

Vayeilekh Deuteronomy 31: 1-30
Yom Kippur
October 4, 2014

Today's Torah reading opens with Moses addressing his people with the words: "I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active." The parsha on the first day of Rosh Hashanah opened with the comment: "Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him." Sarah's exact age at the time of this event is controversial, but roughly speaking, she was 90. Now we can complain that none of this is very plausible or we can argue about how many biblical years are equivalent to one contemporary year, but I think it is fair to conclude that the High Holidays, though they deal with many themes including atonement and forgiveness, rebirth and the cycle of life, quite specifically address old age. The question I would like to raise for us to consider today is therefore: what does Jewish tradition tell us about how to live well as we age?

Let's begin with today's text. Moses may say he can "no longer be active," but there is no period of deterioration, of protracted chronic illness, of growing dependence on others. There is certainly no period of mental decline, nor is there a period of joyous retirement, basking in the sun, leisurely munching on figs and pomegranates. There is no slow fade out for Moses; no feeling superannuated, just life at a feverish pitch until the end. And Moses does not go gracefully into the night. When God tells Moses that he is not to cross into the Promised Land, but rather Joshua is to go in his stead, Moses protests vehemently. According to

one midrash, when Moses hears he is about to die, he immediately draws a small circle around himself, stands in it and says, “Master of the Universe, I will not budge from here until you void that decree.” God ignores him, so Moses prays loudly for God to change his mind. God finds the loud prayers distracting and commands his angels to fly down to earth and “bolt all the gates of the firmament” to keep out the noise. Moses pleads, he argues. God remains silent. So Moses offers a compromise: perhaps his bones could enter the promised land or maybe he could enter the promised land incognito, as a “beast of the field,” grazing on grass. This finally evokes a response from God, who says, “Enough. Speak no more to me of this matter.” But Moses refuses to give up, saying: “Master of the Universe, shall the feet that went up to the firmament, the face that confronted the Presence, the hands that received the Torah from your hand— shall these now lick dust?”

To which God responds, “Yes. Such must be the way of the world: each generation is to have its own interpreters of Scripture, each generation is to have...its own leader.” What I argued that this means when I spoke on Yom Kippur a few years ago is that the biblical injunction to *choose life* does not mean that people who are desperately ill are obligated to choose technological interventions that offer some chance, however miniscule that chance and however burdensome the intervention, to go on. In fact, as the story of Moses shows all too clearly, at some point life will end and it is our responsibility to accept that reality when it comes, just as it is to live fully during the time we have.

If the story of Moses tells us something about facing death, the story of Abraham tells us something about the years that come before the very end. We read just 10 days ago about how Abraham behaved after Isaac's birth, shortly after he himself turned 100. Abraham listened to Sarah when she demanded that he cast out Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's first son. This episode is the source of much commentary and I myself argued in one dvar torah that Abraham should not be seen as banishing his son Ishmael; rather, his behavior should be construed as helping his son separate from his parents, as cutting the cord, as pushing him out of the nest to allow him to become independent. But the more I think about this episode, the more difficulty I have accepting any attempt to exonerate Abraham. He may have been over 100, but he was not always a wise man. And after the story about throwing out Hagar and Ishmael with just a little bread and water, we learn of a series of interactions between Abraham and Abimelech, the local king. The first thing that Abraham did when he arrived in Gerar was to steadfastly maintain that Sarah was his sister, which led Abimelech to conclude that she was fair game; he then proceeded to take her as his wife. It was only through divine intervention that this misunderstanding was corrected. Finally, it was Abimelech, not Abraham, who suggested that the two sign a non-aggression pact. Abraham by then had the wisdom to agree, though it wasn't his idea. From which we can conclude that wisdom is not a necessary concomitant of old age, but that the possibility of learning, of changing, of becoming better, continues into old age.

Torah is a good place to start our quest for learning what our tradition has to say about aging, but it's just that, a beginning. What can the rabbis tell us? It turns out they address three discrete questions: what accounts for the longevity that some people experience? How should those of us who are not old treat those who are? And what is the right way for older people to live?

