

## One Last Barrier of Prejudice Yet to Fall *VaYera 2008*

The Torah portion about the birth of Isaac causes us to ask: Is it really possible? Could Sara really give birth to a child at age 90? And what about all those other characters in the Bible who lived so long? Was Noah really in his 600's when he started to build the ark?

It reminds me of the joke I told during the high holidays – and since there are a few people here this morning who davened elsewhere on the holidays, and there may be a few who weren't listening when I told the joke, and there may be some who would enjoy hearing it again, it is worth repeating: An elderly Jewish man walks into an insurance agency and says he wants to buy a life insurance policy. When told that insurance policies are not sold to 80 year old men, he asks, "Then how come you sold one to my father last week?" "Your father?! How old is your father?" the agent asks. "He's a hundred." "A hundred?!" replies the astonished agent. "Well, you'll have to come back tomorrow, when the manager is here, since I don't have the authority to issue you a policy."

He tells him he can't come back tomorrow. "Why not?" he is asked. "I can't come tomorrow because my grandfather is getting married." Now the agent is really shocked. "Your grandfather is getting married?! How old is he?" "He just turned 120." "A hundred and twenty?! Why would a 120 year old man want to get married?" "Well, to tell you the truth, he really doesn't want to, but his mother is pushing him into it."

Many answers are offered to help explain this age old question about the ages of the individuals in the opening chapters of the Bible – everything from time was reckoned differently, to perhaps it represents seasons not years, to the numbers have an entirely different significance, to saying that maybe people really did live longer lives in those days.

Regardless of which answer you choose to accept, one thing is clear, Judaism recognizes the importance of treating our elderly with respect. It goes even further than that and mandates that we recognize the wisdom they have to offer. The Book of Proverbs says, "Grey hair is a crown of splendour: it is attained by a righteous life."

When you ride the Metro or a bus here in DC or elsewhere in America seats are reserved for the handicapped and elderly. There is usually a sign that asks people to give up their seats for the elderly. I love the way it is done in Israel. On buses in Israel, the request is in the form of a quote from the Bible, from Leviticus 19, known as the Holiness Code. The sign says, "Lifnei savah takum: You should rise up before an older person." Egged, the national bus system means the verse in terms of what we call the peshat, its direct, literal meaning: stand up when you see an elderly person and give them your seat. But our rabbis, and I suspect most of the riders know that the biblical phrase is also understood to mean much more than that. It refers to our obligation to defer to and to show respect to the elderly. And you know what? When you ride a bus

in Israel, sometimes, it is almost as if there is a competition among children and younger riders to see who will have the honor of doing the mitzvah of giving up their seat for an elderly person.

Last week was unquestionably an exciting time for our country. As I said in my sermon, one chapter, the chapter of racial discrimination was finally closed, and a new one opened. With the election of Barak Obama as president, our nation has come a very long way toward putting behind it the terrible blot of racism and prejudice. While we still have more to do to insure equal opportunity for all, all Americans can and should be proud of how far we have come to bring to fruition the dreams of so many who struggled so hard and so long. It says a great deal about the basic decency of our people, of our desire to reject injustice and intolerance and to overcome barriers to equality. No wonder Jews have felt so welcome in America. We have found opportunities, and doors are open to us allowing us to succeed and contribute to the welfare of America at the same time.

I must admit there were times when the campaign seemed interminable and I hoped it would be over already. But the contest was precedent-setting because of the stereotypes it shattered. As a result of the candidacies of Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin, women are also now viewed as viable, legitimate contenders for the nation's highest office. It means that we will have a new generation of leaders. The youth of today will grow up believing that anything is possible, and that anyone can aspire to achieve their loftiest goals. We are all the beneficiaries of a society that allows all to advance.

Yes, this race was notable and will be remembered as the one when barriers were taken down --- with one possible exception. While racism and sexism were not tolerated on the campaign trail, there was one form of discrimination that no one objected to. The campaign was great fodder for late night comics. Although racist jokes were totally off limits, there were some sexist jokes that should not have been made. But the one area where there was no limit or boundaries were comments about John McCain's age. We as a society may have made tremendous strides in the area of sexism and racism, but ageism and ridicule of the elderly is apparently permissible.

