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“At 80”

I want to thank the Rabbis and Cantor this evening for inviting me to share the pulpit in honor of the eighth anniversary of my tenth birthday. We tend to label such milestones “significant” birthdays, but indeed, as the years add up, every birthday becomes significant.

In Psalm 90¹ we read: “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength ... fourscore years” But the Psalm couldn’t stop right there, couldn’t leave well enough alone, no it had to continue with the notion that after 80 everything becomes labor and sorrow and a whole lot of *feh*. But one good thing that our tradition derived from that verse is the notion that if you make it to 70, your life starts anew. Hence, 13 years later, at age 83, we can become Bar Mitzvah again. It has to be easier the second time.

In *Pirke Avot - The Sayings of the Fathers*, a Mishnah teaches that 70 is for grey hair and that 80 is for strength. There is no mention of the age for no hair. But I like that thought better than the end of the verse in Psalms. Imagine Mishnah teaching that 80 is the time of strength, or in another version of that verse, 80 is for the fatness of years. That translation seems to be a play on the Hebrew word for 80, which is *shmonim*. The root letters of *shmonim* are *shin, mem, nun* / which when read as *shemen* is the Hebrew word for oil. Other words build off those root letters: *shuman* means grease, oily, or fat, *shamain* means chubby or even heavier, *shamenet* means rich sour cream, and so 80 is all about life’s richness even if being well oiled leads to a few extra pounds.

Last week, I came across a test on the Internet. It was entitled, “Will you live to be 80?” With only a week to go, I couldn’t resist. I took the test and I failed. It told me to change what I was doing immediately or I wouldn’t make it to 65. It was the first test I’ve failed since 3rd grade spelling. So I learned; at 80, I don’t need tests?

¹ Psalm 90:10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they

Ever since my retirement twelve years ago, I have been exploring the promised land of longevity. We live in a youth enamored culture, whose sentiment was expressed by Shakespeare in two brief lines: “Age, I do abhor thee. Youth, I do adore thee.”

Roman philosopher Seneca called it “An incurable disease.”

The novelist Philip Roth: “A massacre.”

The composer David Diamond lamented: “Age is torment. Only death can terminate the agonizing flow of deterioration.” He must have been a lot of fun at parties.

We find a pathetic picture of an old man’s poor self-image, self-doubt, and insecurity in T.S. Eliot’s poem, *Prufrock’s Lament*: “I grow old, I grow old. I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled and my shirt untucked. Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?”

Dylan Thomas was angered by it: “Old age should burn and rage at the close of day. . . rage, rage against the dying of the day.” After reading what others say about the feebleness of aging, it’s a wonder we’d have the strength to rage. Well, one of these days, science will show us how to add many years to life, but for now we cannot arrest age. At best we can only conceal its signs. Millions of people do so at great expense, giving the cosmetic industry a huge slice of the world’s economy. As Benjamin Franklin put it: “We all want to live longer, but not look as if we have.”

Although the majority opinion about aging is grim, I take comfort in knowing that most of the darker adages were written by young people filled with imagination born of fretful foreboding ... and what do kids know about this stuff?

During the course of my 53 years as a rabbi, I have performed more than 650 weddings. At each, as part of a final benediction, I have asked God’s blessing on the couple with the words: “May love and companionship abide within the home you establish, and may you both grow old together ... ever grateful unto God for the blessings of your lives.” A young couple eager to break the glass is often jolted by the expression, but their parents and grandparents can embrace it with a knowing smile.

Similarly, there is Robert Browning’s line, “Grow old with me . . . the best is yet to be.” I used to question that as poetic license. Now at *shmonim*, 80, I have come to recognize

at least six reasons to justify Browning's positive view of aging, the good stuff that comes with rounding the bases.²

The first positive is the gain of tranquility.

