

Aging: Coping With Growing Older

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This past year I went with my wife and did something we do not do often enough. We went to one of the many fine art galleries in our area. I had read an article in the Washington Post about the black-and-white photographs Nicholas Nixon has taken every year for almost 40 years, since 1975 of his wife and her three sisters. The women are always photographed standing in the same order, in what appears to be a beach or summer home setting. The Post article said, "The photographs offer without comment what seems a miracle: a sustained communion among four sisters over almost four decades." It went on to say, "One senses mortality throughout this collection of 37 prints."

And so as part of my 60th birthday celebration we went to see the exhibit at the National Gallery of Art.

I didn't think the shading and lighting were particularly good, yet I found the images compelling and even haunting. As the curator's notes explain, "Nixon's disciplined approach to photographing the Brown sisters also records the evolving demeanor of the women and suggests their changing relationships with one another. Working within these limited parameters, Nixon has created a compelling investigation of both portraiture and the passage of time. Taken as a whole, the 31 photographs made between 1975 and 2005 reveal not only incidental changes in background, lighting, and dress, but also the gradual, incremental aging of the women."

Indeed, you notice the subtle gradual change in clothing and style, as well as the process of aging slowly and incrementally extending its reach. The innocence and anticipation of youth gives way to worn lines of experience of later years. Thin bodies become fuller. Tight fitting clothes are now replaced by loosely fitting ones. Notably, and perhaps one of the reasons it is so interesting, inviting and intriguing, none of the women smile in any of the photographs. Always in the same order, in some they lean against each other, in others they lean on each other. Is it for support?

Right before your very eyes the care-free liberated young women of the 70's evolve and are transformed into mature adults who appear to have had their share of burdens and problems. Although the pictures do not speak, and there is no accompanying text, it seems as if you can hear the women sighing, as if life's challenges have taken a toll on them. You cannot help but wonder as you look at the images -- how did they bear their troubles? How did they weather life's storms? Do they speak to each other and meet regularly? What happens in between the annual meeting? Do they only get together for this annual ritual of taking the picture? Do they ever smile or laugh? Do they know any joy in their lives?

The Post article concludes, "The lowest row, only seven photographs long, is terrifying. Will it be completed? When will this group of four be a group of three, then two, then one?" It poignantly poses a question that cannot yet be answered, "What is the end of this project?"

The truth is: wherever we may be in life, growing older is an inevitable part of being alive. We all grapple with questions about the process of aging and all that it entails and accompanies it. In addition to the mid-life crisis, psychologists have now identified what is referred to as a "quarter life crisis." Regardless of when it hits, at some point in life, many people wonder if they have achieved the goals they thought they wanted to attain. With the passage of time, each year seems to pass more quickly.

George Carlin mused about growing older and said, "Do you realize that the only time in our lives when we like to get old is when we're kids? If you're less than 10 years old, you're so excited about aging that you think in fractions.

"How old are you?' 'I'm four and a half!'

You're never thirty-six and a half. You're four and a half, going on five! That's the key. Then you get to your teens. Now they can't hold you back. You jump to the next number, or even a few ahead.

(When asked,) 'How old are you?' (you answer,) 'I'm gonna be 16!' You could be 13, but hey, you're gonna be 16! And then the greatest day of your life! You become 21. Even the words sound like a ceremony. YOU BECOME 21. YESSSS!!!

But then you turn 30. Oooohh, what happened there? Makes you sound like bad milk! He TURNED; we had to throw him out... You BECOME 21, you TURN 30, then you're PUSHING 40. Whoa! Put on the brakes, it's all slipping away too fast. Before you know it, you REACH 50 and your dreams are gone.

But wait!!! You MAKE it to 60. You didn't think you would! So you BECOME 21, TURN 30, PUSH 40, REACH 50 and make it to 60. You've built up so much speed that you HIT 70! After that it's a day-by-day thing: (You're happy when) You HIT Wednesday!

When you get into your 80's every day is a complete cycle; you HIT lunch; you TURN 4:30; you REACH bedtime. In the 90s, you start going backwards; You say, 'I Was JUST 92.' Then a strange thing happens. If you make it over 100 you become a little kid again and let everyone know, "I'm a hundred and a half."

If Carlin were Jewish, instead of concluding by wishing people reach 100 and a half, he might have wished that people be blessed to live "until a hundret unz zanvtzig, til 120!" since that was the age when Moses died.

