

**TOO YOUNG TO BE OLD**  
**KOL NIDREI 5778**  
**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

At 97 years of age, Tao Porchon-Lynch teaches yoga. In fact, she is able to do the double lotus position quite easily. And she still has goals to reach on her bucket list. "I want to go to Argentina before I die to dance the tango," she says. Her advice about how to stay vital into old age? "Don't sit there thinking about what you can't do. Think: This is going to be the best day of your life." Porchon-Lynch is one of several nonagenarians – people in their nineties – who are leading fulfilling lives. They are featured in a recent documentary hosted by Carl Reiner, called, "If You're Not in the Obit, Have Breakfast."

At 95, Carl Reiner has written 5 books since he turned 90 and is working on his 6<sup>th</sup>. The film was recommended to me by a congregant who, at 76, thought her life was pretty much over. Then she saw the film. "I realized that I have many years of life ahead of me," she said. "It was so inspiring to see all these people in their nineties being active and productive."

Our Torah portion this afternoon tells us that God places before us life and death. "Choose life," God counsels. Which doesn't mean that we should simply exist, but that we should make use of our God-given talents. Now, of course, we have to acknowledge that some people develop debilitating physical and mental illnesses as they age, and are not able to do what people like Carl Reiner or Porchon-Lynch can.

Our Bible recognizes that old age can be a terrible burden. In the book of Samuel, Barzilai Hagiladi bitterly sums up what aging can be like: "I am now eighty years old," he says. "Can I tell the difference between what is good and what is not? Can [I] taste what [I] eat and drink? Can I still hear the voices of men and women singers? Why should [I] be an added burden to my lord the king?" Ecclesiastes describes this reality even more cynically:

“before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets.”

But as Nancy Schlossberg maintains in her new book, *Too Young to Be Old*, we focus too much on the negatives of aging. Because the reality is that “one in five Americans will be over the age of 65 by 2030.”<sup>1</sup>

So we better figure out how to make our later years as golden as possible. Luckily, says Schlossberg, “the average American now looks forward to more healthy years than his or her parents enjoyed...[and] we are seeing an increasing shift to a positive model that acknowledges that older people can make positive contributions to society, and that with aging – surprise! – comes happiness.”<sup>2</sup>

Schlossberg quotes a Harvard Medical School article that concludes: “if you bring to your life appreciation and respect, and embrace aging with good humor, grace, vigor and flexibility, you will – at the very least – be happy to grow old.”<sup>3</sup>

For so many of us, even though we slow down as we get older and may be less physically or mentally capable, our lives do not have to end with retirement or with reaching a particular number like 70, 80 or 90. The Torah, in fact, considers old age a virtue and a blessing. Throughout the Torah, “old” – *zakein* -- is synonymous with “wise.” The Torah commands us to respect the elderly, because their accumulated experiences offer wisdom that even a young prodigy cannot match. A ripe old age is regarded as one of the greatest blessings of all. And the Chassidic rabbi, Nachman of Breslav, forbids Jews to feel old.

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<sup>1</sup> P. 18.

<sup>2</sup> P. 4

<sup>3</sup> P. 8.

Think about the heroes of the Bible. As Jacquelyn Dwoskin explains, <sup>4</sup> “Our ancestors begin their journeys as older men, older men to whom God speaks differently.” At 75, Abraham follows God’s command to go forth from Haran. Moses takes the Israelites out of Egypt when he is 80. “In beginning a spiritual journey at an older age,” Dwoskin says, “both Abraham and Moses have accumulated multiple life experiences. They have passed through childhood and adolescence. They have worked and married. They have been part of a community and family. Both men hear God’s commanding voice. Being older, is Abraham more open to and willing to set forth on a radically new path? Being older, is Moses more sensitive, has he become quieter within himself that he can stop and look and hear? Does reaching an older age bring with it a unique ability to explore spirituality? Abraham and Moses challenge common notions of growing old. Contrary to coming of age as young men, they come of age as old men...By following God’s call, both men have gone beyond the limits of their expected routines. They are able to venture into the unknown. They become leaders, transforming themselves and others in the process.”

