

Giving it our All; Maturing Gracefully on Yom Kippur and Year Round

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A year and half ago I celebrated a milestone birthday, the big 5-0, the half century mark. Celebrate might be a strong word, since my birthday fell in the frantic lead-up to Passover-- as it usually does, except on years when it falls on Passover. (To give my family credit, we did take a short break from cleaning for a lovely birthday dinner) The birthday came with some perks-- receiving mail from the AARP, being able to attend events of the synagogue's Hazak (over 50) group without needing a fake ID-- and also some repercussions.

I noticed an immediate upgrade in my annual physicals, which now seemed to include more blood work and extra poking and prodding. After years of growing up with my dad, the gastroenterologist, sharing Polaroid photos of polyps at the dinner table, I had now reached the *shehecheyanu* moment of my first colonoscopy. I visited the dermatologist, who took the precaution of sprinkling most of my face with liquid nitrogen. My doctor advised me to watch my sugar and carbohydrate intake, my iron, and my cholesterol, but other than that, I can eat whatever I want. I've noticed that exercise, medically recommended of course, can lead to being sore not for a day but for a week. When playing basketball in the driveway with my kids, my years of relying on my height advantage to offset my speed and aim have come to an abrupt end. I imagine that the age of 50 may seem young and spry to some of you, and kind of old to others of you, based on Bernard Baruch's rule of thumb that old age is 15 years older than you are.

Those of us gathered here-- in our sanctuary and social hall and in your homes-- are all a year older. With children, it's a joy to see them growing, developing new interests and talents, questions and ideas. We've watched some of the congregation's teens and young adults heading off into the world to navigate new challenges. And on the other side of the spectrum, our congregation has an impressive number of adults well past retirement age who still work part or full time, who volunteer prolifically, who

show up, and who contribute greatly to the fabric of this community. I want to give a special shout-out to the amazing Esther Fine, the eldest member of our community at 104 years old. *Keyn ayin hore*-- may she live to 120! And along with the process of becoming a year older, many of us have accumulated aches and pains, undergone surgery, battled cancer, dealt with mental health issues, or suffered memory loss.

I've been thinking a lot about aging over the past few months. In addition to my personal experience of aging and the communal experience of the congregation, this was the summer that President Biden resisted and then succumbed to public pressure not to run for reelection, primarily because of how he was aging. At the same time, I took an online class on the topic with Rabbi Micha'el Rosenberg. In addition to exploring Jewish texts on aging, he shared a link to a performance at the 2024 Grammys by Joni Mitchell. Nine years after suffering a brain aneurysm, at the age of 80, she sang her iconic song, "Both Sides Now," backed up by some admiring younger stars. Her voice is a bit rough and her cadence halting as she begins, enough to make one concerned that she would pull through. As she hits her stride, the raspy beauty of her voice, the striking way she brings her lifetime of experience to her song, moved me to tears.

On this holiday of Yom Kippur, as we take stock of the year and our lives, as we consider what we've learned and the experiences we've undergone, what intentions should we bring to our next year of aging, our next year of living and maturing?

Yom Kippur is the holiday on which, through our liturgy and through the rituals of fasting (as we are able), we confront our mortality. Difficult as it is to contemplate our own deaths or to grieve the loss of our loved ones, our finite lifespan is what gives meaning to our lives. This is why heroes of literature, from Winnie in *Tuck Everlasting* to Percy Jackson in the series based on Greek mythology, ultimately turn down their chance at immortality when it is offered to them. According to the Hasidic Rabbi Kalonyus Kalman HaLevi Epstein of 18th century Poland, Moses too was offered eternal life and freedom from all suffering through the gift of the original tablets of the ten commandments. When Moses realized that the people,

who were busy worshiping the Golden Calf at that moment, could never merit this gift, he decided he didn't want it for himself alone. That's why he broke the tablets, and according to the midrash, God reacted by saying, "*Yasher Koach Asher shibarta.*" Way to go-- good job, that you broke them. Good that you cast your lot with the people, with our imperfect world and our fragile and flawed lives.