There are many suggestions from a wide variety of sources on aging suggesting how to deal with it. The poet Maya Angelou reflects that over the years she has learned that:

"...no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow. I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights.'

I've learned that regardless of your relationship with your parents, you'll miss them when they're gone from your life. I've learned that making a 'living' is not the same thing as 'making a life.'

I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance. I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw some things back....'

I've learned that whenever I decide something with an open heart, I usually make the right decision. I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one.'

I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone. People love a warm hug, or just a friendly pat on the back. I've learned that I still have a lot to learn. I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

I could cite numerous other pieces of sage advice, but on this Rosh Hashanah, I want to talk about the insights our tradition can offer to help us deal with the inevitable process of growing older. For after all, it is an issue that confronts all of us, regardless of how old we are.

We inhabit a society which worships youth and offers all kinds of anti-aging products. As a result we are now younger longer. But paradoxically as a result of all the advances in science and health, we are also older longer as well.

The process of aging challenges our sense of who we are, as well as who we were, and who we will be. Familiar roles are redefined and regular routines may be altered, causing people to feel less needed, valued or important as their independence declines.

Some of us may be concerned with what happens when our physical powers wane, or our physique and physical appearance are not what they once were. (Have you seen the pictures of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his youthful days as a body builder and how he looks now with a pot belly and pouch, body sagging in a tiny speedo bathing suit?) Some of us may notice or be concerned that we are less agile and less mobile than we once were, or we may harbor these concerns about what we notice in our spouse, parents or other loved ones. Some may worry about becoming dependent on others. Some worry about the loss of memory. (What was I just talking about?)

Some ponder how to fill their days with activity, meaning and purpose when we no longer have a place to go every day to work, especially since that office was once the main focus of where and how we spent our day. A real issue is grappling with what is our identity when we are no longer defined by a job we no longer have. Others agonize over finances, while many may confront the issue of their mortality.

I find myself thinking about this issue in part because as Carlin would say, I “turned 60” this year. Around the time of my birthday the weddings section of the New York Times had a picture of a couple married over 40 years ago who were still together. I couldn't help but notice the contrast between the picture of the two carefree counter culture hippies with long hair and the

now middle aged couple, still looking very much in love, who appear so respectable and establishment. It gave me pause as I speculated and imagined who they once were, and who they have become.

It reminds me of a poem I wrote 20 years ago, in the summer of 1993 when I was a rabbi in residence at a summer camp. Looking up in the dining hall I noticed names written years ago and composed this poem --

The names of the children in a bunk at summer camp adorn the wall of the dining room.

*As I read the names and the dates, I realize it was
20 years ago the names were children in a bunk at camp.*

*With their cute colorful carefree drawings and signatures they are immortalized and frozen in
their youth on the dining room where they used to eat*

*Although Peter Pan lives forever, Mary Martin does not. She, like the rest of us grows old and
up.*

*And so I wonder where they are today,
And what of the exuberance of summer and youth and camp is still inside of them.
What fun is locked up and do they even remember that they once raised and captured flags,
shouted and played color wars, canoed, fished, swam in a lake, ran and played and even slept
outside.*

*Do they remember that they were once kids in a bunk at summer camp who wrote their names
on a plaque
that still hangs on the wall
of a camp dining room hall.*

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I wrote that the summer I turned 40, and in reviewing my files came across a sermon I gave when I reached 40, so it is not so surprising that I would return twenty years later to this theme of the passing of the years. For whether you are a baby boomer, or a member of generation x, y or z, the reality is that, whether we like it or not, and whether we will admit it or not, regardless of our age, we are all a year older than we were a year ago last Rosh Hashanah.

A story is told about a rabbi who bumped into an elderly man who never believed in God and never came to shul. The rabbi was pleasantly surprised when the proud agnostic told him one day he was thinking a lot about the hereafter. Seeing an opening, the rabbi invited the man to come to speak with him in his office. When he did, the rabbi asked him to share his thoughts about what he was worried about. The gentleman explained, "Rabbi. I don't know what's going on or what to do. But I cannot stop thinking about the hereafter. I go to the kitchen and I think to myself, what am I here after? I go to my bedroom or the bathroom and try to remember what am I here after?"

I wish to address not how we face the hereafter and our inevitable mortality, which according to the latest research is still 100%, but how do we deal with the here and now, and what does Judaism have to say to help guide us with this inevitable part of living?

