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Standing at an Unprecedented Demographic Crossroads: Reflections on Aging

As a young rabbinical student, one of my first internships was working at a nursing home in Northeast Philadelphia. As a chaplain, I spent several hours a week making visits on the floor. Afterwards I would process my experiences with a small group of chaplains and our supervisor.

The facility was run-down and depressing, and it served a particularly vulnerable, low-income population. There never seemed to be enough water at the place; the water pitchers left for the residents were always empty. You could certainly sympathize with the underpaid, undervalued, overworked staff who were pulled in every direction just trying to keep the residents safe. But still, there was never enough water.

I began to think of the nursing home as a warehouse for the old. The residents, with their vacant eyes, were so alone. I rarely saw family visiting. I rarely saw residents talking to each other. Mostly the blaring television filled the silence.

Sometimes I thought the residents on the Alzheimer's floor were better off because they didn't know what was going on. I remember the old woman with long white hair who reverted back to her native language of Chinese, and not a soul could understand her. I remember the towering old man who walked around with his sweatpants dragging on the floor. No one had found a way to keep them up, or maybe he pulled them down. I remember the woman who thought she was in her childhood home, so happy because she thought I was her mother who was there to care for her.

America is aging and we haven't come to terms with what that means. We are living longer. Much longer. In the last hundred years our life expectancy has increased by nearly 30 years in this country. People over the age of 60 are the fastest growing segment of our society. Never before have there been so many people over the age of 85. In the words of Jane Gross, author of *A Bittersweet Season: Caring for Our Aging Parents and Ourselves*, "[W]e stand at an unprecedented demographic crossroads."

As a society we do not typically embrace the elderly as precious resources. Back in 1961, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel delivered a talk on the White House Conference on Aging entitled "To Grow in Wisdom." He wrote, "What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten."

It can be easy to discard and forget the old. Maybe that's why, on Yom Kippur, we recite Psalm 71: "Do not cast me off in old age; when my strength fails, do not forsake me" (Psalm 71:9).

As a society we would do well to not only heed this advice, but to see the elderly as people with decades of wisdom to give and stories to share. We would do well to consider them blessings in our midst, valued, appreciated, and treasured.

Rabbi Heschel continues: “The test of a people is how it behaves toward 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.”

I remember pondering, when I changed my kids’ diapers or put their teeth under their pillows when they fell out, why we find this kind of caretaking endearing at one end of the life spectrum but not at the other. Perhaps it’s because we see hope in children. The elderly remind us that we are vulnerable, that our youth and beauty will fade. We are scared of our own fragility and mortality.

The truth is that we are all growing old, and our loved ones are growing old.

Most of us will experience caring for the old – a grandparent, parent, spouse, sibling, or friend – either from afar or up close. This is when standing at an unprecedented demographic crossroads becomes personal.

Are we prepared to navigate the vastly complex world of aging, with assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and hospitals, with insurance policies, Social Security and Medicaid, powers of attorney, and wills, with doctors, discharge planners, social workers, home health aides, and lawyers?

Are we prepared for how expensive it is to ensure that a loved one is well-cared for? And how much time even long-distance caregiving can take?

Are we prepared to make complicated and painful decisions on behalf of our loved ones, knowing that sometimes there are no good choices?

Are we prepared to muddle our way through the challenging relationships we have with our siblings, our sisters- and brothers-in law, with our parents, our in-laws, our spouses, and our children?

Rabbi Heschel was right – we do owe the old reverence. But on a personal level, what does that really look like? Just how do we parent our parents? How do we keep our spouses safe *and* preserve their dignity? How do we share the load with our siblings? If we are unmarried or we are only children, how do we make our way through each crisis on our own?

Ms. Gross recounts her experience of caring for her aging mother, cautioning, “...[I]f you take charge too soon, you will patronize and humiliate your [loved ones], but if you step in too late, their manageable problems will have turned unmanageable.”

How complicated it is to know how to show our loved ones reverence.

Ms. Gross has many thoughts and much advice to share. But most importantly she focuses us on the process of caregiving: “Forgive the New Age-speak, but this is all about the journey, not the destination, because we all know the final outcome.”

We do not have much control over some parts of the journey – whether our loved ones get cancer or dementia or Parkinson’s and the particulars of how the decline unfolds. Or whether they have financial resources to sustain them in their last years or whether they are more constrained with their options.

But we do have control over other parts.

We can decide to show up. We can help our loved ones downsize, put their finances in order, and tend to their health. We can help fill out paperwork and talk to doctors. We can reach out for help because none of us can manage all the details on our own.