Not only do our Biblical heroes choose mortality, according to the rabbinic imagination, but they are also responsible for seeing the need for illness, suffering, and aging, and bringing these things into the world. In the midrash on the book of Genesis¹, Rabbi Yehudah son of Simon says that until Abraham, there was no such thing as aging. Abraham complains to God that when a person and his son, such as himself and Isaac, come into a room, no one knows who is the elder that should be honored; they look too much alike! God says: you have a good point-- we'll start with you. For the first time in the Torah, aging is mentioned in Genesis 24:1.

וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וַיְהִי בֵרַךְ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם בְּכָל:

Abraham was now old, advanced in years, *V'avraham zakein, ba bayamim.* and God had blessed Abraham in everything. *Vadonai beirach et Avraham bakol.*

Some rabbinic commentators expound on the second part of that verse, and I hope that their views on what it means that God blessed Abraham "*bakol*," in everything, can shed some light on how we can use our precious time.

Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev says being blessed with everything, "*bakol*," means "along with all," "*ba--kol*." A righteous person, a *tsadik*, prays not only for him or herself, but for the whole community, and they are not satisfied if a blessing comes to them alone. So when God wishes to bless them personally, God blesses their whole community. This is an important reminder to share our blessings, to realize that our own

¹ Genesis Rabba 65:9, also found in a similar form in the Talmud, Baba Metzia 87a

sense of blessing and wellbeing is dependent on that of those around us. As I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, it's part of our purpose as a congregation, to be able to *kvell*-- to take joy in witnessing and taking part in other people's lifecycle events and milestones, and to be there to support each other when we experience losses. I think there's something special and holy about being in an intergenerational community like this, where a young parent who wants to eat knows they can pass their delicious baby off to any number of trustworthy people, where someone who needs a ride to shul can be matched with someone who is happy to drive them, where we can be inspired by and learn from each other's varied life experiences.

Rabbi Zerach Eidlitz of 18th century Prague says that "*bakol*" is the quality of accepting all, being content with what one has, not feeling that one is lacking something. This sense of gratitude can influence how we approach our lives, how we interact with the community, and how we take care of ourselves as best we can. I read an interview with Nobel Prize winner Venki Ramakrishnan, who was speaking about the multibillion dollar research industry on aging. He said that none of the anti-aging drugs have been shown as of yet to be safe and effective, largely because of the side effects of turning off cellular aging. But he notes that there are things we can use to combat aging, or to age well, that work better than any drug currently available: a healthy diet, exercise, and sleep, along with attempting to reduce stress (which I sometimes find stressful), having friendships, and being part of a community such as this one.

And Rebbe Yaakov Yitchak, the Seer of Lublin, says that Abraham was blessed with qualities of *bakol*, as in the words of the *Shema* and *V'ahavta* prayer that we say in the liturgy and affix by our doors in the *mezuzah* (Deut. 6:5): ***b'chol*** *lvavcha*, ***uv'chol*** *naf'sh'cha*, ***uv'chol*** *m'odecha*-- with **all** your heart, with **all** your soul, and with **all** your might. Abraham approached life wholeheartedly; he gave it his all-- *bakol*.

As we strive to become not only older but wiser this year, how can we give it our all? How can we step up into our role as a proud part of the

Jewish people and a good human being? We don't have to be the most learned but we can always learn more. We don't have to be the most observant, but can always take in something more from our tradition. We don't even have to be Jewish ourselves. I want to give special appreciation to those of us in the community who are partners of Jews, parents who work so hard to raise Jewish kids; you are all a crucial part of the Jewish people. Any of us can stand up for Am Yisrael, for the Jewish people, any of us can figure out what Judaism means to us, and any of us can share that with others. We can do this on the basis of however much or little life experience we have, whatever our various strengths and capacities, and we can do it whole-heartedly, giving it our all.

While the different commentators interpret the word “*bako*”-- “in everything-- differently (along with all, accepting all, giving it your all), they seem to agree that Abraham’s being blessed was less about the blessings he received than about the blessings that he transmitted to those around him. In other words, the blessings he transmitted became blessings for him. To paraphrase the teachings of our Sages², the reward for a kindness or blessing is its own blessing. The reward for a blessing being a blessing can mean that a blessing is its own reward. It can mean that when one does a good deed, it begins to form a habit. And it can mean that one person’s good deed can inspire the next to pay it forward, leading to a profusion of blessings.