Where better to begin for advice than with Abraham *aveenu*, about whom we heard this morning? I suggest we look to him as an example because he is the first person the Torah says was blessed with old age. Although the Bible tells us that a number of people lived longer lives - - Noah lived to be 950, and Methuselah beat him by 19 years, living to be 969, Abraham is the first to be described as old. Why him, and why at this point in his life?

The description follows the passing of his wife, Sarah, "*Ve'Avraham zaken*, And Abraham was old." Midrash Tanhuma asks why he is considered old now and suggests it is linked to the narrative that precedes it, the death of his beloved Sarah. It explains that Abraham is described as being old, because he began to feel old when his companion Sarah died.

Indeed, loneliness and loss of friends and companions is a concern of the elderly.

One of the stories in the Talmud about Honi HaMa'agel is of a Rip van Winkle like character who wakes up after sleeping for 70 years. When he realizes none of his friends are alive anymore he proclaims, "*Ten lee hevruta, oh ten lee meeta*: Give me friends, or give me death." This is good advice worth considering for those who think they can defy death by freezing their bodies until a medical remedy is discovered for whatever ailment took their life. Frozen for years? Can you imagine? Have you ever tasted ice cream or something left in your freezer too long?!

Rabbi Dov Lipman, originally from Silver Spring, and now a member of Knesset wrote an article in the Jerusalem Post about a man who he used to pass on the street when he lived in Cincinnati. He said hello, as his father had taught him to observe the mitzvah in the Talmud to greet every person with a cheerful hello. The man responded by pointedly asking where in the Torah it says he has to be wearing a black hat and jacket? Lipman was surprised because he had no idea the guy was Jewish, but proceeded to respond and spoke with him for a few hours about Judaism. He encountered Julian just about every day and they would walk together to where Rabbi Lipman was studying, always declining the invitations to come to his home or to enter the study hall.

As Rabbi Lipman writes, "One day, Julian looked sad and said, "Today is my 70th birthday. Seventy makes me feel old and like I am going to die." Knowing that he did not believe in God or an afterlife, Lipman was shocked when he asked if he would recite Kaddish for him after he passed on, since he had no children of his own. A few months later Rabbi Lipman prepared to take up a new post in Silver Spring. On moving day Julian showed up and spent hours telling about his life and about the woman he loved but never married. Lipman writes, "Two days later we were unpacking our new home when the phone rang. A friend from Cincinnati called... and delivered the sad news. "Dov, I am sorry to tell you that Julian passed away." I was in shock. Just two days earlier he had been the model of perfect health as he spent the day with us in our home. How could this be? Then my friend on the phone added, "Dov, it is actually much worse. Julian killed himself."

He notes, "...as long as we were living across the street and Julian knew someone took an interest in his life and was available on a daily basis to walk and talk with him, there is no way he

could have killed himself. Once we left town and that daily routine and attention were removed from his life, all of the past came crashing back. In his mind he no (longer had a) reason to live.”

The message reminds us not to underestimate the power of taking an interest in someone, and how much caring and having a relationship can sustain another human being.

The verse in the Bible about Abraham adds words which seem to be superfluous and do not appear to add anything, but are obtuse and difficult to understand. After being told that he was old, the text says, “*Bah bayamim*,” which literally means, “he came with the days.” The awkward phrase is puzzling and usually translated and understood to emphasize that Abraham was advanced in years.

The rabbis offer a number of interesting interpretations which are relevant to how we in the 21st century deal with aging. They understood it as referring to wisdom, which he acquired with age, for according to Judaism, one of the benefits of growing older is that we grow wiser. I am reminded of the saying attributed to Mark Twain, “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.”

Some commentators suggest that the words introduce the passage that follows – Abraham’s sending Eliezer to find a wife for his unmarried son, Isaac. His concern about the next generation shows his concern for the future and that he had something to look forward to. We know that many times people are kept alive because they are looking forward to an upcoming event, holiday or family simcha.

Significantly, a number of commentators write that the extraneous words “his days came” teach that Abraham continued to be engaged and immersed in daily life even as he aged. We would say he lived in the moment. Avraham did not give up or stop living, or become apathetic or detached, but continued to live every day to the fullest, as it came, “*bah bayamim*”.

Rabbi Akiba who went on to become one of the most important teachers and rabbis of the rabbinic period was uneducated and knew practically nothing about Judaism until he was 40. Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, brought them to Sinai and led them for the 40 years they were in the desert – all between the age of 80 – 120. Part of what Judaism is teaching us is not to trivialize or infantilize the elderly, for they still have much to contribute. We need look no further than our own day to see how Shimon Peres at age 90 has lived to become one of the most respected leaders in the world. And in fact, even closer to home, we can all be inspired by a member of our own congregation, Ambassador Richard Schifter, who is the same age as Shimon Peres and works tirelessly to almost singlehandedly change the United Nation’s predisposition against Israel.