With respect to the rationale for a long life, the rabbis tended to subscribe to the view that many years of life are a reward for good behavior. In particular, "length of days" is assured for those who "honor their parents," for those who do not remove a mother bird's young from the nest in her presence, and for those who "employ equal measures in commerce," which I think means people who don't put a finger on the scale when weighing an item for sale. But as we think today about those we have lost—including some precious friends and family members who were struck down before they reached old age, and including the 6 million who died during the Shoah, among whom were 1 million children—we realize that righteous living does not necessarily result in long life. Moreover, some of the worst tyrants in history have made it into old age: both Stalin and Pol Pot lived to age 73 (not old by today's standards, but old in their time and place). Mao lived to be 83 and Kim Il Sung to 84. Clearly, the correlation between righteous living and a long life is very weak. This isn't to say we shouldn't try to live virtuously, and much that is good may derive from good behavior, but we cannot equate longevity and virtue.

The rabbis devote considerable ink to discussing how the young should treat the old. Most of what they suggest is that older people, usually defined as

those over 60 or 70, should be treated with great deference. In fact, some argue that the attitude should be one of “reverence and fear,” and that younger people should never contradict the words of an older person. These claims generally derive from the belief that older individuals, because of their age, are the repository of great wisdom, which as we saw with Abraham on Rosh Hashanah, is not necessarily true. But what I think is worth paying attention to in the rabbinic commentary is the observation that respect should not be predicated on the continued capacity to contribute to society; for even someone who is “broken,” by which I think is meant someone who is frail or has dementia, is to be cherished and nourished, just as the Israelites cherished the first broken set of tablets.

Our tradition also tells us that older people should be integrated into the community and not kept apart. When Moses was asked who would go with him out of Egypt, he answered, “both young and old.” Implicitly he was saying that for a community to be a community, its young members and its old members must interact. Relentless age segregation is a bad thing; we all have much to learn from each other. And we also have the line from Leviticus, “You shall rise before an elder and allow the beauty, glory, and majesty of their faces to emerge.” The emphasis here is on the responsibility of the young to “bring out the beauty in their elders’ faces;” but it also tells us that older individuals *have* a certain glory and beauty that they should cultivate. This is a nice segue to the older people themselves and the question in which I am most interested, and which should interest many in this congregation, and that is how to live a good life as we age.

It turns out that the rabbis didn't have very much to say about this question. To be sure, the biblical and the rabbinic commentaries on aging come from an era when very few people survived to old age. We don't have reliable data about Talmudic times, but in 1900, only 47% of the American population survived to age 60 and only 15% to age 80. Life expectancy for a white male born in the year 1900 was 48 years. Today it is 76. Perhaps more relevant, since it takes into account infant mortality, if you lived to age 60 in the year 1900, you could expect to live another 14 years, to 74. If you survive to age 60 today, you can expect on average to live another 22 years, to age 82. Not only do people live longer today, but we can expect that during much of the extra time, we will remain vigorous. The idea of retirement at age 65 originated with Bismarck, at a time when it was the norm was for people to work as long as they were strong and healthy and then, quite abruptly, to get sick, stop working, and die. The period of retirement, mercifully from the perspective of social security, was expected to be short. Today, many people will have 10, 20, or 30 years of "retirement." So how to spend that time is a new issue, an issue colored by uncertainty as none of us knows whether the autumn of life will be measured in decades, years, or months.

Now I said earlier that the rabbis didn't have terribly much specific to say about this. Perhaps the reason, aside from the demographic realities of their time, is that their answer was no different from their usual answer to the question of how to lead a good life. What we are commanded to do, according to our tradition, is to perform acts of loving kindness, to welcome the stranger, to visit the sick, to rejoice with our loved ones, to console the bereaved, and to make

peace when there is strife. And above all, we are to study Torah because “the study of Torah is equal to them all, because it leads to them all.”

If the rabbis of Talmudic times didn’t have much else to say about old age, plenty of Jewish thinkers of more recent vintage do. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, in his essay “From Age-ing to Sage-ing,” talks about the September, October, and November of life. Most of us have learned to use a computer, he says, and perhaps to use a spreadsheet. “But we haven’t learned to look at life contemplatively.” He urges older people to become “spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible.”

The developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, who was born Jewish although he converted to Catholicism, wrote about the stages of psychosocial development and characterized the final stage as a struggle between integrity and despair. He recognized that this is a time of changing social roles, of experiencing the loss of others, a period when people often stop working in the job they held for many years, and a time of increased awareness of mortality. He saw it as a time for reflecting back on life, on trying to create out of one’s life a coherent, meaningful whole. But what he did not address, and what other parts of the Jewish tradition do, is the responsibility of the individual to continue learning, to continue to be part of the larger community, and to continue to give.