Returning to the beginning of the verse we’ve been exploring, after the text says that Abraham was old, it says: “*ba bayamim*.” He was coming in days, along in days, perhaps the days were flying by, everyone else seeming to get younger. Rabbi Jordan Braunig, in one of his pre-Rosh Hashanah emails³, shared how the mystics in the Zohar interpret this phrase. They imagine Abraham carrying his days with him, or draping himself in his days, like some sort of fabulous garment. His days, with their lessons and experiences, became an adornment, protection, and in the

² Pirkei Avot, Teachings of the Sages 4:2. Ben Azzai says that the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah.

³ You can view all of his 2024 pre-Rosh Hashanah emails (or sign up early to receive them next year) here: <https://www.jewishstudioproject.org/daily-creative-prompts-for-elul-2024>

imagination of the mystics, a garment that would smooth his way into the world to come. Rabbi Braunig wondered what it would mean to carry our days, or to wear them, not as a burden, but as a gift.

In the Talmud⁴, Rabbi Yosef shares a teaching about the original tablets of the ten commandments, the ones that Moses decided to break instead of keep, the broken shards of which were placed in the ark along with the unbroken ones. Rabbi Yosef says this preservation of the broken shards teaches us that when we encounter a Torah scholar who has forgotten their learning, we need to treat them with love and respect. In a few minutes, and throughout the holiday, in the prayer *Shema Koleinu*-- hear our voice-- we'll cry out "*Al tashlicheinu l'eit zikna*"-- don't cast us away in our old age. As usual, when we ask God to act in a certain way-- to be loving, to be forgiving, not to cast people away in their old age-- we're also reminding ourselves to follow this example, to act as people made in the image of God and treat each other person as such. We are reminded to give every person the respect they deserve, regardless of their age or abilities, whether a 2 year old, 50-year-old, or an octogenarian, a young adult, or a friend or family member with Alzheimers that may not recognize us any more.

In Pirkei Avot, Teachings of the Sages (4:20), Elisha ben Abuya says that for one who learns as a child, it sticks as easily as ink on a new writing sheet, but for one who learns as an old person, it doesn't absorb as well, like ink on a scratched writing sheet. Rabbi Yose ben Yehudah says that conversely, old people make better teachers-- one who learns from the young is like one who eats unripe grapes, and one who learns from the old, like one who drinks old wine. The editor of the text, Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, cautions both of them not to look at the container but rather at what is in it,

אַל תִּסְתַּקֵּל בַּקִּינָן, אֶלָּא בַּמָּה שְׁיֵשׁ בּוֹ.

Al tisktakel bakankan, ela v'ma sheyesh bo

⁴ Menachot 99a. Our Rabbi Laureate Harold Kushner, of blessed memory, taught beautifully about Moses and the broken tablets in his book *Overcoming Life's Disappointments* and other writings.

This reminds us that wisdom and learning are not necessarily age dependent, that we shouldn't underestimate or discount any person, whether a little kid or a member of the AARP, all of whom have their own needs, opinions, and ways of looking at the world.

In procrastinating writing this sermon, I scrolled through dozens of quotes about aging and found two that I wanted to share with you. Betty White, the actress and comedian who worked into her 90s, addressed the fear we have of aging, reassuring us: "Getting older is not something to be afraid of. It's a privilege."

And the great singer and songwriter David Bowie added,

"Aging is an extraordinary process where you become the person you always should have been."

What a beautiful way of redefining aging, which happens naturally and subconsciously but can also happen with intention, by merging it with the central idea of this season, *teshuva*, repentance. "Aging is an extraordinary process where you become the person you always should have been." May we keep this in mind during this holiest of days, *shabbat shabbatonim*-- the sabbath of sabbaths, and keep returning to it throughout the year to come.

As we age this year, as we grow and learn and forget and overcome obstacles, may we do our best to age intentionally, striving each day to come closer to the person we always should have been, and taking care of each other in the process. In doing so, may we bring blessing to ourselves, our families, our community, the Jewish people, and the world.

Gmar chatima tova-- may we work this year to help ourselves and each other be sealed in *sefer chayim tovim*-- the Book of a Good Life.