

## In With The Old

### Parshat Chayei Sarah - 5782

Estelle and Irving had been married for over 50 years. Irving noticed that his wife seemed to have trouble hearing him lately, and became concerned. He started thinking she might need to be tested for hearing aids.

Not quite sure how to approach this subject with Estelle, he called their doctor to discuss the problem. They devised a simple, informal test the husband could perform to get a better idea about her hearing loss. *“Here’s what you do, Stand about 40 feet away from her, and in a normal conversational speaking tone see if she hears you? If not, go to 30 feet, then 20 feet, and so on until you get a response.”*

That evening, Estelle was in the kitchen cooking dinner, and Irving was in the den checking his email. He thought to himself, *“I’m about 40 feet away, let’s see what happens?”* So in a normal tone he asks, *“Honey, what’s for dinner?”* No response. Irving moves closer to the kitchen, about 30 feet from his wife and repeats, *“Honey, what’s for dinner?”* Still no response. Next he moves into the dining room where he is about 20 feet from his wife and asks, *“Honey, what’s for dinner?”* Again no response. So, he walks up to the kitchen door, about 10 feet away. *“Honey, what’s for dinner?”* Again there is no response, so he walks right up behind her and yells in her ear, **“HONEY, WHAT’S FOR DINNER!?”** This time she turned around and said, **“For the fifth time, TUNA CASSEROLE!”**

Sometimes, we perceive a problem as being external, when it actually lies within us.

Nowadays, due to the marvels of modern medicine, widespread health consciousness and perhaps some good fortune, we have to come to take for granted that many people will reach old age. From our vantage point, we may find it strange that the Torah specifically points out that Avraham reaches old age - ואברהם זקן בא בימים. In addition to the peculiarity of the Torah pointing out something that seems like just a normal stage of life, it need not be stated as we are already aware of Avraham's advanced age; after all, we know he was older than 100 years when Sarah bore Yitzchak. What then, is the Torah adding?

Chazal picked up on this oddity and suggested that Avraham was the first person in history to experience old age. Before his time, there was no such thing as senescence, or the gradual deterioration that is ubiquitous with old age. Instead, the Rabbis tell us, people would simply sneeze one day and their souls would depart. While this is a fascinating idea to consider, it certainly is not reflective of our historical and biological understanding of the world, and so, it requires further analysis with regard to the lesson it is trying to teach us. Permit me, therefore, to draw your attention to a homily on the words ואברהם זקן בא בימים, and ***Abraham had become old in his days***.

The Gemara in Kidushin suggests that the word זקן is an acronym for the phrase "זה קנה" - *this one has acquired wisdom*. Someone who is blessed with a long life, over which he or she has learned many things from rich experiences and diverse interactions, has met enough people and formed many deep relationships and undoubtedly accumulated considerable wisdom.

Alternatively, we can focus upon the second part of the expression **ואברהם זקן בא בימים** - that he acquired two worlds - this one, *olam ha'zeh* and the next, *olam ha'ba*.

We might suggest that within these two interpretations lies a powerful lesson about how the Torah thinks about aging. To be old means one has acquired wisdom, but it also means living simultaneously in two worlds- one's current reality, and the memories of the person one was. Indeed, the Sfas Emes boldly suggests that the expression “בא בימים” comes to teach us this very notion - that Avraham came בימים, with all of his days in hand. His youthful accomplishments, his mistakes and his triumphs are not things of the past; they are a considerable part of who he is today. He was simultaneously young *and* old, like his wife Sarah at the time of her passing, who, our sages tell us, was as vital at the age of 100 as she was at the age of 20. Perhaps, in telling us that this was the first time in history that anyone experienced the aging process, what Chazal were really saying was that this is the lens through which we are to regard old age.

To be sure, the Torah stresses the importance of revering the elderly. Perhaps the best example is the Torah's command<sup>1</sup>

מִפְּנֵי שְׂיִבָּה תִּקּוּם וְהִדַּרְתָּ פָנֶי זָקֵן וְרָאִיתָ מֵאַלְהֵיךָ אֶנֶּכִּי יְהוָה:

You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

In fact, on any Israeli bus, you can see a sign by the front seats bearing this verse, exhorting passengers to leave the front seats available for the elderly, and to vacate their seats when an

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 19:32

elderly person boards. The Torah tells us as well that if you want to know anything about Torah or the world, you should ask an elderly person<sup>2</sup> - שאל אביו ויגדך, זקינו ויאמרו לך. Finally, the Gemara talks about רחבעם, the son and successor of Shlomo haMelech, telling us that the reason his reign did not endure was that he sought counsel from younger friends instead of from senior advisors.

