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It takes some chutzpah for a younger person to talk to a group of older people about aging. So I do this with great respect, a little bit of fear, and the hope that the Torah I'm about to teach will resonate with all of us. Please let me know where I get it right, and where I get it wrong.

How old is Abraham when we first meet him, when God commands him to go from his land, from his birthplace, from his father's home, to a land God will show him? 75.

And then, when Hagar bears a son to Abram, Ishmael—how old is Abram? 86.

Abram is 99 when God appears to him and makes another covenant with him, changing his name from Abram to Abraham, and telling Abraham to circumcise himself, his son and the males of his household.

Sarah is ten years younger than Abraham, but twice, Abraham tells people she is his sister, because she is attractive, and worried that first Pharaoh, then Avimelech, will kill Abraham to marry Sarah.

Some time after this, when Sarah is at least 90, and Abraham 100, Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac.

Sarah lives until the age of 127, and Abraham, then 137, remarries, to Keturah, and has six more children, living until he is 175.

I tend to take biblical ages at their word. The Torah itself knows well how long a year is, and I think there are two messages, two lessons, the Torah intends us to learn from the course of Abraham and Sarah's lives. First, even though people used to live longer than they do now, humans have always been mortal. Our mortality is a fundamental part of our humanity, and coming to grips with that mortality is part of our struggle, our journey.

And second, we learn from the stories of Abraham and Sarah that journeys can begin late in life, that just as our patriarch and matriarch became who they were when they were old in years, so too can we become our truest selves when we are old in years.

This is hard even for Abraham and Sarah to comprehend. They are both surprised when God tells them they'll have children, because they think themselves too old.

And if you've ever wondered why God makes so many covenants with and promises to Abraham, it's because Abraham wants to have children, and a legacy, but knows he's getting older and older, so he needs increasing reassurances from God.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi wrote a book twenty-two years ago called *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* (written with Ronald S. Miller). Reb Zalman, as he was known, was originally a Chabad rabbi, who went off on his own path, becoming a teacher of Kabbalah, mysticism, Torah, and spiritual parent of the Jewish Renewal movement. He was an incredible teacher and writer, and I regret never having studied with him.

Abraham and Sarah are wrestling with what Reb Zalman describes as the "traditional model of life span development," where "we ascend the ladder of our careers, reach the zenith of our success and influence in midlife, then give way to an inevitable decline that culminates in

a weak, often impoverished old age. This," he says, "is *aging* pure and simple, a process of gradually increasing personal diminishment and disengagement from life" (5).

Abraham and Sarah don't quite age that way, but the sense is that they are always expecting to. Reb Zalman "proposes a new model of late-life development called *sage-ing*, a process that enables older people to become spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible 'elders of the tribe'" (5).

"An elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential and whose life continues to have with in it promises for, and connection to, the future. An elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy, and pleasure, and her or his birthright to these remains intact. Moreover, an elder is a person who deserves respect and honor and whose work it is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and formulate this into a legacy for future generations" (14-15).

"People don't automatically become sages simply by living to a great age," says Reb Zalman. They become wise by "undertaking the inner work that leads in stages to expanded consciousness." They "refute the notion that older people are close-minded, set in their ways, slow... They can and do undertake new learning" (15).

Abraham and Sarah have much to learn, much to do, for themselves, in their later years. And that is one element of what it means to age as a sage—to never stop becoming who you are, to never see that process as completed.

But also, they, in their later years, become parents, leaders and role models. You can age like a sage on your own, but you cannot be a sage unless you have people for whom you are a sage.

Writes Reb Zalman, "Sages bear witness to the enduring values that transcend individual conflicts and selfishness... Sages bear witness to long-term evolutionary trends that cover great sweeps of time. Given the authority to exercise leadership through their advisory capacity, they can inspire our society to give up its shortsighted, quarterly 'bottom-line' mentality in favor of spiritual values that will help create a more sustainable, Earth-cherishing lifestyle" (30).

For our sages, what are the ways you are a sage? To whom are you a sage? What could you do to become more saged, rather than aged?

For those of us not yet sages, who are your sages? How could you be a student of one who is aged, helping them transform into a sage? And how will you become a sage in your own time?

Shabbat shalom.

Blessing:

May you be blessed to continue learning, continue growing, continuing become who you are meant to be. As you age, may you become sages, sources of wisdom for yourself, for others, for our community, and for our world. And may we all be your students, talmidei chachamim—students of sages.