

Rosh Hashanah Day Two  
17 September 2023

### ***Takka – It Was Good!***

Every day during basic training, my alarm would jolt me awake at 0430 [O-430]. I'm not much of a morning person, so for me, the "O" stood for "*Oh my God, it's early!*" I had about 15 minutes to put on my PT gear – blue nylon reflective shorts and a quick-dry reflective tee, each emblazoned with an Air Force eagle. Along with my fellow airmen, we would line up in our respective flights and march down to the track. PT, our daily physical training, began at 5 a.m. sharp. Most days started with various forms of calisthenics, an array of exercises custom-designed to make every part of my body hurt. Once everything sufficiently ached, it was off to the track to "run like the wind," or at least that's what they kept yelling. We would run until our PT leaders got tired of watching us or they got hungry, whichever came first. After a few stretches, back to the dorms we marched to change, eat breakfast, and begin our day.

From a young age, endurance running was never a strength of mine. I was great at sprinting, but long-distance running often left me gasping for air. Nevertheless, I reasoned that after several weeks of mandatory training, I would actually excel in the running portion of our fitness test. We were timed in completing sit-ups, pushups and a mile and a half run. Each component was scored, and a composite score of 75 was required to pass. A score above 80 was considered good; above 90 was excellent. Point value charts were based on age and gender. As a 23-year-old male, I pretty much *had* to run like the wind. I don't remember my exact scores, but my composite was in the mid-80s. Good. After that, it was all downhill. Remember, I don't like running. With every subsequent fitness test, I just felt lucky to pass. 76, 78, 75.5. Once in a while, I would break 80. Air Force fitness standards dictate that if you score above 90, you don't have to retest for 12 months. Between 75-89? Mazel Tov. You passed, and you are testing again six months later. Below

a 75? You have 90 days to shape up or prepare to ship out. From 2005 until 2021, twice a year, I tested. Boy, did I hate that PT test!

I share all of this because something very strange happened in November 2021. I was at Joint Base Andrews for my Fitness test, and upon completion, my jaw dropped. I could not believe what I was seeing. 92! My *first* excellent score. I could avoid this torture for an entire year! I remarked to one of the test administrators that this was my first score above 90. He looked at my scoresheet, looked at me, and said, “Oh, it’s because you’re old now. Over 40.” I was excited until he said that. Had I already reached an age where the Air Force expected less of me? I guess when it comes to physical output, the answer was “yes.” Sure enough, a year later, another excellent score and another reminder that I’m 15-20 years older than fellow airmen in their prime. The funny thing is...I don’t feel old.

I wonder...do any of us feel our age? Think about it. How old do you think you are in your head? I asked my grandmother this question some years ago as we were walking up the stairs to her Century Village apartment. “Well, I feel like I’m 62, but I probably should hold on to the railing because I’m no longer 47.” “Grandma,” I said, “you’re 89!” Age is strange, isn’t it? Most of us don’t think of ourselves as shorter or taller than we actually are. We don’t think of ourselves as having smaller ears, longer noses, or curlier hair. We tend to be very aware of our bodies and what they look like. Yet we are awful about locating ourselves in time. Have you ever seen a friend for the first time in 20 years and wondered how they aged so much? And then you see a picture of yourself from 20 years ago and realize: Oh! In fact, research has shown that adults over 40 perceive themselves to be, on average, about 20 percent younger than their actual age (The Atlantic, April 2023). Why are we so hesitant to grow old? Why do we fantasize about being youthful? And what on earth can we do about it?

According to the last major census, the fastest-growing demographic in America, and the fastest-growing demographic in the American Jewish community, are people between the ages of 65 and 90. Here's the paradox. In 1900, the average American life expectancy was 47. In the 1930s, it extended to 65, and after World War Two and the discovery of penicillin, it jumped to 72. With retirement, Social Security, and Medicare set at 65, people figured you would have a couple of years to wear polyester, move to Palm Beach, play Mahjong or golf, and then die. Since then, something crazy has happened. Today, if you reach 65, you can expect to live well into your 80's or 90's. Every year, Hallmark sells 85,000 "Happy 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday" cards. Most of us knew how to be teenagers. We understood what it meant to be a young adult and the expectations of adulthood. Many of us even know what reaching middle age means. But what comes next? What does this next phase of life have in store for us? The great paradox of this moment in American culture is that we have these years, in some cases a full *third* of our lives, and there is no script, no map, no concept of what these years are all about (inspired by the teaching of Rabbi Ed Feinstein).

