

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman  
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim  
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A Jewish Folktale:

A mother bird was carrying her three babies across a river. As she carried the first baby in her beak high above the river, she asked it, "When I am old, will you do the same for me?" "Of course, Mother," replied the baby, "It will be my honor." The mother bird dropped the baby into the river, saying simply, "You're a liar."

As she carried the second baby, the mother again asked, "When I am old, will you do the same for me?" The second baby bird replied as the first, and the mother bird dropped it, too, into the river.

When she carried the third baby across the river, the mother bird asked it, "When I am old, will you carry me across the river as I am carrying you now?" The baby bird answered dolefully, "Oh no, Mother, when you are old, I will have children of my own, and I shall have to carry them across the river. I won't be able to carry you as well." The mother bird replied, "You are my darling child, for you have told the truth." She carried this baby to the other side of the river and gently put [it] down. (*Jewish Visions of Aging*, Rabbi Dayle Friedman, p. 85; taken from *Yiddish Folktales*, ed. Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, p. 24)

Indeed, this is a harsh story, one that highlights the challenges of caring for aging parents. Pushing aside the obvious moral questions of a mother bird killing her two babies because she is dissatisfied with their answers to her question, this story raises some difficult issues. The bird has just entered motherhood, but she is already worried about growing old. She wonders what her role will be once she is no longer raising her children. Will she be useless? What if she becomes dependent on her children? Will anyone take care of her?

The first two babies perhaps misjudge their ability to care for their mother when she grows old, and they assume that their love for her will be enough to sustain them through the challenges of caring for an elderly parent. They are just babies, so how could they possibly imagine how complicated it will be to care for their parents, care for their own children, hold jobs, and tend to their many other needs? Or perhaps they did know how challenging it would be, but they were uncomfortable by the prospect that their mother will grow old, so they blindly reassure her – as well as themselves – that everything will be just fine. They are unable to accept that their beloved mother will become dependent, frail, and ill and that she will eventually die.

The third baby, the darling child who tells the truth and makes it to the other side, is certainly aware of the burden of aging parents. However, this baby takes no responsibility in the matter. It is true that we can never directly repay our parents for raising us. It may also be true that this bird cannot carry both its own children as well as its mother across the river. But this does not absolve it of the responsibility of caring for its mother when she grows old, for other solutions do exist.

If this folktale gives us an unclear message of our responsibility in caring for the elderly, Jewish texts are much more forthright. We read in the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus: "You shall rise before the gray headed and show deference to the elderly; you shall fear your God: I am the Eternal" (Lev. 19:32).

Furthermore, Rabbi Judah said, "Show respect to an old person who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his own, for we have learned that the fragments of the [first set of tablets of the Ten Commandments which Moses shattered] were kept alongside the new tablets in the Ark of the Covenant" (B.T. Ber. 8b). The old tablets, in being placed alongside the new, teach us that even the feeble among us are holy, and we still show them respect.

This past year I heard a lecture by Dr. William Thomas, founder of the Eden Alternative which seeks to radically change the culture of long-term care facilities. He argues that our aging population is good news because our society needs elders. He remarked that in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had so many problems because they did not have elders to guide them. Adam lives to be 930 years old because the first humans needed the stories of their elders to crystallize the wisdom of how to live. Adam had to be there for so many future generations until there was a society full of elders; only then could he die.

Thomas argues that the elderly are our teachers, just by their being. When it comes to honoring human dignity and the sanctity of human life, a woman who has had a stroke and cannot feed herself offers us instruction in how to honor the sacred in the other. Just by her being she teaches us the highest form of compassion. Moreover, when we care for an elder, we are protecting our entire society because we are upholding what it means to treat the elderly with honor and respect.

As we know, either by growing old ourselves or by watching a loved one grow old, the aging process can be very difficult. In our Yom Kippur liturgy we read, "Do not cast me off in old age; when my strength fails me, do not forsake me!" (Ps. 71:9, Shema Koleynu). As we age we fear being alone, being abandoned, living every day with terrible loneliness. We fear death. As we grow old we suffer more loss, parting with our parents, brothers, sisters, spouses, friends, and even children. Our bodies do not work as well as they used to, and we may suffer from physical ailments or dementia. We may have to be dependent on our children or on other caregivers, part with our cherished belongings, and move to a new home. We may feel worthless as we lose the ability to care for ourselves.

Moreover, as Thomas argues, we live in a society that does not value elderhood. Aging is perceived as declining, and every day society views us as less important. Our society places so much emphasis on being productive that elders do not have any real role. The problem is that we measure elders by the yardstick of adulthood and then find them wanting – instead of seeing elderhood as a new stage of life, with new opportunities, that holds the potential of a new kind of emotional and spiritual life.

Some of us are being cared for to various levels as we age, and God-willing the rest of us will also grow old and benefit from the care of our loved ones. Most of us either have had or will have the experience of caring for an aging parent or loved one. We are familiar with the fifth commandment in the book of Exodus, “Honor your father and your mother” (Ex. 20:12) and we know that this can be challenging. Interestingly, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says that this is the most difficult of all commandments to follow (Tanchuma Eikev, 2). It is noteworthy that the commandment is not to love our parents but to honor them, from the word *kavod*, and in another commandment in Leviticus, to respect them, from the word *morah*.

Specifically, the rabbis teach that honoring our parents means that we are obligated to make sure that their basic needs are met. *Kavod* is really about preserving our parents’ dignity, making sure that they can live a dignified life even when they are no longer able to care for themselves.