Rather than focusing exclusively on past accomplishments, as Erickson advocates, we should continue to develop our relationships with family and friends and to engage with the outside world. Rabbi Dayle Friedman, until

recently on the faculty of the Reconstructionist College in Philadelphia, writes that old age can be a time of broadening our concern, of involvement with others and the world around us in order to create a better life for those who will live in the future. The Torah and Talmud make much of the responsibility to teach our children, for example to teach that we were once strangers in the land, to teach the story of the Exodus, and more generally, to impart the wisdom of Torah, the Tree of Life. But Rabbi Friedman reminds us that the responsibility does not end with children—it continues to grandchildren. The Talmud tells the story of how Hadrian, walking along near Tiberias, came upon an old man planting trees. “How old are you?” he asked. The man said he was 100. “Fool,” Hadrian responded. “Do you think you shall live to eat fruit from these trees?” To which the old man replied, “As my ancestors planted for me, so I am planting for my children and my grandchildren.”

Not only can we teach as we age, we can also continue to learn. The words from Proverbs, “Torah is a tree of life to all who cling to it; all who uphold it are happy” apply to everyone, regardless of age. And the kind of learning in which older people engage is often deeper and more nuanced than the quicker, easier learning characteristic of children. As one commentator put it: “One who learns when he is a child, what is he like? Like ink written on fresh paper. But one who learns when old, what is he like? Like ink written on a paper of erasures.”

What if we suffer major disabilities or illness as we age? How, then, are we to live? The rabbis were well aware of the changes that occur in people as they age. We hear in Kings 1 that “King David was old, advanced in years; and

they covered him with clothes, but he could not become warm.” My 88-year-old mother lives with us, and I can assure you that the difficulty staying warm is just as much an issue now as it was 3000 years ago; all that has changed is that we have central heating and the capacity to create separate heating zones in our homes today. We also have the text from the Talmud, “Youth is a crown of roses; old age is a crown of thorns,” which alludes to the indignities that often accompany aging: hearing impairment, visual loss, mobility problems, incontinence, cognitive difficulties, and chronic disease. How we should live if we have these limitations is no different from how we should live if we do not, except in degree. We should learn and teach and engage with the world—to the extent we are able—recognizing that being rather than doing, relationships rather than more tangible accomplishments, may be the measure of our success. And it is the responsibility of the community as a whole to facilitate older people doing exactly this, whatever their limitations.

So aging is an opportunity to pay more attention to things that we may have neglected earlier, that we may not have had much time for while raising children or holding a full time job. It is a chance to turn inward, delving into spiritual pursuits, as well as to turn outward, taking on tzedekah projects. It offers the opportunity, to the extent that we are up for it physically and mentally, both to learn and to teach. Some contemporary activists have even suggested creating a new “coming of age” ritual to recognize and honor this phase of life. Savina Teubal created a “Simchat Hochmah,” a rite of passage ceremony establishing her place in the community as an “elder.” Many variants of this rite have been

created, but all aspire to mark the beginning of a new phase of life, just as a bar or bat mitzvah or a wedding do. Simchat Hochmah, in Teubal's words, "validates the part of life already lived, and empowers the portion of our future." She recommends celebrating the event to coincide with the reading of Lech Lecha, because this parsha focuses on the call made to Sarai and Abram to begin the quest for a new spirituality. She suggests that in recognition of the new status as an elder of the congregation, the older person may wish to choose a new name and ask the congregation to offer a blessing. And in memory of the promises and covenants received by our ancestors, the celebrant may wish to make a promise to the community to engage in a particular activity. The ceremony ends with the planting of a tree by the participant, symbolizing the nurturing of future generations.

So the true wisdom of old age comes from recognizing that we have an opportunity to do what we should have been doing all along but perhaps haven't always. The corollary, for those here who are in the spring or summer of their lives, is that they don't have to wait until the gates are closing to figure out what's important and to attend to those things—learning, teaching, Tikkun Olam—that matter.

I will close with a poem about time by Marcia Falk from her new collection, *The Days Between: Blessings, Poems, and Directions of the Heart for the Jewish High Holiday Season*, just published this summer:

Time

We use it—wisely or not. We fill it and mark it.

We try to stop it, but there is no end to it.

And yet, we never have enough.

It is a circle, and it is a line. Moving forward, day by day, year by year, we come round again. Again the spring, again the fall—but every leaf a new one, every fall a new shape falling.

Always starting, never finished, we live always in the between.

No time, we say, we have no time. Yet we have all the time in the world.

And there is no time like now.

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