Over the last ten years, I have had several coffees with members of the community who are very accomplished, very intelligent, very involved...wonderful people. And then they say, "Rabbi, give me something to do. I'm going out of my mind!" There are so many people who have years of life and no idea what to do. We don't even have a name for these years. Some people call it late adulthood. Some people call it encore years or third chapter. Whatever the name, this is an opportunity for us. We have a huge population of people who have time and resources. They have experience. They have wisdom. And they are looking for something to do. No one wants to feel useless. No one wants to feel discarded. No one wants to feel left out. People want to grow. People want to learn. People want to serve. People want to create. If you are thinking, "I have skills. I have abilities. Give me something that makes my life worthwhile. Show me what I ought to be

doing with my time,” then take a look at the volunteer page on our website, referred to by our president’s article in the High Holiday bulletin, or let’s meet for coffee! It is absolutely right that our community invests significant resources in our young people – children, teens, young couples, young families. But we also need to invest, even just a modest amount, in our older adults. I want you to be involved. I want you to be engaged. I want this to be a place where the lives of older adults teach us something about being alive.

How we think about older adults calls to attention several principles we were taught as young people. Number one: You are what you do. If you are what you do, then when you stop doing what you do, what are you? Right? Two people meet at a party. They don’t know each other. The first question is, “What’s your name, and where are you from?” The second question is, “What do you do?” The answer is not, “I love opera. I garden. I have three grandchildren.” The answer is, “I’m a lawyer. I’m a doctor. I’m a rabbi. I’m a professor.” That puts you on a social grid. It identifies you. What happens when you lose that? If you are what you do, you have no identity when you stop *doing* it. But maybe what you are and what you do isn’t true? Maybe you are *more* than what you do. Number two: You discover that your truth is not something you find. It’s the reason we have a myth about God *giving* us Torah on Mount Sinai. I don’t know if you ever read the story in the Torah, but it doesn’t say that we got to Mount Sinai and *discovered* Torah. It says we got to Mount Sinai and were *given* Torah. Why? Because Torah is what’s given to you by the community, by your tradition, by the people you love. It’s a sharing of what we have and what we know. And finally, you don’t only trade time for money, power, and position. To quote the great James Taylor, “The secret of life (and I would add the secret of happiness) is enjoying the passage of time.”

I will admit that I'm not a huge consumer of social media, let alone the current obsession with TikTok. But with all the fuss about TikTok's latest hyperrealistic aging effect, I decided to open an account and give it a try. The result was shocking and, I will admit, a bit depressing. "Aged" is the latest TikTok trend to go viral this year, with the agedfilter hashtag used more than 169 million times in less than a week. The app is not the first to introduce aging filters, but the effect stands out because it uses artificial intelligence to predict how users may look in the future. Each time someone shares their altered face, we reveal our particular obsession with youthfulness. The effect has gone viral because it manipulates the basic human fear of aging and eventually dying. It reminds us that we are human (Washington Post, 15Jul23). I guess I succumbed to my curiosity, but frankly, I would rather just live in the present. And for those curious about what I would look like as an old rabbi, you'll just have to stick around because I don't have plans to go anywhere.

George Carlin once 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. Then you get to your teens. 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. But then you TURN 30. Makes you sound like bad milk! He TURNED; we had to throw him out. 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! You've built up so much speed that you HIT 70! When you get into your 80's, every day is a complete cycle;

you HIT lunch; you TURN 4:30; and then you REACH bedtime. In your 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."

William Shakespeare, in his play *As You Like It*, takes his audience on a similar journey, made particularly vivid by visual images of the different stages of life. Life, according to Shakespeare, is a drama acted out on a stage. Each phase of life is an act in the drama, a person's life being no more than a brief appearance on a journey from cradle to grave.

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages. (1) At first, the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms. (2) Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel...unwillingly to school. (3) And then the lover, sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad...(4) Then a soldier, full of strange oaths...jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel...(5) And then the justice...with eyes severe and beard of formal cut, full of wise saws and modern instances...(6) The sixth age shifts into the lean and slippered pantaloone, with spectacles on nose and pouch on side...(7) Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Without disputing the venerable words of William Shakespeare, Jewish tradition takes an entirely different approach. Old age is not a time of diminishment, disability, and loss. The old are never retired, removed, or isolated. In fact, Jewish tradition recognizes that elders possess a capacity to see life from higher perspectives. We honor and celebrate the unique contributions of our elders to our collective life. Today, in celebrating Rosh Hashanah, celebrating the passage of another year, I want to share insights from our tradition that can help us with the inevitable process of growing older.

Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Sages, famously teaches a great truth about aging (5:23). "At the age of five, one studies Bible; at ten, the Mishnah; at thirteen, one is responsible for the mitzvot; at fifteen, one studies the Talmud." What's the goal of childhood? Literacy. Because literacy is the

doorway into the adult community. “At eighteen, one is ready for marriage; at twenty, one begins a career; at thirty, one is at the height of *koach* – one’s power.” So, at 18, 20, and 30, you become economically viable. Family and work. Or as Freud would say, labor and love. Now, pay attention to what comes next. “At forty, one achieves *bina* – understanding.” Understanding is a quality. It’s no longer something you do. “At fifty, one is prepared to give *aitzah* – wise counsel. At sixty, one is given the deference of *zikna* – seniority. At seventy, one is considered *sayva* – a sage. Eighty is the age of *gevurah* – heroic strength. At ninety, one is given to *l’su’ach* – meditation.” According to Judaism, in old age, you gain qualities of spirit. This is the exact reversal of the American and Western idea that the older you get, the more diminished you are, that you have nothing to contribute. On the contrary! With increasing age, you acquire the qualities of *bina*, *aitzah*, *zikna*, *sayva*, and *gevurah*. What are these qualities? These are the qualities of God. In *this* community, you gain *Godliness* as you grow older.

Every Friday night, during Kabbalat Shabbat, we recite Psalm 92 – *mizmor shir l’yom hashabbat*. And then we sing these words:

צְדִיק כְּתֹמֶר יִפְרֹחַ כְּאַרְז בְּלִבְנוֹן יִשְׁגֶּה: אֲשׁוּלִים בְּבֵית ה' בְּחִצְרוֹת אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִפְרִיחוּ: עוֹד יִנּוּכּוֹן בְּשִׁיבָה  
דְּשָׁנִים וְרַעֲנָנִים יִהְיוּ: לְהַגִּיד כִּי־יֵשֶׁר ה' צוּרִי וְלֹא־עוֹלָתָהּ בּוֹ:

“The righteous flourish like the date palm, thrive like a cedar in Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they flourish in our God’s courtyards. In *sayva*, in old age, they remain fruitful, still fresh and bountiful, proclaiming: The Lord is upright, my rock in whom there is no flaw.” The Psalmist declares: In old age, you are still fruitful. You are still alive! You still have plans, visions, and ideas. And then, at the end of your life, you will be able to say, “טוב להדות לה” – thank God it was *takka* good – it was *really* good!”

Learning how to sanctify time and having moments that you can sanctify are existential truths that come from being old in this world. This is what older adults have to offer those who are

young. We need to guide this generation into lives of meaning, creativity, and service. We need a space for them to share their truths with those who follow in their footsteps. Over the years, we have had a handful of second bar mitzvahs in the shul. The Book of Psalms tells us that the span of our life is seventy years, 70 plus 13 is 83. Time for a second bar/bat mitzvah. The truth is, it's too old. What if we started earlier? What if we celebrated every zero-birthday starting at 50? 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100. We'll have a series of special Shabbat services (perhaps an annual summer series), and we will ask you to speak your truth to your family, your friends, and your community. We'll have your family and friends get up and talk about what *you* offered them. Imagine hearing those words *before* your funeral. Wouldn't that be nice? And then we'll have some cake and cookies to celebrate. If individuals did this every 10 years, there would always be a group of people celebrating their lives and thinking about their existential journeys. The shul would become the place to mark these sacred milestones. Such a ritual, such a tradition, would affirm our belief that the reflection you see in the mirror is a reflection to be celebrated, the spiritual wisdom and godliness within YOU.

Every year, for the past ten years or so, Jodi and I sit down over the summer and take out a small mortgage to buy plane tickets to Florida in December. For a week at the end of the year, we head to Delray Beach to spend time with my grandparents, my children's great-grandparents. Come this December, they will be 96 and 89. Thank God they are still healthy. Thank God they are at the age of great wisdom. Thank God they can share that wisdom with their great-grandchildren. I pray they should live until 120, but I know, in my heart of hearts, that one day their lives will come to an end. And on that day, please God, they will smile at their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren and say, "*kindalach, takka* it was good – thank God...it



was *really* good.” I pray that we will all reach that moment, peering into the eyes of those we love, thanking God because our lives were...*takka* good.