Respecting our parents means that we refrain from shaming them. This principle of *morah*, of reverence, means that we may not stand or sit in our parent’s place or contradict their words. We may not take away their parental role or make decisions that do not respect their wishes.

When we are aging we do not want to be treated like children. We have lived many more years than others around us have lived, and we have often experienced much more loss than they have known. We have a burning desire to preserve our independence and dignity. It can be terribly frustrating and infantilizing to be lectured to and told what we have to do.

Those of us caring for the elderly must listen to their voices, appreciate their wisdom, remember their stories, and consider their perspectives. There may be times when we are forced to make decisions for our loved ones that run counter to their wishes, but this should not be done lightly. We must approach these conversations with gentleness and compassion.

Honoring and respecting our parents can be particularly challenging if they have been or continue to be abusive towards us. The Torah cautions us to care for our own health and well-being. In Deuteronomy we read, “You shall be very watchful of yourselves” (Deut. 4:15). It is sometimes necessary to carefully separate ourselves from our parents for our own health and well-being.

We honor and respect our parents for the role that they play in our lives, not necessarily for how well they have treated us. Especially if abusive parents are unrepentant, we may choose not to be their immediate caretakers or even to visit or speak with them very frequently. But we can still make sure that they are being cared for by others, and we can refrain from humiliating them. We can also observe mourning practices and recite Kaddish for them after they have died, and in this we may find some small measure of healing after our relationship with them in this world has ended.

Although we want to honor and respect our parents, caring for them in this generation poses unique challenges. Especially in the Jewish community, we are living longer and there is a higher proportion of elders in our midst. We also have a lower birthrate than in past generations, thus we have a shrinking pool of caregivers. Additionally, we are geographically mobile and do not necessarily live close to our parents.

Rabbi Dayle Friedman, in her book *Jewish Visions for Aging*, outlines three specific challenges that arise in part because of these demographic issues and in part because caretaking in any society is difficult. The first is guilt. We never feel like we are doing enough. We blame ourselves for not adequately balancing our responsibilities or taking enough time to sit by the bedside of a loved one. And we feel that we have to repay our parents for the care that they gave us. However, like the story of the mother bird and her babies shows, we have competing claims on our time and resources – children, spouses, jobs, and a variety of other commitments, and we simply cannot do everything.

The second is conflict among family members. If we have siblings, we may disagree with them as to how we should care for our parents. We may share the caretaking responsibilities unevenly, which can lead to feelings of resentment, disempowerment, and anger. Conflicts from long ago may resurface among family members, and it can be emotionally complex to care for a parent because we are used to them caring for us.

Lastly, we are faced with hard choices. As our loved ones age we are called to be increasingly involved in decisions that affect their lives. It can be complicated to figure out how best to care for our parents. Do we take over our parent's finances? Do we allow our parents to continue to drive? Do we move our parents to a nursing home? When it comes to end of life decision-making, when do we decide to stop trying new medications and let our parents die?

These challenges create enormous stress. Caregiving can be exhausting, overwhelming, and isolating. Watching a parent grow sicker with each passing day is painful, and it can leave us short-tempered, irritable, unable to sleep or focus on our work, or incapable of experiencing joy.

Caring for a loved one with dementia poses special challenges as well, for we are not able to relate to that person as we once did. Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement and co-author of *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*:

*A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* cautions us not to look at our loved ones in the same way that we used to. “If you look at intellect as a benchmark for who a person is, then we feel entitled to treat the other as a non-person. We want to warehouse them. We assume that in some way, they’re dead already.” Instead, we should look at them compassionately and try to relate to their souls. He continues, “You may just want to sit and hold the hand of the parent with Alzheimer’s. Communicate on the inside. Something is going to happen in the silence. There is a being behind the brain.” (Interview, *Front Range Living*, October, 2008)

In caring for our parents and loved ones we must find a balance between taking care of them and taking care of ourselves. It is important to care for them respectfully and attentively – even if we live thousands of miles away. We must ask ourselves: Are we honoring and respecting our loved ones to the best of our abilities? And at the same time, we must set limits and recognize what we can and cannot do. We must also ask ourselves: While caring for our loved ones are we losing ourselves and not creating appropriate boundaries? Jewish tradition teaches that we should not care for our parents to the point that we harm our relationships with our spouses or children or that we cause harm to our own physical or emotional health.

Tonight we come together on Kol Nidrei and we seek to do two things. First, we forgive ourselves. We inevitably make mistakes and let down our loved ones, either by our actions or our inactions, and we forgive ourselves for not doing the best that we could have done. In doing this we also recognize that we may never fulfill the expectations of our parents or loved ones. We remind ourselves that we have to live up to our best selves, not their hopes for what our best selves might have been.

Second, we call ourselves to task. Are we taking proper care of our loved ones? Have we offered not just the physical care but the emotional warmth and love that they long for? Have we treated them with honor and respect? Have we extended an arm in reconciliation, even if our hearts are hardened, and even if we believe that we are right? Have we opened our hearts to forgive, even those who are no longer living and can no longer ask for forgiveness?

This Yom Kippur, let us treat our elders with dignity and respect and remember that growing old is a sacred stage of living. Let us reach out to our loved ones, even when it is difficult, with our compassion and care. And let us not forget to love, honor, and forgive ourselves.

Gmar chatimah tovah – May you be sealed for good.