

Torah Table Talk – *Sacred Words*

Zikna: Is Old Age a Time of Wisdom or Woe?

Parshat Hayyei Sarah, Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

While the story of Abraham begins when our forefather is already seventy five years old, the Torah presents us with a vision of the full breadth of life, from youth to old age. In *Parshat Lech Lecha* we find a youthful vision of life: Abraham sets out on a journey of discovery and conquest as he seeks his destiny. *Parshat Vayera* deals with the middle years. Abraham and Sarah struggle with childlessness and then the struggles of creating a family. Abraham is tested and argues with God in an effort to combine his vision with the harsh realities of life. *Parshat Hayyei Sarah* describes Abraham’s final years. With the death of his wife, Abraham becomes a *zaken*, an elder. Yet we also learn that he is blessed with “everything” (who among us can make such a claim). In his final years, Abraham attends to the burial of his wife and arranges for Isaac’s marriage. He is now concerned with assuring his legacy. We see a man who still exhibits vitality and strength as well as vision. In contrast to Abraham, we have a different vision of old age in the life of King David who is worn out and powerless in the face of political turmoil and intrigue in his palace.

Dr. Michael Fishbane writes: “The *Parashah* and the *Haftorah* are linked by the expression, “old, advanced in years” found in both Gen. 24:1 and I Kings 1:1 and by the theme of old age. Abraham and David represent two distinct models of aging. The Abrahamic type enters old age with religious and moral integrity of his life intact...David entered old age in the atmosphere of catastrophe.”

Genesis 24:1 Abraham was now old (*zaken*), advanced in years and God had blessed Abraham with everything.

1Kings 1:1 King David was now old (*zaken*), advanced in years, and though they covered him with bed clothes, he never felt warm...

Sources

Sifra Kedoshim 7

Zaken: is an acronym *zeh kanah chochmah*, ‘this one acquires wisdom.’

Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, Sfat Emet (translation by Rabbi Reuven Boshnack)

My grandfather quoted the Zohar that *bah bayamim* means that Avraham had brought the spiritual illumination from each day. This means that there is something unique to be removed from each day. When Avraham died he brought them with him to the next world. We can also explain the phrase as each day stayed with Avraham forever. In fact, this is the explanation of the word *zaken*, which is composed of three words *zeh kanah chochmah*, one has acquired wisdom. The wisdom has been imbued into his body and will never leave him. It is the way of humans that when they encounter or feel something new, they are enthused, after that it becomes old and they are not enthusiastic about it any more. A person needs to remember constantly all of the things which excite them or cause an inner awakening, lest they forget...This is the meaning of the verse that Avraham “came with his days”- he had preserved all of the inspirations which he had received and they were with him always, they never became dull to him...Abraham was old but the inspiration was new to him.

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 87a

"And Abraham became old" (Gen. 24:1). Until Abraham, there was no old age, so that one who wished to speak with Abraham might mistakenly find himself speaking to Isaac, or one who wished to speak with Isaac might mistakenly find himself speaking to Abraham. But when Abraham came, he pleaded for old age, saying, "Master of the universe, You must make a visible distinction between father and son, between a youth and an old man, so that the old man may be honored by the youth." God replied, "As you live, I shall begin with you." So Abraham went off, passed the night, and arose in the morning. When he arose, he saw that the hair of his head and of his beard had turned white. He said, "Master of the universe, if You have given me white hair as a mark of old age, [I do not find it attractive]." "On the contrary," God replied, "the hoary head is a crown of glory" (Prov. 16:31).

Tanhuma, Miketz 10

"Therefore let every pious man pray unto Thee when hard times befall" (Ps. 32:6), "hard times" being old age, according to Rabbi Abba. Concerning his old age, a man should pray that his eyes may [continue] to see, his mouth to eat, and his feet to walk. For when a man grows old, all his functions desert him.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:1

Rabbi Jonathan said, Solomon first wrote Song of Songs, then Proverbs, and then Ecclesiastes, inferring the order in which these books were written from the way of the world. When a man is young, he utters words of song; when mature, he speaks in proverbs; when old, he talks of [life's] vanities.

Yalkut Shimoni Ekev 871

A story: a woman, who had grown very old, came before Rabbi Yosi Bar Halafta, saying: "My rabbi, I have grown too old and my life is ugly for I can't taste food or drink and I want to depart this world." He replied: "Which mitzvah do you perform daily?" She told him, "It is my custom to leave even treasured activities in order to go to the synagogue early each morning." He said, "Refrain from going to the synagogue for three consecutive days." She did as he said and on the third day, she became ill and died, thus Solomon said. "Happy is the person who listens to me..." What is written after this? "For one who finds Me, finds life." (Proverbs 8)

Commentary

Zikna, old age, is something to which we aspire in the Jewish tradition. According to *Pirkei Avot*, we acquire *zikna* at the age of sixty, an age we would hardly consider to be old today. So what is *zikna*? Does one automatically attain *zikna* when one reaches a certain age or is *zikna* measured by certain mental and spiritual characteristics? *Zikna* is not a sign of chronological age but an age associated with wisdom, as we see above. We honor those who attain the wisdom we associate with old age. And yet the sages were also realistic in their assessment of old age. They recognized that sometimes with age comes physical and mental impairment. They believed inherent with age comes respect. Maybe that is why the Torah instructs us, "You shall rise before the aged (*sevah*) and show deference to the old (*zaken*)." (Leviticus 19:32) I have always found it inspiring that this verse appears in the front of Israeli buses as a reminder to the riders to give up their seats to the elderly! The quotes above, then, present two different images of old age, realistic and idealistic.

Whether or not one is blessed in one's senior years, we have an obligation to honor the wisdom that comes with age and experience. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it well: "What we owe the old is reverence but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference but we do not even grant them equality." In the High Holiday liturgy we ask God not to abandon us in our old age (*zikna*); we are left to ponder the wisdom, wonder and woe of our senior years.

Questions to Ponder

1. Compare the stories of Abraham and David: how are they different from one another in their old age? What might account for this difference? What do they have in common?
2. What does it mean to be "blessed with everything" in old age? What would be a realistic way of understanding this expression given the realities of old age?
3. The elderly aren't always so wise. Should this affect the way we treat them?
4. In *Pirke Avot* 5:23, we read: "At the age of sixty, one attains old age (*zaken*), at seventy, one attains a white head (*sevah*); at eighty, one attains strength (*gevurah*); at ninety, one is bent over and at one hundred, it is as if one were dead and out of this world." What do you think of this assessment of old age? Is it realistic? How would you describe these decades as we live them today?
5. Why do you think the sages described eighty as the age associated with strength?
6. The final source above contains a troubling story about someone who could no longer bear the ravages of old age? What do you think of Rabbi Yosi's advice? What was he really telling her?

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