All of our most important decisions are made in earlier years: educational and vocational choices, what college to attend or not as the case may be; who to marry and when and where and why ... and if not, why not. Then there are the ramifications of marriage – buy or rent, live near the parents or as far away as possible, children or not, how to raise them, religious observances, private or public school, and the personal choice issues that grey the most dedicated of parents – discipline, limits, their independence, dress, language, Internet and cell phone usage, moral values vs. pop culture ... a conundrum that these past months of electioneering have driven home.

OK, with my legal immigrant wife, we managed lovingly to create a home, raise children, and establish a career ... actually two careers. One everyone here must certainly know about – founding and forming this magnificent congregation. But with Audrey Marcus, my imaginative and extremely disciplined partner, and with Rikki as manager, we were also able to create a very successful Jewish educational publishing company, which during the course of 30 years not only became one of the largest such ventures in the English speaking world, but spawned a dozen or so other such ventures thus revolutionizing and transforming Jewish education for an entire generation and more. So, I have no pressing need to prove myself further. I have walked the walk, had my failures and successes, shed tears many ... and garnered joys aplenty.

All the pressures have eased. I am more relaxed than ever. I get to exercise regularly and take an occasional afternoon nap, sometimes unexpectedly; and, what a joy to find an empty page on my calendar every so often, a page without obligations, meetings, functions, complexities. I can actually devote hours to reading novels, something I never had a chance to do in earlier years. I was always so consumed with building Temple (or keeping it standing), writing sermons, taking care of life cycle events, visiting the ailing, comforting the failing, returning 15-30 phone calls a day, who had time for novels? For the publishing company, I read thousands of pages each week, but mostly manuscripts to edit. Then there were articles to stimulate sermon ideas, or Commentaries to find fresh insights for teaching the weekly *Sedra*. Now I try to read one novel for each year of life

² With thanks to Rabbi Joshua O. Haberman of Washington Hebrew Congregation

every year. Last year I did read 79; this year I finished my 80th on the morning of my 80th birthday. So, I guess I'm still goal driven. (Incidentally, a list of those books is available on this sinaidenver.org web site.) I have no compunctions, no guilt as I sit on my porch and thumb pages on my mini-iPad. During my working years, time was a constraint, a limited commodity to be parceled and scheduled, weighed and confronted. Of late, time has become my friend. Tranquility is a good thing.

The Second gain is what the Greek philosopher Plato called “the cooling of passion.”

I like to think of it as the doctrine of insignificance. If a matter is not truly significant or important, ignore it! I spent a lot of energy in former years worrying. I got umpteen emails these past few weeks from those rejoicing over and from those worried silly about the election results. But I have come to realize that worry is the fulcrum, the mid-point between action and resignation. Worried? Either do something about it – volunteer for the cause you believe in, get tested for the pain you feel, find the person who can fix the leak, debate the issue ... or, resign yourself to what is and let it go – take a trip, take a nap, fagetaboutit. Aging is about getting less frantic, less overly analytical, more accepting, less needy.

Sean O’Casey wrote about his eighties: “I like to sit back and let the world turn by itself without trying to push it.”

Age does not render us indifferent to the world’s problems, to the ills of society, to the suffering and unhappiness of people around us. But the perspective of years teaches us that not all problems can be solved; and certainly, not by ourselves. There is no quick fix for the world’s problems – energy, environment, education, poverty, hunger, health, duplicity, bigotry, economic inequity, and most serious of all, stupidity. The Middle East will fester and smolder for as long as there are Sunni and Shia, Arabs and Jews. Religions and politics, dogmas left and right will spew and fight ... I’m very certain, for a long time to come.

Some of our intimately personal problems have no solution. All we can and must do is endure, which as we age we seem to be more adept at than we were not so very long ago.

The third gain is spiritual; I call it “redefining a relationship with God.”

