

## **Jewish Elderhood**

One of the most frequently asked questions I get about the congregation from colleagues or friends is: *How big is your religious school?* Sometimes that is followed up by: *Have a lot of new young families joined this year?*

I get it. Jews are concerned about the perpetuation of Jewish life. In every generation there is the belief that the younger people don't care enough about Judaism and because of their indifference, the next generation won't have any connection at all. We want to know that Judaism is not just being preserved, but even better, that it is flourishing. A growing school and young adult community means that all is good in the Jewish world.

Maybe its' because I've never lived in Florida, but no one has ever asked me with as much enthusiasm, "Rabbi, has the senior membership been growing this year?" I can't recall anyone remarking about our vibrant 65 and over community.

The truth is, the Jewish community pays a lot of attention to children, millennials, and young families, but it does not seem too concerned about the elderly population. We are certainly attentive to them, but, they are not a priority. At a sit-down I had with several seniors at a local independent living facility a few months back, they expressed how Beth Israel's focus is on everyone else but the elderly. It was a sobering conversation.

Consider the outside world. Older people are overlooked when looking for jobs, especially when competing against younger people. They are stereotyped in the media. Ageism is an everyday challenge for many older adults. As Dr. Louise Aronson writes in her book, *Elderhood*, "We have created a society where we do everything possible to stay alive yet dread being old."<sup>1</sup> Because of this mentality, we have allowed it to be normalized in our culture to the extent that this demographic has been marginalized within our community and it's time to show this segment in our society proper respect.

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<sup>1</sup> Aronson, Dr. Lousie. *Elderhood: redefining aging, life, transforming medicine, reimagining life*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019. p. 8

How many people are we talking about? What does the senior population look like today? According to the US Census Bureau, every day approximately 10,000 people turn 65, the age when one is considered a senior. (Even that word, “senior,” is off-putting to many of us. “Elderly” isn’t much better.)

In ten years, when all of the baby boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—“will be 65 years and over, more than 20 percent of the total U.S. population will be over the age of 65... This shift toward an increasingly older population is expected to endure. By 2056, the population 65 years and over is projected to become larger than the population under 18 years.”<sup>2</sup> Right now 23% of population is under 18 and 16% of population is over 65. So, when my 7-year old daughter is around my age, these figures are likely to swap. In other words, the trend in the population is that it’s getting older.

With an aging society we ought to have a discussion about how best to serve this group’s needs. We have done a tremendous job focusing on youth and we will continue to do so, but perhaps it’s time for us to pivot and direct our attention to those in our community who feel cut off.

If you were to hop on a bus in Israel today there is a good chance you would see a sign that quotes a specific verse from the Torah, reading *mip-nei sei-vah takoom v’hadarta p’nei zakein*, “You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the elderly.”<sup>3</sup> And it continues, “You shall fear Adonai, I am your God.” This verse from *parashat Kedoshim*, which we’ll be chanting this afternoon has three messages for us. The first is that we should stand up for the elderly and in our day and age, give them our seat. It could end there, but it doesn’t. We are also commanded to show deference or respect to them as well. Letting someone have your seat is not in and of itself an act of respect. Showing deference requires a conscious and positive action one takes for another. It’s not as automatic as standing up.

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<sup>2</sup> The Baby Boom Cohort in the United States: 2012 to 2060, by Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p25-1141.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:32

There must be as Martin Buber teaches, an “I-Thou” interaction. The last phrase can be interpreted in one of two ways. Either, just as one rises before God and shows respect, so too should we do the same for the elderly. On the other hand, we better do this or else!

Giving a senior your spot on the bus is a nice gesture, but we must take it one step further. The rabbis teach us that we are not to speak before them nor contradict their words. Surely, this doesn't apply to all elderly people. Is everyone deserving of respect? The Talmud teaches us that the term “elder” refers exclusively to a wise person.<sup>4</sup> Age is deemed worthy of respect only if it is accompanied by signs of wisdom. Thus, people with memory loss or dementia, according to this interpretation, do not deserve special consideration.

Just when you've almost written off the rabbis, they come back and redeem themselves. The view which the codifiers accepted as law is attributed to the second century sage, Rabbi Issi ben Yehudah who said, "You shall rise before the aged" includes *anyone* who is advanced in age. It doesn't matter what one has accomplished in life or how much wisdom someone has, what matters is life-span. We even find another rabbi who would rise before non-Jewish elders because they too have experienced much in life. (Back then, this would have been an unprecedented gesture.)

We learn from our ancient rabbis that simply being older is reason enough to demand respect. If one had a question about life and could ask either a 20 year old or a 70 year old, hands down the rabbis would select the older person. Wouldn't you? Ok, maybe I won't call my parents up if I'm having computer problems. In Pirke Avot we learn “Rabbi Yosi bar Judah of Kefar ha-Bavli said: He who learns from the young, what is he like? He is like one who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine fresh from his wine press. But he who learns from the aged, what is he like? He is like one who eats ripe grapes and drinks old wine.”<sup>5</sup> The Jewish sages paint an entirely different picture of the elderly than our culture is used to seeing. And they are not

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<sup>4</sup> BT Kiddushin 32b

<sup>5</sup> Pirke Avot 4:26

alone. If we were to travel the globe we would find a similar outlook from Greeks, Koreans, Chinese, and of course, Native Americans.

