avenue. Then only by force of will and with the aid of a walker could he move from his bed across twelve feet to the dining room table. Eventually even that was impossible.

But, as Ernie writes, "Torah stayed with him to the end. At a time when

all other activities were impossible, he was still able to study and write for hours at a time. He could barely see, but he could read the small print of the commentaries. When conversation was impossible, it was always possible to communicate by taking down a Sefer and roaring out the text to him."

Prayer also remained. In 1990, Robert Pack, speaking to a group of poets, said that when he recently asked Ismar Schorsch about his old friend Louis Finkelstein, Schorsch told him, "Louis still starts every day with a prayer to the Lord; he begins by thanking God for allowing him to die from the bottom up instead of from the top down." LF's prayer, continued Pack, "implicitly rejects any personal wish, for example to be young again or healthy or living under any conditions other than the ones that actually prevail. His prayer acknowledges that the only thing under his control is his attitude toward existing circumstances and his prayer, just like the poet's deliberately chosen words, is the creation of a point of view."

It was a point of view very characteristic of my father. In 1960 he had responded to a letter from Phil:

Perhaps one of the reasons Americans, (including Jews) do not take to prayer is that we have forgotten the logic of it. Nobody would normally ask the Deity to change the order of the Universe in order that his particular need might be granted. And if one did, one would be quite arrogant. How would it help me to have my way about some matter, in which I am particularly interested, if that would mean that the world would lose its predictability? On the other hand . . . I am impressed when I think of the number of prayers in the Jewish prayer book which have to do with our spiritual and intellectual affairs, rather than our material ones. To be granted wisdom, to be made to repent, to be saved from sin, to be brought near the Deity etc. all these are within the natural order, and require miracles, only insofar as all life is a miracle. . . . Maybe we have forgotten how to pray, because we have forgotten or don't care about the things worth praying for.

My father when he was ninety-five
could hardly stand, or hear, or see.
But he bound *tefillin* on his arm and head.
Each day he said the morning prayers and the evening prayers.
Before he ate bread he washed his hands
and thanked God for bringing forth food from the earth.
Happy the man who, aged, deaf, and blind,
still praises God, Who gives His creatures mind.
May his memory be a blessing.

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