That’s just how the seniors in Carl Reiner’s documentary behave. At 99, Betty Seinfeld, Jerry’s mom, says she is living life to the fullest. The pianist, Irving Fields says that at 100, he is doing things “I was afraid to do 40 or 50 years ago...I love what I do.” 100 year-old Ida Keeling started running at 97. The celebrated portraitist, 91 year-old Ray Olivera, spends all his time in his studio. “What motivates me,” he says, “is the desire to continually make new things.” He advises: “Don’t lose your curiosity.”

So what is it that allows these folks to be so active and fulfilled? George Vaillant, the director of a Harvard study, concludes that successful positive aging depends on attitude and outlook. So too Dan Buettner, an expert on aging and the author of *The Blue Zones*, who is featured in the film. He points to places like Sardinia, Okinawa, and yes, Loma Linda, where people live long and healthy lives, and where older people are celebrated and expected to contribute to the community.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/spirituality-the-elderly-a-jewish-perspective/>

They have a reason to get up in the morning, and that is half the battle. He tells us that 50% of our outlook on life is genetic.

15% is circumstances. And the other 40% is up to us. He says, "You can shape your environment to stack the deck of life better."

In his book, Buettner makes the following suggestions.

--Keep moving: exercise is really important. Walking "is the one activity that all successful centenarians...do...almost daily. It's free... always accessible, [and] invites company."

Nancy Schlossberg suggests dancing.

--Eat until you are no longer hungry but not until you are full, and eat slowly. Avoid meat and processed foods, eat vegetables, beans and nuts.

--Drink red wine -- in moderation.

--Find a clear purpose in your life. If you don't have one, "craft a personal mission statement." Begin by answering the question: "Why do you get up in the morning?"

--Learn something new, a musical instrument or a new language.

--Find a way to relieve stress, because stress is a major factor in any number of diseases. Do you know how the Seventh Day Adventists in Loma Linda reduce stress? They observe the Sabbath! According to Buettner, they create a "sanctuary in time," borrowing the phrase from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who characterizes Shabbat this way. The Sabbath offers us a moment to slow down, allows us to experience gratitude, gives us time to smell the roses. Shabbat is also a day when we can turn off the electronics for 24 hours, a needed respite from all the noise.

--Another suggestion for relieving stress: Come to services! According to Buettner, "The simple act of worship... seems to improve your chances of having more good years... people who pay attention to their spiritual side have lower rates of cardiovascular disease, depression, stress, and suicide, and their immune systems seem to work better."

--Buettner also suggests that you get more involved in your religious community.

--And Harvard study director Robert Waldinger reminds us:

“people who are socially connected to family, friends and community, are happier, they are physically healthier, and they live longer.”<sup>5</sup>  
--This is a really crucial insight. Buettner tells us that  
“The happiest people in America are interacting face-to-face 6 hours a day – not on Facebook.” And Nancy Schlossberg says we need to  
“pump up our social life” by maintaining social support systems and nurturing friendships.<sup>6</sup>

In the documentary, Jerry Seinfeld sums up the three primary ways to age gracefully: Bust your [butt]; Pay attention; Fall in love – and he doesn’t necessarily mean romantic love but passion for something you can really sink your teeth into.

Rabbi Rachel Cowan gives us a good way to begin. She writes:  
“Many of us approach old age the way we approach the Yamim Noraim – the days of awe – with fear and guilt. We dread the decline of our bodies and capacities, and also the confrontation with our lives. We know we have not lived up to our intentions. We have hurt ourselves and others. These painful feelings show us what to work on, but battering ourselves with blame and shame will not let us transform the causes of our actions. Our brains are actually neurologically incapable of opening to change when frightened or threatened. Our work as we age is to find the deep places of love inside us, and expand them to include those we need to forgive and those from whom we seek forgiveness. This work begins at home with the difficult task of loving and forgiving ourselves. Only then can it authentically expand out to our families, our community, our people and our world.”

So let us set aside our fears and open up to love – of ourselves as well as of our family and neighbors. Let us take a page from 97-year-old yoga practitioner Tao Porchon-Lynch who says:  
“When I take a breath, I open the door to my heart.”

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<sup>5</sup> P. 179

<sup>6</sup> Pp. 184186