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Rabbi Chaim Potok, ז"ל

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According to the Talmud, if a king dies any other Israelite can succeed him, but if a scholar dies, אין לנו כיוצא בו (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 in 2001. 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 '60s, 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 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.

The 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 intrinsically 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 פשט 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 but 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, ל"ל, and served as a בעל תפילה and Torah reader and gave דברי תורה 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 Shehecheyanu.

The intense media coverage in the 24 hours that followed Chaim's passing illustrated another Talmudic statement הכל קרוביו חכם שמת, "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.