

YOM KIPPUR 5778  
THE CHALLENGES OF AGING  
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In June when I was in Israel, I tried to follow my normal practice, that is, donating blood at the Magen David Adom mobile station in central Jerusalem. It was a hot day and I walked a number of blocks in order to reach the mobile unit. I was given a form in Hebrew to fill out, and asked to detail my medical history. Once I completed it I walked inside the mobile unit, presented my passport and the form and was ready to have my blood pressure taken and have my middle finger pierced.

The attendant looked at my form and said to me “I’m sorry but you can’t give blood today.” I asked “why, after all I have done so on a number of occasions?” She said to me “the health ministry has declared that they would not take blood from anyone over 65 years of age at the mobile unit.” I told her, “I didn’t see a problem with it.” She told me, “That is our policy, thank you very much.”

It was a rather stark moment for me. While I may feel “young at heart,” I am aging. And, in fact, I am old enough not only to be a senior citizen, but in Israel’s health ministry’s terms, to be past the point of giving blood at the mobile unit to be used as a donation for others.

As I walked the streets of Jerusalem I thought of the phrases in our Holy Day liturgy which have always troubled me. Beginning with the Selichot service the Saturday evening preceding Rosh Hashana, and except for Rosh Hashana, in every morning service including Yom Kippur, we recite the prayer *Shema Koleinu*. In this prayer we ask G-d to hear our voices and accept our prayers. And then we add a few more verses emphasizing our dependence on the mercies of G-d. From Psalm 51: “Do not cast us out of Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit away from us.” From Psalm 71: “Do not cast us off in old age; when our strength fails, do not forsake us.” From Psalm 38: “Do not abandon us, O Lord; our G-d do not be far from us.”

I have always been puzzled as to why these phrases were put exactly in this part of the service. I can appreciate the fact that we want G-d to hear our prayers. Our prayers are many over the course of the High Holy Day season. But why at this particular dramatic moment, no matter at what age we currently find ourselves, when the Ark is opened, do we ask G-d not to forsake us in old age, as our strength fails not to abandon us, and not to take His presence away from us? The author of the prayer clearly wanted to make the point that this is a time when we need G-d’s help. It is a time when our physical strength begins to fail and we become concerned not only about our physical frailties but also about our spiritual essence.

These phrases continue to haunt me. What does it mean to get older? Why should we be fearful when our strength begins to fail us? What are our concerns as we age? How can we prepare for what is inevitable, we pray, in the life of every human being? The Population Reference Bureau in January 2016 issued a report entitled *Aging in the United States*. It stated that “the number of Americans ages 65 and over was projected to more than double from 46M in 2016 to over 98M by 2060, and the 65-and-older group’s share of the total population will rise to nearly 24% from 15%.” In another study by the U.S. Census Bureau, demographers predict that on a global scale

the number of people over 60 will reach 1B by 2020 and almost 2B by 2050, making them 22% of the world's population. In fact, the over 80's will account for over 4% of the world's population, or about four times more than at present.

The statistics show that most of us will live longer than our ancestors. From 1950 to 2013 life expectancy has increased from 68 years of age to 79. Remember the day when on the *Today Show* those who turned 100 were feted with special greetings. Today, attaining that age is not so unusual. During that same trip to Israel in June, Bryna and I paid a Shiva call on Shira, the wife of Rabbi Mordecai Silverstein, who served as the interim Rabbi at the Moriah Congregation in Deerfield. Her mother, Rivka Goldberg, passed away at the age of 96. What was more astounding was that her aunt, her mother's sister, Adina Katzoff, the wife of Dr. Louis Katzoff, a past Education Director of here at Beth El, is still alive. While Adina was not present at the Shiva house she, at 104 years of age, was mourning the loss of her younger sister.

On July 28 of this year the *Chicago Tribune* printed an obituary of Mildred Salk, who at the age of 112 passed away peacefully in her home surrounded by family after an extraordinary long and healthy life. She was widowed in 1978 and at age 98 began entries into her personal diary with happy stories of her childhood and family events. Can you imagine what she saw in her lifetime from 1904 to July 28, 2017? Perhaps those types of obituaries will be not be so rare in the future.

Our perspective on old age varies throughout our lifetime. In the 2009 PEW research study on *Growing Old in America*, the survey respondents ages 18-29 believed that the average person becomes old at age 60. Middle-age respondents put the threshold closer to 70, and respondents ages 65 and above said that the average person does not become old until turning 74. Our perspective changes throughout our life. Whether you are at that stage now, or your parents and grandparents are, the issues of aging should concern you.

Our society does not look kindly upon old age. Many are the cosmetic and medical procedures which enhance beautiful looks and extol the vibrancy of youth. In ancient times some authors saw old age in that light, as well. Seneca, the Roman stoic philosopher of the first century, stated that "old age is an incurable disease." Cicero, the Roman politician of the same era in his *Essays On Old Age and Friendship* wrote: "I find there are four reasons for old age being thought unhappy. First, that it withdraws us to inactive employments; second that it enfeebles the body; third, that it deprives us of nearly all physical pleasures; fourth, that it is the next step to death."

