

What Is the Measure of a Life?

After Jacob arrives in Egypt with his family amid great fanfare, he is invited for a private audience with Pharaoh. Upon meeting Joseph's father the first thing Pharaoh asks him is an unusual question. The ruler asks the Patriarch, "How old are you?"

The commentators are perplexed as to why Pharaoh would ask such a personal question. Why did he wish to know Jacob's age, and why was it the first thing out of his mouth?

It would be hard to imagine in our days, that this would be the opening words of a conversation. It seems rather untactful and undiplomatic. One answer offered by our commentators is that Jacob looked exceedingly old and worn, and that is what prompted the Pharaoh's query and curiosity.

It reminds me of the joke about a woman who noticed a little old man in a rocking chair on his front porch. She approached the man and said, "I couldn't help but notice how cheerful you are. Tell me, what is your secret for such a long and happy life?"

The man paused his rocking and replied, "To tell you the truth, I myself don't understand it. I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day. I drink a case of whiskey a week. I only eat junk food, and I never exercise."

"That's amazing," the woman says. "Tell me how old are you." He answers, "23."

When Pharaoh inquired of Jacob's age, Jacob responded by saying, "I've lived 130 years." But then he continues and adds, "*Me'at v'raim hayoo yemei shenei hayai, v'lo hisigu yemei shenei avotai..* Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not reached the life spans of my forefathers."

The response is surprising on several accounts: We do not expect him to divulge how bitter he feels about his travails and tribulations. Yes, we know he has had a tough life, but to say this to Pharaoh? Furthermore we are surprised that Jacob would reveal so much to a stranger, and that he would speak so personally and openly and divulge so much to a leader of a foreign country he had just met for the first time.

In today's terms, we would say that this was "TMI" – Too much information.

After all, all the Pharaoh asked was his age, not a commentary about the nature of his life.

When most people are asked a relatively innocuous question, such as – "How are you?" we usually respond, with a simple one word answer, "Fine."

As you may expect, our sages were puzzled by the whole interaction. In fact, the Midrash says that God became angry with Jacob's response to Pharaoh. He takes it as a sign of ingratitude and imagines God saying to Jacob, "I saved you from Esau and Laban, I returned Dina and Joseph to you, and now you are complaining about your life, saying that it has been bitter?"

Jacob lived 17 more years in the land of Egypt, to the age of 147. As a result of his public expression of how bitter his life was, the midrash concludes God reduced the number of years originally allotted to Jacob. Whereas his father Isaac died at the age of 180, Jacob died at 147, which is 33 years less than his father, and which corresponds exactly to the 33 words of his remarks to Pharaoh.

Perhaps the dialogue should be understood on a different level. If we read the text closely we note that the words Pharaoh uses to ask of his age actually are – "*Kamah ymei shenei hayecha* -- How many are the days of the years of your life?"

Maybe the way the Pharaoh phrased his question was meant to be more penetrating than a simple question of how old Jacob was. Perhaps it is a rare moment in which Jacob, who is a patriarch and recognized as a great leader feels – who other than another leader would understand the travails of his life and what he has been through to get to where he is now. It is as if he is saying, You might look at me and think – Wow, what a great life, but in reality I have had my share of challenges and struggles.

Yes, my son is now viceroy over all of Egypt – but I lived 17 long years presuming that he was dead. Yes, I have now accumulated much cattle and wealth and prestige. You may see that my sons are working together in concert and are united, but for many years they fought bitterly among themselves. I had a bitter battle with my brother and a father who didn't love me. My daughter was kidnapped and violated against her will. So – don't just judge based on the material good fortune that you see. That is all superficial.

Similarly, we may see others and envy them based on outside appearances. We tend look at the exterior. On the outside looking in, we assume they are happy, that they are blessed, that they are content and living an easy life. But the reality is, we never really know what transpires in another person's life. We have no way of doing what they went through to get to where they are today. As it has been said, every overnight success takes ten years.

Nor can we ever fully know, nor should we know what goes on behind closed doors or in the hearts of others.

Jacob has become a keen listener. He heard the Pharaoh didn't just ask how old he is, but he actually asked about the days of his years. In his reply Jacob distinguishes between his sojourns

and his life – between chronological age and quality of life, between longevity and meaningfulness.

He may be saying – I may be old, but do not envy me, and that is why he says - My days of true life, of bliss have been few and far between. And it might not even be a complaint, but just a statement of fact.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has written that Jacob is teaching us – Do not aspire to a simple sojourn without strife. He writes, “Peace with no content, meaningless tranquility, rest without sanctity can all be empty vessels... There are some goals that can only be attained through struggle waged with the soul.” Our goal should not be measured in chronological age, peace of mind, or having an easy stress-free life. Strife of the spirit and overcoming adversity and challenges is the source of true accomplishment, and the means to finding fulfillment, meaningfulness and purpose, which is what ultimately leads to true happiness.

Perhaps we can learn something from God’s rebuke of Jacob in their imagined dialogue. God is telling Jacob an important message for all of us – No, life isn’t always easy. It’s not meant to be. But do not merely dwell on the negative. Appreciate the blessings you have experienced. And it is after this realization that Jacob is able to, in turn, bless the Pharaoh.

May we find the inner strength to persevere, not to judge others by what we see, and thereby be a blessing.

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