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GROWING OLD JEWISH

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Most of us look forward to the first two “benchmark decades” of life, when we turn 20 and 30. The age of 20, more or less, is the beginning of freedom—from parents and childhood restrictions, from economic dependence, and from teenage growing-up pains. This decade and the one that follows are the beginning of productive creativity for many of us—starting our own family, and acquiring position, possessions, prestige, and power. The age of 30, more or less, is the beginning of liberation from our own mental and emotional incompetence, from the immaturity of youthful missteps, and from the struggle of trying to determine who we are and what we are to do in the world.

But the benchmark-decades of 40 and 50 are often less welcome, more unsettling for us. At 40 we are entering “middle age,” no longer “young,” and we begin to see that the window of opportunity to achieve our goals won’t remain open to us permanently. While at our prime in this decade of life, our physical and mental powers at their peak, pressures for maximum performance are also probably higher than at any other time.

As we enter the fifth decade of life the pressures are increasing, because we see that the window is beginning to close, “old age” looms off in the distance, and our physical and mental powers are beginning to wane, if ever so slowly at first.

Finally we enter the sixth decade, forced to acknowledge that “old age” is upon us. We inevitably begin to take stock of our successes and failures. We begin to anticipate whatever final gift of life we will yet receive

Is there anyone who has reached this point of life without trouble and travail?

Maybe it’s like with the *tzadikim* (צדיקים), the righteous ones; it’s possible to be saintly, but very few of us are—maybe one in a million. In our experience, that’s roughly the proportion of people whose lives are free of trouble and travail

When Jacob went down to Egypt, as we read in *parshat* (Torah portion) *Vayigash*, he stood before

Pharaoh as an old man. The Egyptian ruler was shocked at the patriarch’s age, because the Egyptians were not nearly so long-lived.

He asked Jacob, “How many are the days of the years of your life?” (Genesis 47:8)

Pharaoh understood, according to Rabbi Nosson Scherman, that although a person may have lived many years, “he has probably made full and productive use of only a few of his days, since most people fall far short of their potential.” In effect, says Rabbi Scherman, he was asking Jacob, “How many truly meaningful days [have] you . . . had in your long life?”

And Jacob answered, “The days of the years of my sojourns have been 130 years. Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life. . . .” (Genesis 47:9)

Jacob seemingly made a conscious distinction between the number of years of his life and the quality of those years. In short, the *years* of his life were full of trouble and travail, but there were *days* of joy and fulfillment too.

Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340) teaches that, “When Jacob replied, he was careful not to equate the years he had been on earth as ‘life.’ He said: ‘the days of my sojourn on earth, etc.’ This [viewpoint] is typical of the righteous. They consider themselves as merely transients in this world.”

There is a well-known story about the Chofetz Chayim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1839-1933), himself a *tzadik*—one of the righteous ones. He was living in very meager quarters, virtually without furniture. He received a guest, a merchant of substantial means, who was traveling through the area and had stopped to seek his advice.

When the merchant entered the Rabbi’s quarters he was shocked by the virtually complete absence of furniture—there was only one chair.

The visitor remarked upon the lack of furnishings, and the Rabbi replied, “Where is *your* furniture?”

The chagrined merchant answered, “I’m only passing through, so of course I don’t have any furniture here.”

To which the Rabbi replied: “It’s the same for me, I’m only passing through this place.”

The point was not that this world was so unimportant to the rabbi that he didn’t need to acquire any possessions here. On the contrary, the Rabbi’s point of view was that this world is terribly important—so important that one should not squander all the brief time and energy we have here to acquire things.

So how are we to increase the days of joy and fulfillment in our lives?

In his play “The Price,” Arthur Miller tells us that, “Years ago a person, he was unhappy, didn’t know what to do with himself, he’d go to church [or synagogue], start a revolution, something. Now you’re unhappy? Can’t figure it out? What is the salvation? *Go shopping.*”

Judaism, however, teaches to the contrary. In the words of the Rebbe of Rizhin (Israel Friedman, 1798-1850), “He who wishes happiness must bear

with patience a measure of unhappiness. Light can enter only where darkness has been.”

But if we are in darkness, how are we to find the source of the light that we’re seeking.

Rabbi Levi Yitzkhak (1740-1810) teaches, “. . . God formed humankind, man and woman, and God made them in the Divine image. God commanded them to be fruitful and multiply. . . . And God gave them the power to sense and to focus God’s radiant light. Each one was given the ability to become aware of and to attenuate God’s presence according to his or her will. Some could transform the light into wisdom, others into life. Some could turn it into fear of God, others into love, and some into the goods of this world. Each human being, having been created in God’s image, was of God’s all-encompassing, all-filling light. Each could know God and each could attract and direct that light.”

Jacob understood that all of us *together*, a people in congregational community, day by day, using to the fullest the combined gifts God has given us, are the source of light in each other’s lives as we grow old Jewish.

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