The poet, Shel Silverstein, in a commentary on our prayer of *Shema Koleinu* wrote these words: Said the little boy, "sometimes I drop my spoon," said the old man, "I do that too." The little boy whispered: "I wet my pants." "I do that too," said the old man. Said the little boy, "I often cry." The old man nodded, "So do I." "But worst of all," said the boy, "it seems grown-ups don't pay attention to me." And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand, "I know what you mean," said the old man.

These authors see old age as something that is not desirable. As one Rabbi commented, "Old age is one big sickness, yet all aspire to it." But that was not always the case. In fact, in early Biblical times old age was not seen to have been part of the human condition. The Talmud in the tractate Bava Metzia states: "Until Abraham there were no physical signs of old age.

Consequently, one who wished to speak to Abraham might mistakenly speak to Isaac [who was of identical appearance], and one who wished to speak to Isaac might mistakenly speak to Abraham. Thereupon Abraham prayed, and [physical signs] of old age came into its existence. As it is written, ‘And Abraham was aged, well on in years.’” Abraham saw old age as a blessing.

Traditional Jewish sources reflect this apparent paradox. On the one hand, they realistically depict the impairments and losses during the aging process, while on the other hand, old age is treated as a positive and worthy stage of life. Our verses from the Psalms are not the only ones in which old age is characterized by concern for physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual impairments. Isaac becomes blind. David is so feeble that his body is constantly cold. These are merely two examples. But even as old age can bring forth infirmities and insecurities, Jewish tradition sees positive aspects of aging. The Torah tells us, “You shall rise before the aged [gray haired] and show deference [*hiddur*] to the old. You shall fear your G-d: I am the Lord.” This statement dictates preferential treatment towards older adults. In fact, on Israeli buses you will find that verse present on seats close to the front door so that those sitting in these seats will be prepared to give them up to those who are of an elderly age. The Rabbis mandate attitudes of reverence and honor towards people who are considered today to be senior citizens. This reverential treatment is for both Jews and non-Jews alike. Respect for the elderly is not based on their capacity to contribute to society. They are inherently worthy of being honored.

The Torah and later rabbinic sources remind us that elders have much to teach. They have life experience, they possess an ability to look at life in a different fashion from those who may be at a much younger age. In fact, it is a *Zaken*, an elderly person, who is supposed to represent *Ze Shekanah Chochmah*, a person who has inherited wisdom. The guidance of the elderly is seen as critical to the survival of the Jewish people. As Rabbah teaches us: “When is Israel able to stand? When it has elders... for one who takes advice from elders never stumbles.”

In an essay written by a child in the third grade entitled *What is a Grandmother?* The young child wrote: “A grandmother is a lady who has no little children of her own. She likes other people’s. A grandfather is a man grandmother. Grandmothers don’t have to do anything except be there. When they take us for walks, they slow down past things like pretty flowers and caterpillars. They never say ‘hurry up.’ Grandmothers don’t have to be smart, they only have to answer questions like ‘Why isn’t G-d married?’ and ‘How come dogs chase cats?’ When they read to us, they don’t skip lines or mind if we ask for the same story over again. Everyone should have a grandmother – especially if you don’t have a TV, because they are the only grownups who have time.”

The sagacity of older age allows one to appreciate life a little more, to take the time to smell the flowers, to spend the time with little children, and to allow ourselves to appreciate the world and all that is in it.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in an address to the White House conference on aging in 1961 entitled *To Grow in Wisdom* stated: “What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference, yet

we do not even grant them equality. One father finds it possible to sustain a dozen children, yet a dozen children find it impossible to sustain one father.”

I think it is important to put old age into the proper perspective, both in terms of how we age and how we deal with it in our families and in our community. In a book entitled *The Privilege of Aging*, the author Patricia Gottlieb Shapiro, states: “While many of us lament growing older and wish we were younger, the fact is, it is a privilege to age – especially when you consider the alternative. Coping with an aging body, losing friends and family, becoming ill: these take their toll. We all have unique ways of responding to these shifts based on who we are, what our earlier life has been like, and how we feel about ourselves today.”

She quotes the actress Laura Linney, who wrote in an article in *The New York Times* on July 28, 2010: “Sagging skin, waning energy and creaky joints are not fun.” But, she also said that the early deaths of beloved friends had opened her eyes to the fact that growing old is the greatest of blessings. We receive the privilege of adding not only years to our lives, but also meaningful life experiences to our years which we can share with others.

Shapiro informs us that the Jewish attitude toward aging differs from the general attitude prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western society. Jewish views are based on the unique respect for the wisdom that comes with age and a reverence for our own parents and elderly in general. The Torah commands that we respect all elderly, believing that the challenges and experiences they have encountered throughout their lives bring wisdom.

She offers ten keys to successful aging including staying involved and active; building a support system; take good care of yourself; continuing to learn; and developing a spiritual life. These attitudes and attributes, she suggests, will bring healthy aging and much blessing not only to you but to those around you.

In a book entitled *Aging – The Fulfillment of Life*, Henri Nouwen and Walter Gaffney write, “Aging does not need to be hidden or denied, but can be understood, affirmed, and experienced as a process of growth by which the mystery of life is slowly revealed to us.”

