

In this week's Torah portion we read of Jacob's old age. His son, Joseph, now viceroy of Egypt brings his brothers, their families and his elderly father to Egypt to escape the ravages of protracted famine in Canaan. There, Jacob is granted an audience with Pharaoh, who asks the patriarch his age. "ימי שני מגורי שלשים ומאת שנה," -- מעט ורעים היו ימי שני חיי, ולא השיגו ימי שני חיי אבותי בימי מגוריהם -- The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty, " Ya'akov answers, "Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my ancestors during their sojourns" (*Genesis* 47:9).

Pharaoh asks a simple question regarding age; Jacob responds with an editorial. His answer is puzzling, for if he has lived to the ripe age of 130 how can he describe his years as few? Equally surprising, Jacob speaks as if his life is already over, as if the final tally of has been reckoned. . .yet the patriarch lives another seventeen years. And if he has survived to witness his beloved son Joseph become the second most powerful man in all Egypt -- not to mention the birth of grandchildren and great-grandchildren -- how can Jacob make a blanket statement as though all the years of his life have been hard?

Many classical commentators such as Nachmanides and Sforino suggest that Jacob's trials and tribulations aged him prematurely. Fleeing the wrath of Esau, the hard years of work for Laban, the long period spent mourning Joseph, the son whom he believed dead. Surely if viewed solely through a prism of pain, Jacob's years were "few and hard" indeed.

Yet I find myself wondering whether or not Ya'akov was simply lonely in his old age. His wives, Rachel and Leah, were no longer alive; his children fully grown and preoccupied with their own families. As the Talmud wisely notes, "רחמי דאבא אבני," -- רחמי דבני אבני -- The love of a parent is for his child, but the love of a child is for *his*

child” (*B. Sotah* 49a). Jacob’s children lived close by and accorded their aged father full respect. But how much time could they take off from their hectic schedules to visit the “old man”? There was famine in the land and times were tough, they had families of their own to feed, and children to raise. Certainly Ya’akov’s offspring did not intend to ignore their father, but immersed in the demands of their own day-to-day lives, it was difficult to find “quality time” to spend with him. How quiet Jacob’s house seemed without the commotion of twelve boys and a daughter running around! Perhaps our ancestor responded to Pharaoh as he did because he felt cheated somehow . . . He had come through so much only to grow old alone. Was *this* the reward for a lifetime of hard work and suffering?

Today’s life expectancy is longer than ever. On the surface this would seem to be good news, but it is not always clear that longevity is a blessing. The issue goes beyond the fact that those who live longer are more vulnerable to chronic ill-health. There are also many men and women of mature age who lead lives of great loneliness; sound of mind and body, yet bereft of family and friends. Having worked a lifetime to attain the freedom of retirement, time now weighs heavily on their hands -- not as a gift, but as a burden. For them, Jacob’s response to Pharaoh is more than a biblical phrase; it is a living reality.

“Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be. Youth shows but half. . .” so wrote the 19th century English poet, Robert Browning. Each month as we announce the new moon in *Birkat Haḥodesh* we ask God for **חיים ארוכים** -- long life, the blessing of many rich years of work, the privilege of watching our children and grandchildren grow up. What could be better than attaining a ripe age in relatively good health?

Yet even as we hope for the gift of a lengthy life, we are ambivalent and suspicious of the aging process. As the actress Doris Day once noted, “The only frightening thing about middle age is the knowledge that you’ll grow out of it.” People despair at the first gray hair or the first wrinkle, enlisting the aid of a multi-million dollar

industry in the campaign to turn back the clock. Many are the potions and lotions, the botox injections, and types of plastic surgery found in the arsenal of those who would do battle with the signs of aging. Birthdays increasingly become occasions for depression, rather than causes for celebration; while poking fun at the process of aging has become the most popular birthday greeting card theme of all. Indeed, after a certain point in life, people are often reluctant to share their ages with others as if such were a cause of embarrassment instead of celebration. It would seem that we are a nation of modern Ponce de Leons searching in vain for that mythical fountain of youth.