Questions about John McCain's health were appropriate and legitimate, but most of the jokes on late night tv about him were mocking and belittling him just because of his age. He tried to diffuse the issue with humor, and turned the spotlight on himself, telling us that his social security number was 7.

I am concerned about the impact when the media will become, if it is at all possible, even more obsessed with youth once the new administration arrives in Washington. Unfortunately, despite what the campaigns of Obama did for racial stereotypes, and Clinton and Palin did for stereotypes about women, we remain a society that does not view with deference or reverence the contributions our seniors have made and can continue to make.

In today's Torah portion Abraham set out on his journey and left for the Promised Land when he was 75. Moses came before Pharaoh and boldly demanded freedom for his people when he was 80. He continued to lead the people until the ripe old age of 120. Even if we cannot be certain about these ages, and they cannot be verified, the great sage Akiba did not begin his studies until he was 40, and did not start his career as a rabbi and teacher until he was in his late 50's. Moving from the Biblical to the contemporary realm, Israel's President, Shimon Peres is 80 years old, and remains active and continues to make an important contribution to his nation.

A few years ago I heard a wonderful story about Israeli leaders Shimon Peres and Ariel Sharon discussing the current situation and state of affairs. At the time, both of them were in their mid- 70's and a new government had just been formed. The person who relayed the story to me overheard them talking and said that Peres put his arm on Sharon's shoulder and said, "Arik, I guess it is now up to us and our generation to carry the torch and see what we can do."

The Jewish perspective has traditionally recognized the value of not casting out those of advanced years. The Book of Job says, "With age comes wisdom, and understanding comes with length of days."

I am indebted to my friend and colleague Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg of Baltimore for pointing out that the very humorous Sarah Silverman You Tube video about "the great shlep" had a certain disturbing premise. It urged young Jewish kids to visit their grandparents in Florida to get them to vote for Obama. One aspect that I found somewhat disturbing was the notion that grandchildren would not visit and would withhold their love if their grandparents did not comply with their demand that their grandparents vote for Obama. A grandchild's love should never be conditional, but that is a topic for another sermon, not this one. And while the video was extremely clever and very funny, there was another implication to it which is worth pondering. The assumption that young people know better than their elders, and that the advice of young people must be heeded runs counter to Jewish teachings. In the Jewish tradition, it should be the other way around. Deuteronomy tells us (Deut 32:7), "Remember the days of long ago. Reflect upon the years of the generations that came before you. Ask your father, and he will tell you, the elders, and they will inform you."

Perhaps our attitude comes from the fear expressed in the Bible, "Al tashlecheni be'et zikna: Do not cast me aside in my old age." In the early years of our congregation, before we had a building and a cantor, the cantor we hired for the High Holidays met me at the Ring House, an assisted living home for the elderly, where we were holding services at the time. An older man, originally from Israel, as he saw how lonely the residents appeared, he kept mumbling and repeating under his breath as he saw the residents that same verse, "Al tashlecheni be'et zikna kichlot kochanu al taazveinu – do not cast us away in old age, when our strength gives out, do not forsake us."

The second century sage Ben Sira wrote,  
Do not treat a man with disrespect when he is old,  
For some of us are growing old...  
Do not neglect the discourse of wise men,  
But busy yourself with their proverbs,  
For from them you will gain instruction.  
And learn to serve great men.  
Do not miss the discourse of old men,  
For they learnt it from their fathers.  
From them you will gain understanding,  
And learn to return an answer in your time of need...  
How beautiful is the wisdom of old men...  
Rich experience is the crown of old men... (8:6-9; 25:5-6)

Judaism recognizes that there is a role for both – for our elderly and for our youth. As the prophet Joel put it so beautifully so many centuries ago, and as recorded in the Bible, “Your youth shall dream dreams, and your elders shall see visions.”

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