But, despite the aforementioned, we still struggle to respect our elders. It is not always easy to engage people we might consider difficult, or needy, or past their prime. We may *revere* old people, but we aren't necessarily *comfortable* with them- and we certainly still discriminate against them in many overt and covert ways. In almost every industry- and Jewish professional work is no exception- more seasoned employees are phased out, let go or denied a chance at employment in favor of younger, more enthusiastic candidates, who are willing to work for less. To give you a sense of the extent of ageism in the modern workplace, it has been shown that 60% of older employees have experienced workplace age discrimination. In 2018, claims of age bias against older workers cost the US economy more than **\$850 billion**<sup>3</sup>. Thankfully, the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission protects those above the age of 40<sup>4</sup> from discrimination in the areas of hiring, firing, promotion, layoff processes, benefits and training. And while all of this is noteworthy, that which is enshrined as law does not necessarily affect that which is in the heart of man. You can't legislate והדרת זקן; its an inner emotion, an attitudinal *mitzvah* with certain external manifestations. And so, even when civil law can require a certain behavior, older people will not be respected as

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<sup>2</sup> Devarim 32:7

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aarp.org/politics-society/advocacy/info-2020/age-discrimination-economic-impact.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.eeoc.gov/age-discrimination>

God intends unless we find a way to explain why they ought to be respected. It is here where the description of Avraham's aging process becomes instructive.

On the one hand, we are challenged to respect and admire our elders because of who they *were* in the past and because of what they once achieved - *זה קנה חכמה* - But we are also challenged, per the Sfas Emes, to see the older person in front of us not as a relic, as a museum piece, but as *the same person* they once were- *בא בימים*, who still has interests, passions and an inherent worth. Consider, for example, whether we would ever get a minyan without our senior members. In today's Jewish funding landscape, generous grants are distributed to Jewish outreach organizations that target the young professionals and young families demographics. This makes sense; if one is looking to cultivate future Jewish leaders and promote Jewish communal, institutional and personal continuity, it makes sense to engage the younger segments of our community. But more often than not, the most invested and engaged demographic in Jewish learning- whether in the form of Torah classes or communal experiences- is the 50 plus crowd. Indeed, long before Chabad and other outreach organizations began actively courting young professionals, the Lubavitcher Rebbe focused on providing opportunities for learning and engagement for the elderly, which he named after his father- *Kollel Tiferes Zkainim Levi Yitzchok*. This is the Torah's antidote to ageism; we have to respect and value the elderly, not because some government division tells us how to hire and maintain employees, but because the Torah tells us that they are vital forces, people of value and significance in their own right.

If you've ever been to the Kotel, you may have seen an older gentleman wearing a custodian's uniform, sweeping up the Kotel plaza. Perhaps you remarked at how unfortunate it was that such an elderly person was still working at that age, or how considerate it was for the Kotel to employ him when he was so slow at his job. You went on your way, in a rush to daven or get your obligatory Kotel photo. You didn't know that that man's name was Binyamin Zev Wurzburger. Sivan Rahav-Meir shared his remarkable story this past week.

Binyamin Zev was a native of Hungary, who was taken to the Mauthausen concentration camp as a young man. In his bunker, there was a particularly vicious SS officer who delighted in taunting the inmates, "You pray to God to take you to Jerusalem? You will never see Jerusalem! The only way you will ever get there is if your ashes do, as they exit this chimney." Binyamin never forgot these words, they carried him through the darkest times in his life. They strengthened his faith and resolve even when his brother and two sisters were murdered, even when he worked under brutal conditions in labor camps, and even when he finally made aliyah. He eventually married his wife Miriam and moved to Afula. At the age of 70, he retired, but he was not done- the next chapter of his life began, as he fulfilled his lifelong ambition and moved to Yerushalaim. Shortly thereafter, he presented himself to the Kotel authorities, and asked for a job as a custodian. They were initially skeptical; he was already advanced in years, and slowing down, but he challenged them. "Give me a job, and let's see what I can do!" So they put him in charge of cleaning the stones. Every candy wrapper, every Bissli bag, every can of Coke anywhere near the Kotel was lovingly thrown away by him. Each day, he carefully replaced all the notes that fell out of the wall back into

the ancient gaps, restoring peoples' prayers to the place where they rested. Every morning at 5 AM he was there, regardless of the temperature or the weather. He said, "Whenever I cleaned the stones of the wall, where the *Shechinah* rested I felt I was exacting revenge upon my Nazi tormentor." He became such a fixture at the Kotel that he became an official stop on any tour of the Kotel, and he spoke to many groups of tourists each day. Binyamin Zev Wurzberger died this week, at the age of 95. He was both young and old, realizing his youthful dreams and living a life of meaning until the very end.

עוֹד יְנוּבֹתָן בְּשִׁיבָה דְּשָׁנִים וְרַעְנָנִים יִהְיוּ:

In old age they still produce fruit;  
they are full of sap and freshness,

May we follow his lesson- in our own attitudes toward the elderly, and ourselves, until 120.