The poetess Anne Marx spoke of this when undergoing cancer treatment: “The force beyond,” she wrote, “is now in charge of my fate.” There are life events we simply can’t control. We can’t always change a health, a family, or a financial issue. At an earlier time in life, we might plunge in, charge at full speed, race toward distraction; we might make ourselves crazed over each confronted issue, frustrated at each failure, feeling guilty often, or perhaps given to a whole lot of religious flailing – God bargaining, “why me,” and a bunch of shudda-cudda-wudda. With the perspective of a few years, we come to realize that such emotional and religious flailing doesn’t bring amelioration or resolution. You want change? Change your attitude; change your perspective; change your anti-depressant.

As I teach the Torah portion to my grandkids each week at Shabbat dinner, I like to think of how God appears through their eyes. What must they be thinking when Abel is killed and God responds to Cain’s cynical question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” In the early chapters of Genesis, God is moral judge, a parent figure kicking the kids out of Eden for eating from the cookie jar, marking Cain and sending him off to wander as punishment for his awful deed, bringing a flood, ready to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. God as indignant parent might be just the ticket to detour thoughts of bad behavior in the young and to encourage the inculcating of virtuous acts, but as we age, God has to grow up too.

Eden? Family arguments? Saving the world? I’ll do what I can to help as best I can, but I don’t need a punitive deity, just One who accepts me for who I am ... right now. God as judge? The deity who failed anger management? Not so much anymore. God ... now more as understanding spirit of the universe, God as the depth of wisdom yet to be plumbed, God as patient listener and comforter, God as private confidant and trusted silent partner, God as friend who accepts calls at any time, God as the Source that leads to peace of mind even in ... especially in ... the face of illness or pain. Less the God of the *Vidui-Ashamnu*, and more *Y’did Nefesh, Av HaRachaman*.

The fourth gift harvested while aging is a liberation from the urge to set everyone straight.

I used to feel it was important to win arguments. When I was right and I was usually right (except at home), you needed to know that. I took up words with some pretty heavy thinkers back in the day. The intensity of their conviction was fierce, but I often thought that intensity is no proof that you are right. Philosophers and historians have been

passionate and wrong, experienced explorers have gone astray, some religious leaders and their doctrines have done more harm than good, artisans and writers have portrayed nonsense, military leaders have blundered in battle, czars and presidents have deceived or played the duped fool, yet at one time or another, no matter how wrong they were, they thought, felt, were certain, knew absolutely without a scintilla of doubt that they were right.

There is the lovely account of two people arguing a case before the rabbi. He listens intently and after hearing both side, one asks,

“So, am I right?” “Yes,” the rabbi answers, “you’re right.”

The other litigant responds, “But rabbi, my case was also just; what about me?”

“Yes, you’re also right.”

As they leave the house, the rebbetzin who heard the entire matter, asks her husband,

“How can they both be right? In such a case, one must be right and the other wrong.”

“My dear,” the rabbi answered, “you too are right.”

Now we know, that rabbi must have been 80.

That doesn’t mean that I have no opinions. Oh, I have opinions ... about nearly everything, and if you ask, I’ll share them ... no holds barred. At 80 I know what I think and how I feel about lots of stuff. Here’s my opinion for what it’s worth, but don’t take it personally. I’ll be happy to tell you exactly what I think. I have no need to win your approval. If you agree with me, fine; if not, I just return to step one above – tranquility.

Do I think I might also be wrong? Do I think I don’t have all the answers? Just between us grandparents, let me ask you, have you ever gotten into a discussion with an 8 year-old over how to download an app? More often than before, it occurs to me that I might not have all the answers. I’m not ready to concede that I am wrong, mind you, just that I have learned to listen more and talk less. I am less dismissive of opinions I disagree with, more willing to consider the merits of the other side. I still reserve the right to think the word “idiot,” but I don’t have to say it out loud. I used to think that letting an argument drop was a mark of humility, however feigned. But at 80, I find, and remarkably so, that I no longer really give a darn who wins.

The fifth dividend of old age is greater appreciation and gratitude.