We can be willing to have difficult conversations. We can ask our loved ones how they wish to live and how they wish to die, and we can treat those wishes gingerly and with respect, even if it is not possible to honor the particulars of each one. We can talk about the legacy our loved ones will leave, in terms of inheritance or in terms of the values they wish to pass on.

We can attend to those angst-filled family dynamics that burst forth at the worst times. We can choose to let this time be an opportunity to work through decades-old resentment, forgiving others for not living up to our expectations, or expressing anger and regret and disappointment, and then figuring out how to let it go.

Mostly, though, I think we can be present.

That year I worked in the nursing home I met a man named Harold. He told me that he was upset because his hair was too long. There were so many overwhelming and complicated problems in that nursing home, and I thought that this was a problem I could solve. So I dashed out of his room to tell an attendant that he was overdue for a haircut.

Later I told my supervisor that I had finally solved a problem. And she told me that perhaps his disheveled hair wasn’t really the problem. See Harold had recently lost his wife, and his children lived far away, and he was terribly alone. Being upset about his hair was only a symptom of deep loneliness. Had I understood that he was giving me an opening, I might have been able to settle in so I could listen to his pain, give him space to share memories of his wife, and affirm this difficult place in his journey.

We live in a culture of doing, not of being. We are good at solving problems. It is much harder to listen to what’s underneath those problems. Especially when texts are coming in and emails must be sent and kids are waiting to be picked up and work has to get finished. It takes time to slow down, and for the efficient multi-taskers amongst us, it’s hard work.

Ms. Gross offers this advice for us:

I sprinted when I should have cautiously watched my step, rushed when I should have ruminated, barked orders when I should have discussed things with my mother. I heard what I wanted to hear, not what doctors or admissions directors of long-term care facilities were actually telling me. Does any of this sound familiar to you? If it does, slow down. Get your bearings. You can't bulldoze your way through this like a work project. Still, you can take comfort in knowing that this precipitating crisis, for many of us, is the hardest part, because you probably still think you can make it right, that you can stop the clock.

Of course, we can't stop the clock. I am ever aware of this as I watch my father slip away, become so uncharacteristically quiet due to Alzheimer's, not be able to follow a conversation or remember a word or a name or an idea. At first I would just try to take his lead when we talked. Now I have a hard time having a conversation with him.

Still, there are so many moments of beauty, of watching him as he listens to music or dances, of holding his hand, of just being with him. And watching my mother faithfully help him upload the photographs that he still takes for his camera club competitions. He is gentler and sweeter.

The word for funeral in Hebrew is *levaya*, which means accompanying. We honor the deceased by accompanying them to their graves, by covering them with the earth from our shovels, by lowering them into their final resting place.

I wonder what it would look like if we extended this metaphor of accompaniment: We can accompany our loved ones in their last years as they grow in wisdom and teach us what they have learned from being on this earth for so long. We can accompany them as they share their stories, giving us new perspectives on experiences and relationships. We can accompany them as their spouses, siblings, and friends die and they learn to live without them. We can accompany them as their bodies and minds fail them and they become more dependent.

We have an opportunity, when we care for loved ones, to heal the wounds of the past, and to set things right. Or maybe not right, but we can make them a little better. There can be meaning in making this journey with a loved one, accompanying them to the very end.

We are all growing old. We begin the aging process from the moment we are born. As we develop through the various stages of life, our bodies and minds change as the years pass. Sometimes an illness or a sprained knee or a significant birthday will cause us to notice and reflect on where we've been and where we're going. Often, though, time just passes.

And then eventually we realize that we are in a new stage of life. We are not ready. As Rabbi Heschel writes, "The tragedy...is that most of us are unprepared for old age. We know a great deal about what to do with things, even what to do with other people; we hardly know what to do with ourselves."

What do we do with ourselves?

Yom Kippur provides us with a strange answer. Every year we stage a dress rehearsal for our death. We face our mortality and come to terms with the fragility of our bodies. Traditional Jews dress in a *kittel*, or burial shrouds. We refrain from activities of the living like eating and drinking. We stare at death so that we can affirm life generally, but also to consider how we want to live.

Or in the words of the poet, Mary Oliver, we ask ourselves: “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Yom Kippur calls on us to take nothing for granted, but to move through each stage of life with mindfulness and a sense of awe.

Yom Kippur calls on us to regard old age, in Rabbi Heschel’s words, as the “age of opportunities for inner growth” instead of as the “age of stagnation.”

Yom Kippur calls on us to embrace growing old as a blessing and to recognize the sacred moments it brings.

In the coming year, may each of us find new ways to appreciate the gifts of aging.

And may we join together to hold the joys and complexities of the journey.

Gmar chatimah tovah.