Not long ago my father asked me to look over something he had written. An old acquaintance, a lawyer, had pled guilty to fraud. It turned out that over the years he had kept for himself some five million dollars his clients had been awarded in settlements. The man’s wife contacted my father, distraught, and asked if he would write a letter to the judge seeking leniency in sentencing. Now my father was asking for my thoughts on what he’d written – a brief recounting of the lawyer’s contributions to the community.

Both the lawyer and my father are white, Jewish men in their mid-seventies.

My father has also for many decades served as the education chairperson for two local branches of the NAACP in Rockland County, New York. In that capacity he has investigated and intervened in scores of cases of racist discrimination in the county schools. Now retired, he spends hours every day working for social justice in a school district plagued by tensions between the mostly poor, mostly black and Latino public school families, many of them immigrants, and the white, Jewish Ultra-Orthodox men who control the school board.

And here he was agreeing to participate in seeking leniency for a white man of privilege in a criminal justice system that, as we both well knew, already does afford more leniency to the white, well-off and connected while routinely and ruthlessly discriminating against poor people, immigrants and people of color. On the other hand, here he was responding with compassion to the anguish of a woman who was terrified of having her husband spend his remaining years in prison. What should I say? What would I do?

There’s another thing you should know about my father. A few years ago, I was going through a hard time. For a period of several months, I would call him every day, usually crying. “If only I knew how much longer this will last,” I would sob. “I just wish someone could tell me when it will start getting better.”

“It’s in motion,” he would say. “It doesn’t feel like it, but it is. It’s all already in motion.”

Day after day he would promise me this, remind me of this. And I needed him to.

So back to the letter: “Dad,” I asked. “Did you consider giving yourself permission not to send it?”

A pause.

“…no,” he said. “No. I didn’t.” And then there was a long complicated silence, a troubled silence, although it was free of judgment and full of love, and full of questions on both our parts.

I still don’t know what I think he should have done. I am grateful that we can be troubled together. Grateful that we can be curious together. To know that all is still in motion.

Yehi ratzon milpanecha – may it be your will that we continue to be troubled, that we continue to be curious. That we are able to feel ourselves in motion.

Leah Hager Cohen