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom writes, "I embrace aging... as you grow, you learn more. If you stayed at 22, you'd always be as ignorant as you were at 22. Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. People who are always saying, 'I wish I were young again' reflect unsatisfied lives, unfulfilled lives, lives that haven't found any meaning. Because if you've found meaning in your life, you don't want to go back. You want to go forward. You want to see more, do more."<sup>6</sup>

There is a Jewish story about how old age was first introduced into the world. Before Abraham, people lived extraordinary long lives but none are called "old" until our patriarch. In *parashat Chayei Sarah*, we read, "And Abraham was old, well advanced in years."<sup>7</sup> The midrash picks up on this and comments, "Abraham introduced old age to the world. He came before the Eternal with a plea. Master of the Universe, a man and his son walk together and no one knows unto whom to give honor. I beg of you, make a distinction between us."<sup>8</sup> Old age was a positive response from God to a human request. How else would people know whom to honor? The outwardly signs of elderhood are therefore a visible badge of identification to those who deserve the honor. They are a gift from God, not a curse as our culture communicates loud and clear. Greying hair—or no hair—and wrinkles, the disappearance of youthfulness from the face and body are not to be masked but to be flaunted as marks of maturity. (Point to head: "It's not genetics, it's wisdom!")

What can we do in our community to show reverence to everyone 65 and older? I know, some 65 year olds are thinking right now, "Hey, don't group me with 80 year olds. 65 is the new 45," to which the sages are laughing in their graves thinking, "You've got it all backwards!"

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<sup>6</sup> Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*. Broadway Books, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 24:1

<sup>8</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 65

What does the senior community need from us? Unfortunately I didn't have a chance to speak to every person in this demographic, but that does seem like a good idea. Imagine if we took a year and organized a listening campaign where we set out to have coffee with every member 65 and over, asking them what matters at this stage in life and how Beth Israel can support their needs.

In the book *Elderhood*, Dr. Aronson mentions a MacArthur Foundation successful aging study that discovers how one of the highest predictors of a happy and meaningful life for this demographic is "a high level of engagement with the community."<sup>9</sup> And when older adults were asked what they crave most, they answered, "independence, spirituality, comfort, coping, meaningful relationships, and contributions to society."<sup>10</sup>

Beth Israel can help with several of these needs. We want to support everyone in their aging process, in the nearly four decades that elderhood entails. Andrea and I are planning to lead a shabbat service on an upcoming 5th Friday of the month at a local senior living facility. Perhaps this can turn into something more. It's hard for many people to get to the synagogue so we're going to try and come to you. Some of our adult education classes are being offered on Sunday mornings instead of the usual weekday evening times. We have a program committee, all refreshed and ready to hear your suggestions. The Reform movement has the Jewish Sacred Aging forum, which is an online "community with resources and texts that feature discussions on the implications of the revolution in longevity for Baby Boomers and their families."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps we can look to bringing its director, Rabbi Richard Address, to our community as a scholar some day.

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<sup>9</sup> *Elderhood*. p. 274

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 276

<sup>11</sup> <http://jewishsacredaging.com>

The ideas, however, must come from you, not us. I want you to know that we see you, we apologize for neglecting your Jewish and personal needs, and that we are present for you now.

I'd like to revisit the first Jewish "old man." Our patriarch Abraham set out on his journey in Lech L'cha when he was 75 and eventually lived to be 175 years old, having reached a "good ripe age, old and contented."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Moses, our greatest prophet, was 80 when he met God at the burning bush and was directed to lead the Israelites out of slavery. He lived to be 120. At the time of his death the Torah teaches, Moses' eyes were "undimmed and vigor unabated."<sup>13</sup> I mention these two biblical characters, not because they lived many years—in fact, several figures lived much longer<sup>14</sup>—but rather to show that despite their advanced age, each of them began new journeys that radically changed their lives and the lives of others. Perhaps what our tradition is teaching us in these two stories is that one can begin a meaningful journey at any age. One can be a change agent at any age. It is only after one has accumulated knowledge from childhood and adulthood that one is ready to set forth on a profoundly new path.

With aging comes more stumbling blocks (for sure), but many new opportunities as well. It is my hope that as a community we will heed the wisdom of the sages who demand that we show deference to our elders, and at the same time may we listen to this group and take their lead on how we can help them grow as individuals and as Jews during this venerated and holy stage of life.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah.

### **Resources**

National Council on Aging ([ncoa.org](http://ncoa.org))

Jewish Sacred Aging (<http://jewishsacredaging.com>)

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<sup>12</sup> Genesis 25:8

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 34:7

<sup>14</sup> Noah's grandfather, Methusela, lived to the grand age of 969—a biblical record.