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, known simply as Reb Zalman, along with Ronald Miller wrote a book entitled *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: a Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older*. In it they quote Barry Barkan, a gerontologist who writes: “An elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential and whose life continues to have within it promise for, and connection, to the future. An elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy, and pleasure, and her or his birthright to these remains intact. Moreover, an elder is a person who deserves respect and honor and whose work it is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and formulate this into a legacy for future generations.” This, they suggest, is a formula for success - to use the best of one’s abilities, to continue to grow, learn, create, and to serve as a mentor to future generations.

Together, the two authors launched a Spiritual Eldering Institute. Its purpose was to address the issues that pertain to transitions. One can use aging as a positive force, both for oneself and for society at-large, they suggest. We must be not merely a youth-oriented society, but we must also

understand the privilege of old age and be grateful for that privilege as we give back our life experience to others. Aging does not have to be seen as an illness, it can be seen as a time of spiritual growth and giving back to society.

At the same time that we prepare for elderhood and the aging process we must learn in our society to care for those who are aged. Heschel in his White House conference talk, stated: "The test of a people is how it behaves towards the old. It is easy to love children. Even tyrants and dictators make a point of being fond of children. But the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless are the true gold mines of a culture." The way we treat our elders should show how we want to be treated ourselves if we are fortunate enough to make it to that stage in life. It is imperative that our society acknowledge the dignity of old age and the responsibility of caring for those who are in need of support.

A poem was found among the possessions of an elderly lady who died in a geriatric ward of a hospital. An anonymous poem, we do not know who wrote it, but its lesson is clear.

#### SEE ME

What do you see, nurses, what do you see?  
Are you thinking, when you look at me –  
A crabby old woman, not very wise,  
Uncertain of habit, with far-away eyes,  
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply,  
When you say in a loud voice – "I do wish you'd try."  
Who seems not to notice the things that you do,  
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe,  
Who unresisting or not, lets you do as you will,  
With bathing and feeding, the long day to fill.  
Is that what you're thinking, is that what you see?  
Then open your eyes, nurse, you're looking at ME...  
I'll tell you who I am, as I sit here so still;  
As I rise at your bidding, as I eat at your will.  
I'm a small child of ten with a father and mother,  
Brothers and sisters, who love one another  
A young girl at sixteen with wings on her feet.  
Dreaming that soon now a lover she'll meet;  
A bride soon at twenty – my heart gives a leap,  
Remembering the vows that I promised to keep;  
At twenty-five now I have young of my own,  
Who need me to build a secure, happy home;  
A woman of thirty, my young now grow fast,  
Bound to each other with ties that should last;  
At forty, my young sons have grown and are gone,  
But my man's beside me to see I don't mourn;  
At fifty once more babies play 'round my knee,  
Again we know children, my loved one and me.  
Dark days are upon me, my husband is dead,

I look at the future, I shudder with dread,  
For my young are all rearing young of their own,  
And I think of the years and the love that I've known;  
I'm an old woman now and nature is cruel –  
'Tis her jest to make old age look like a fool.  
The body is crumbled, grace and vigor depart,  
There is now a stone where once I had a heart,  
But inside this old carcass a young girl still dwells,  
And now and again my battered heart swells.  
I remember the joys, I remember the pain,  
And I'm loving and living life over again,  
I think of the years, all too few – gone too fast,  
And accept the stark fact that nothing can last –  
So open your eyes, nurses, open and see,  
Not a crabby woman, look closer, nurses – see ME!

Heschel stated: "We must seek ways to overcome the traumatic fear of being old, the prejudice, and the discrimination against those advanced in years. All men are created equal, including those advanced in years. Being old is not necessarily the same as being stale. The effort to restore the dignity of old age will depend on our ability to revive the equation of old age and wisdom."

Our tradition teaches us that we are responsible for all people. When Moses demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites into the desert to serve the Lord, Pharaoh inquired as to whom he was referring. Moses replies, "*Benareinu u'Vzekeinenu Nelech*, "We will all go young and old." We are one community, we must take care of the young and the not so young. We must respect the learning capacities of our children and the teaching capacities of our elders. We must learn to use the opportunity to grow in wisdom, to search for spirituality, and to create an elderhood of dignity for all.

When I was rejected at the Magen David Adom mobile station in Jerusalem, it forced me to look into the mirror and see who I am and who I might be, to confront the fact that I am closer to the end than the beginning. Though that may be the case, at the same time, hopefully, I pray that I have years left of meaning and significance to add to the life of my family and my community.

No matter at what stage of life we currently find ourselves the challenges of aging are real and profound. Whether we are elders ourselves, or taking care of elders, or watching others do so, the words of the prayer *Shema Koleinu* are stark and realistic: "Do not cast us off in old age; when our strength fails, do not forsake us." But they are not meant to make us despondent. They are there to challenge us, our families, and our society.

I pray that we may be privileged to live in the shadow of G-d all the days of our lives and be blessed with a proper perspective on life, its stages, and its challenges.