The anxiety associated with growing older, however, is not limited to the world of cosmetics; it is an attitude one finds deeply ingrained in our society. Men and women in their late fifties or early sixties who lose their jobs often find it difficult to locate new employment; their age is seen as a liability rather than an asset; the maturity and experience they may bring to the workplace is frequently dismissed as irrelevant.

We fear the visible signs of aging because they remind us of our mortality. Precisely for this reason the ancient Jewish author, Ben Sira, tells us, “אל תביש אנוש” -- Shame not the old; we shall all be numbered among them” (*Ben Sira* 8:6). Let us not forget that mature age is a privilege, not a punishment; a resource, not a drain. It is true that wisdom does not automatically accompany age; yet wisdom is the crown of experience, and much experience requires time to gain. When we relegate older members of our community to the sidelines we miss the benefit of their insights. In the long run, it is our foolish society which loses the most because we stand in dire need of just such wisdom.

Judaism holds that a culture is judged in large measure by the way it treats its elders. As the Torah commands us in the book of *Leviticus*, “מפני שיבה תקום והדרת” --You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord” (*Leviticus* 19:32). In a comment on this

verse *midrash* tells the story of a king who would rise to honor an elderly commoner saying, “Since God has chosen to honor him with long life, how can I not do the same” (*Vayiqra Rabbah* 25:5).

But for us it is insufficient to demonstrate the trappings of respect; the very fabric of Jewish teaching directs us to seek counsel from our elders as well. It is no accident that rabbinic Hebrew describes our sages as “זקנים,” as elders, regardless of actual chronological age. Indeed, as Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar indicates in the talmudic tractate of *Megillah*: When young and inexperienced individuals say, “Erect the Temple,” while elders say, “Destroy it,” we heed the advice of the elders to demolish rather than build. As to the underlying premise of the text -- מפני שסתירת זקנים בנין ובנין נערים סתירה--the building of the young may lead to destruction, yet the destruction of the old may lead to building. The perspective of time and wisdom can make all the difference in the world.

Yet in our most modern of ages, the gold watch of retirement is not intended to keep time; it signifies instead that one’s career is out of time. Like the daughters of King Lear, our society says, “O sir! you are old; nature in you stands on the very verge of her confine: you should be rul’d and led by some discretion that discerns your state better than you yourself.” Or to put it more succinctly, out with the old, in with the new.

We devalue the treasures of age when we treat our elders as children, when we substitute television for companionship, when we believe that card game and handicrafts are an adequate substitute for meaningful pursuits. For those who are of sound mind and body, the droning of a TV cannot replace the voices of family and friends, nor can recreation take the place of a sense of significance and purpose in life. We trivialize the existence of elder Americans when we believe they only need a deck of cards or a jigsaw puzzle to be content. In the words of the late theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Old men need a vision, not only recreation; old men need a dream, not only memory.” The same, of course, would apply to women of mature years as well.

American society would do well to take a cue from Jewish teaching in this matter. We must begin to revise the subtle and not so subtle prejudices against aging, to revive the association of wisdom with maturity, and to see the elder members of our community as a valuable, though underutilized resource. They are treasure troves of experience and history, who can and should play important roles in community and family life. In so doing we will not merely change the way in which society treats its senior citizens, but the way we look at all life. “In order to be a master one must learn how to be an apprentice,” Heschel teaches. “Reverence for the old, dialogue between generations, is as important to the dignity of the young as it is for the well-being of the elderly.”

May we live to see a day when the biblical words of the book of Joel come true: והיה אחרי-כן, אשפוך את רוחי על כל בשר, ונבאו בניכם ובנותיכם זקניכם חלומות יחלמו -- “The day shall come,” says the prophet in God’s name, “when I will pour out my spirit on all humankind; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your elders shall dream dreams.” How impoverished our lives would be, how poor in spirit, if not for the dreams and visions, the wisdom and experience of those rich in years!