I have become more attentive to old and new friends and to relatives. More often than before, I keep in touch usually by email, since many of my older relatives don’t hear so

well. I especially value chats with many of the rabbis and soloists who served our congregation, and take personal *nachas* in their successes. I've also been blessed with the opportunity to edit the sermons, especially the High Holy Day variety, for a number of colleagues. It can be something like turning sour milk into smoothies, but these are talented thinkers too burdened with the everyday to focus totally on how best to say what they want desperately to share. I tweak what they speak.

There is a great Hasidic story about Rabbi Elimelech who wants to fix the world, but his efforts go for naught. He pours out his frustrations to his friend, who advises that, the world, the country, the state, even the city and the neighborhood are just too big to fix. "So, nu, what can I do?"

"Fix a moment in just one person's day, bring a smile to one face, do an unexpected kindness ... and you will fix that person's entire world if only for an instant. In that way, you can begin to change the world, even if just by a minuscule amount."

So, I make a deliberate effort to be thankful for small favors and kindnesses and try to return them in like manner. It costs nothing to let someone in line ahead of you, to chat for a second with the mail carrier, to thank the young man with the ear phones who mows in a few minutes what would have taken me an hour on a good day, to be grateful for good neighbors who point out the massive hornets' nest on the side of our house and then proceed to spray it. Take no kindness for granted ... as we read in the opening words of *Psalms 92*: "*Tov L'hodote L'Adonai* – It is good to give thanks." Being thankful is the most effective and harmless mood-changer – the best antidote to pessimism.

The sixth and most important gain is more involvement with family – children and grandchildren.

I've had a love affair with a married woman for 55 years. Rikki will usually respond by saying that these have been 25 of the happiest years of her life. With abiding trust in each other and acceptable delusions about our ineluctable charm, we are left with surprisingly little to argue about. She has been a rock of strength and support through all of our personal, family, and career trials and challenges. We've had an especially good time traveling the globe with good friends since retiring and not having to stress out over the little things. I say of her what the great Rabbi Akiba said about his beloved Rachel: "*Mah ani, shelah*" – "Whatever I am, I owe to her."

I am very proud of Ron and Dina and their spouses Julie and Darren. These are four hard working, upright citizens with great values. Except for occasionally helping our children with their homework, I had little to do with raising them. They owe how they turned out to their mother, to their own sense of industry, and to their fortunate ancestral gene pool.

Our four grandkids are a special joy – 10,10,8, and almost 8. They still give great hugs and haven't tired of spending time at our house. We'll welcome that as long as it lasts, probably until they get cell phones.

I have always wanted my kids to be critical thinkers, to question everything and to challenge motivations – theirs and those of others. You don't have to be a total cynic to be curious and cautious. I've even done so with the grandkids by often giving outrageous answers to simple questions. My reward is when they respond, "Oh, Grandpa!" Then I know that they will think before they believe, question before they accept blindly, and wonder at why and how things and people operate. Besides, I want them to learn how to enjoy laughing and smiling. I have much sympathy for folks who have no sense of humor. God loves a good joke. That's why people were created.

So, I'm 80. Big deal. W.C. Fields once said, "The good thing about aging is that it is a temporary condition." So, I could talk about the meaning of life and about death, about illness and its consequences, about fear and loss, but that seems to be the stuff of the High Holy Days. Tonight, I'd rather evoke hope and confidence in the future. I'd rather concentrate on gratitude and giving and generosity of spirit. Those are things that we can do every day, while death is just a onetime event. Comical cynicism – a sermonic gem.

Earlier in life, with many years to look forward to, I felt like a millionaire in time, not giving it much thought, and freely spending it. Now, that my supply of time has shrunk, I appreciate far more each day, each hour, every bit of new knowledge and every moment with people I care for. So what can I say in closing?

As the Torah tells us about Moses, may we all live to be 120, with eyes undimmed and strength unabated ... and, let me add, with a deep sense of gratitude and a heart-felt smile.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Elohaynu Melech HaOlam Shehecheyanu, V'Kiyamanu,
V'Higeyanu La'Zman HaZeh.*

Amen v' Amen