The Zohar comments that when a person dies all his days are brought before God for an accounting, and Abraham’s were filled with torah and mitzvot. In a similar vein, the commentator Alshich says all of his days were full: full of meaning and of life. He lived every day to the fullest by filling them with good deeds and actions. Here again, the message speaks to us today. We learn that we should try to do something that is meaningful and worthwhile as best as we can every day. Each act and every mitzvah is beloved by our Creator.

In a society which prizes productivity the elderly may be viewed as not having much value. This may be why The Holiness Code in Leviticus 19 commands, "You shall rise in the presence of an aged person, and you should show honor and respect for the elderly. You shall revere your God. I am the Lord." Danny Siegel translates the verse slightly differently. He reads it as, "You shall rise before an elderly, and allow the beauty, glory and majesty of their faces to emerge." Our tradition teaches us to appreciate and value our elders. Honoring them is a means of honoring God. It is teaching us to respect experience, going so far as to say in one passage, "The tearing down of the old is building, while the building of the young is actually tearing down."

I came across a piece in response to a grandchild asking a grandparent how they liked getting older. The anonymous author wrote:

"I would never trade my amazing friends, my wonderful life, my loving family for less gray hair or a flatter belly. As I've aged, I've become kinder to myself, and less critical of myself. I've become my own friend. I don't chide myself for eating that extra cookie, or for not making my bed, or for buying that silly cement gecko that I didn't need, but looks so avante garde on my patio. I am entitled to a treat, to be messy, to be extravagant.

I have seen too many dear friends leave this world too soon; before they understood the great freedom that comes with aging. Whose business is it if I choose to read or play on the computer until 4 AM and sleep until noon? I will dance with myself to those wonderful tunes of the 60 & 70's, and if I, at the same time, wish to weep over a lost love ... I will.

I will walk the beach in a swim suit that is stretched over a bulging body, and will dive into the waves with abandon if I choose to, despite the pitying glances from the jet set. They, too, will get old.

I know I am sometimes forgetful. But some of life is just as well forgotten. And after all, eventually I remember the important things.

Sure, over the years my heart has been broken. How can your heart not break when you lose a loved one, or when a child suffers, or even when somebody's beloved pet gets hit by a car? But broken hearts are what give us strength and understanding and compassion. A heart never broken is pristine and sterile and will never know the joy of being imperfect.

I am so blessed to have lived long enough to have my hair turning gray, and to have my youthful laughs be forever etched into deep grooves on my face. So many have never laughed, and so many have died before their hair could turn silver.

As you get older, it is easier to be positive. You care less about what other people think. I don't question myself anymore. I've even earned the right to be wrong.

So, to answer your question, I like being old. It has set me free. I like the person I have become. I am not going to live forever, but while I am still here, I will not waste time lamenting what could have been, or worrying about what will be. And I shall eat dessert every single day if I feel like it."

The verse about Abraham growing older concludes, *VaHaShem behrach Avraham bakol*, “And the Lord blessed Abraham with everything.” (Genesis 24:1) His life was not an easy one and was filled with travails and he knew his share of disappointments. Yet we read he was blessed. He was blessed because he was satisfied and content with what he had. And that is the true message we learn from Avraham.

Ultimately, Judaism teaches we are judged not based on how much we made, how productive we are, how big is our house, or how many homes we own, how fancy the car we drive or the clothes we wear, nor on how beautiful we are, but on how we live our lives. As long as we strive to live a good life, to do mitzvot, and to know the joy of love, we can feel content and fulfilled. As we face the new year, may we, like Abraham live life to the fullest, with all its sweetness and its sorrows, even with increasing aches and pains. Let us vow not to waste time, spend time, or count our days, but let us make our days count. Each day brings its own potential for blessing and is a gift, which is why it is called the present. May we make the most of our days so that we will continue to learn and to grow, to share and to give, to embrace and to love.

The *sheheheeyanu* blessing expresses gratitude to God “*sheheyanu vekeeyamanu vehigeeyanu lazman hazeh* – for keeping us alive, for sustaining us and allowing us to reach this day.” May you and those dear to you know the joy of many more days, and may they be filled with blessing, meaning, and love.

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