

The Jewish view of retirement

Motivation

Joan has four jobs:

- Stay-at-home mom to raise three children: Been retired 13 years, but partially back on job due to five grandchildren
- Teaching music and piano privately: Since 1975, never retired, about to expand
- Psychological counseling at George Mason University: Just retired (for now)
- Managing me (not about to retire!)

Question

What is the Jewish view of retirement?

Answer

There is no retirement in Judaism.

Does not mean must die on paid job, but means must be useful to the end.

Jewish view of the elderly

1-Honor and respect them. Torah:

You shall rise before the elderly, and honor them, and fear your God. I am the Lord. [Leviticus 19:32]

Halacha:

- All elderly? Yes, Jewish or not.
- What is “elderly”? Seventy, but some say sixty.
- What is “before”? When they are within six feet.
- When to do it? When they come in and when they leave.
- What if they don’t want you to? Then don’t.

-What if they lost their mental faculties and are not even aware of your presence? Do it still. Talmud:

Rabbi Yehudah says... Be careful [to respect] an old man who has forgotten his knowledge through no fault of his own, because both the whole tablets of the law and the fragments of the broken tablets of the Law were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. [Berachot 8b]

2-Use their experience. They are a valuable commodity. In ancient days, they sought the elderly for their wisdom. Example from Zohar:

Rosh Hashana is a day of judgment for those who have... neglected the medicine of the Torah... Rabbi Shim'on [bar Yochai, author of Zohar, 2nd-century CE] and his son, Rabbi Eleazar, were out walking one day, accompanied by Rabbi Abba and Rabbi Yosei. As they went along, they saw an old man ahead of them, who led a young child by the hand.

-Rabbi Shim'on turned to Rabbi Abba and exclaimed: We shall certainly hear new and instructive expositions [of the Torah] from that old man.

So they walked on more quickly and soon overtook the couple.

-When they approached the old man, Rabbi Shim'on said to him... Who are you?

-The stranger replied: I am a Jew.

-Rabbi Shim'on said: We shall surely hear new interpretations [of the Torah] from you today. Where do you come from?

-The old man answered: Until lately I lived retired from the world, a recluse in the desert, where I studied the Torah and meditated on sacred matters, but now I am moving to an inhabited area, to sit in the shadow of the Holy One in these days of [Tishri], the seventh month.

-Rabbi Shim'on rejoiced and said: Let us sit down, for surely the Holy One has sent you to us... But why are you now so far from your place of retirement, and why have you decided to live elsewhere?

-The old man replied...: I separated myself from the haunts of men... in order to be better able to meditate upon the Torah and subdue [the evil inclination].” Besides, the words of the Torah can best sink into the soul there in the desert, for there is no light except what comes out of darkness... and no true worship except what comes out of darkness, and no true good except what comes out of evil. ...Hence the perfection of all things is attained when good and evil are first mixed, and then all becomes good... [I] remained in the desert all year... but now I am returning to an inhabited place where the worship of the Holy One [for Sukkot] is carried on... [Mystical explanations follow.]

-R. Shim'on wept and rejoiced. [Zohar Shemot 2:183a-187a]

Temple had just been destroyed, and much rabbinic wisdom with it. Note great enthusiasm of even top rabbis upon seeing an old man. Sadly, not much of that today.

Ancient sources speak of the "Elders at the gate of the city". Elder (*zaken*) usually means old, but can also be man of status. Elders were the

consulting body, considered "wise" [Ezek. 7:26 with Jer. 18:18]. In Mishna, an elder was a scholar, e.g., member of Sanhedrin or bet din. Elders held meetings in the square next to the city gate [Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Ruth 4:1ff.; Lam. 5:14; Job 29:7] Example in Torah:

And if the man does not wish to marry his [late] brother's wife, then [she] shall go up to the gate, to the elders, and say, [He] refuses to raise a name in Israel for his brother. He will not perform [his] duty. [Deut. 25:7]

Midrash: Israel cannot survive without the elders:

Rabbi Akiva said: Why is Israel compared to a bird? Just as a bird can only fly with its wings, so Israel can only survive with the help of its elders. [Ex. R. 5:12]

What to do

-Leave a legacy:

Halakhic man received the Torah from Sinai not as a simple recipient but as a creator of worlds, as a partner with the Almighty in the act of creation. [Rav Yosef Soloveitchik, in *Halakhic Man*]

-That's really what we all want to do anyway:

The very nature of human life is that man knows true happiness only when creatively contributing to the world he inhabits. [Lubavitcher Rebbe]

-It will motivate your life:

Life is like climbing up a down escalator: If you are standing still, you are moving backwards. [Chabad rabbi Elisha Greenbaum]

-You have a mission:

הַיּוֹם בּוֹ נִלְדָּתָךְ

הוּא הַיּוֹם בּוֹ הִחְלִיט הַקֵּב"ה שֶׁהָעוֹלָם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְהִתְקַיֵּם בְּלִעְדֶּיךָ

Hayom yom noladta hu hayom bo hechlit Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu she-haolam eno yachol lehit-kayyem bal'adecha.

The day that you were born is the day God decided the world could not be preserved without you. [Rabbi Nachman of Breslov]

-If you are still alive, it means you have something left to do:

The very fact that God has granted a person a single additional day of bodily life means that he has not yet concluded his mission in life, that there is still something for him to achieve in this world. [Lubavitcher Rebbe]

Have YOU fulfilled all of your mission?

-At a minimum, must study Torah

-Note: The phrase "Study Torah" means not just the Torah itself, but also the full Tanach, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Zohar, Rashi, Rambam, Ramban, and all other traditional commentaries.

We are commanded to do so. Talmud:

[It is most important to] honor father and mother, perform acts of kindness, and bring peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is equal to them all. [*V'Talmud Torah k'neged kullam*] [Peah Y 1a]

The Lubavitcher Rebbe established hundreds of Torah-study centers for the aged: “*Tiferet Zkeinim* -- The glory of the aged”:

If the struggles of the workplace prevented many from acquiring the Torah's illuminating perspective on life in their younger years, retirement provides a golden opportunity to learn and grow. Education, like productivity, is a life-long endeavor. Torah will give them a new lease on life. It will enlighten them to their true worth and potential, and transform them from futile has-beens into beacons of light for their families and communities. Retirement, if used properly, can be a most potent force. [Lubavitcher Rebbe]

Traditional Jews have this attitude: Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* sings:

[If I were a rich man] I would discuss the holy books with the learned men seven hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all!

-That's what I am doing. But I get little credit, for two reasons:

-First, I *want* to do it. I am interested. The Talmud says those who want to do a mitzvah get less credit than those who do not:

Rabbi Hanina said: He who is commanded and does, stands higher than he who is not commanded and does. [Avodah Zara 3a]

(The reason is that he who is commanded and does, may not want to do it, so he earns credit by overcoming his reluctance; whereas he who is not commanded and does, definitely wants to do it, and so earns little credit.)

-Second, even though I *am* commanded, I find it less difficult than many, because I have an analytical mind (I am a physicist and an analyst), so my reward is diminished proportionally. Talmud:

-One mitzvah involving pain is worth 100 mitzvot that do not. [Talmud Y]

-Ben He He says: According to the effort is the reward. [Pirkei Avot 5:21]

Thus, the mitzvot that require more effort count for more.

Conclusion

In secular terms, the Torah is telling us:

-Keep the little grey cells working to the end!

-It is not enough to indulge in pleasures, travel, volunteer for community work, play with grandchildren, watch TV, or even read. You must study something new continually. You must THINK.

Shabbat shalom.