RISE BEFORE THE AGED
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YOM KIPPUR 5778
TEMPLE SHOLOM, VANCOUVER BC

A few weeks ago, I celebrated my 47th birthday. My longest living grandparent Beatrice Moskovitz, who others called Bea and I called Nana *alav ha-shalom*, died at age 83.

What I gather from these statistics is that I am now definitively middle-aged. In fact, based on family history I probably should have given this sermon four or five years ago.

I'm not quite sure how this happened, how all of a sudden, I became old. I still think of myself as a teenager at times but I do know that Yom Kippur is the appropriate time for us to discuss our own mortality, so let's discuss.

Have you seen that New Yorker cartoon, where a man is reading the obituary page and the headlines over each death notice read, "Two Years Younger Than You", "Twelve Years Older Than You", "Exactly Your Age?" I think we can all relate! "The really frightening thing about middle age", Doris Day accurately quipped, "is the knowledge that you'll grow out of it."

In 1900, the average Canadian was dead by age 49; 50 was considered old age, and only one person in ten survived to 65 - which was thought of then as extreme old age.[i] We are indeed blessed in our generation with time beyond the years of child rearing to make all kinds of contributions to our communities and to continue to grow and develop as spiritual beings.

But for many, aging feels more like a curse than a blessing.

"Tomorrow is always superior to yesterday. Everything that's good in North America is new and improved. Ever hear of a product guaranteed to make you look older? Youth means energy, creativity, possibilities. Old is used up."

This may be the modern way, but it is not the Jewish way to look at aging. Tomorrow in our Yom Kippur service we will read a verse from the Psalms, "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone". We ask God to grant us another year; keenly aware that our days are numbered. We don't ask for God to make us younger, we pray that God will let us keep growing older, wiser.

Rise Before the Aged:
Sitaram Gawande was a farmer in a village called, Uti, about 300 miles from Mumbai. He lived to be more than 100 years old, and was revered– to the very end of his life.

His grandson Atul became a physician and author. His book, *Being Mortal*, chronicles the life of the aged, as he sees it both as a physician and through the eyes of someone who visited his elderly grandfather in India.

In one passage, he writes: “In the past, surviving into old age was uncommon, and those who did survive served a special purpose as guardians of tradition, knowledge, and history. They tended to maintain their status and authority as heads of the household until death. In many societies, elders not only commanded respect and obedience but also led sacred rites and wielded political power. So much respect accrued to the elderly that people used to pretend to be older than they were, not younger, when giving their age…The dignity of old age was something to which everyone aspired.”[ii]

Judaism holds that a culture is judged in large measure by the way it treats its elders. As the Torah commands us in the book of Leviticus, “You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old.” (Leviticus 19:32).

How shall we be judged on this evening of the Day of Judgement? Where Torah says rise, we as a society have fallen down. Rather than honour our elders, too often we disregard and marginalize them. We mock their driving, their befuddlement with technology, lose patience with their declining hearing or mobility, we dismiss their opinions as out of step and out of date.

The Talmud observes:
At age five, one studies Bible.
At ten, the Mishna.
At 13, one is responsible for the mitzvoth.
At 15, one studies Talmud.
At 18, one is ready for marriage.
At 20, one begins a career.
At 30, one is at the height of one’s powers.
At 40, one achieves understanding.
At 50, one is prepared to give wise counsel.
At 60, one is given the deference of seniority.
At 70, one is considered a sage.
80 is the age of heroic strength.

In the Talmud’s vision, life is not a tragedy of decline, rather it is an ascent in holiness, a progression in knowledge, value and contribution. The object of childhood is literacy. The object of our 20’s is intimacy. The object of our 30’s is achievement. The objects of later adulthood – our 40’s and 50’s and beyond, are of a different order: *bina, aitza, zikna, sayva*, understanding, counsel, seniority and wisdom. These are the qualities of the inner life, qualities of the soul.

Each stage of life has its own beauty and measure of success. Growing older is not about surrendering the qualities that make us vital and beautiful. In each age of life, we gain something. Each stage of life brings new qualities – the very qualities we associate with God --

learning, love, creativity, wisdom, power. At each successive stage of life, we gain an opportunity to appropriate aspects of divinity. Growing older, we grow Godly.[iii]

Some will say to our elders, “You worked hard all your life, now you ought to settle down and enjoy the fruits of your labors.” As if time is now something to be "filled" and gotten over with as we while away our days on life's sidelines, our knowledge and abilities filed away in the attic of old age.

Retirement is not a Jewish concept. At the basis of the institution of retirement is the notion that life is composed of productive and non-productive periods.

The Torah however, recognizes no such distinction between life's phases, for it sees productivity as the very essence of life: the words "a non-productive life-period" are an oxymoron. There are marked differences between childhood, adulthood, etc., but these differ in the *how*, not the *when*, of a person's productivity. Retirement and the passive enjoyment of the fruits of one's labor also have their time and place--in the World To Come.[iv] Or as one active senior put it, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

Living longer, can be both a blessing and a curse. Beyond the physical decline that eventually comes there are four emotional challenges of aging that can be equally painful.

The first challenge is Loneliness

Many seniors have shared with me over the years that the hardest part about growing older is going to all of their friends’ funerals.

Dr. Brian Thomas Fletcher, an Emergency Room Doctor, posted a case on an online support group for other docs, it simply stated, “Saddest case ever.”

He wrote, “95-year-old male comes in for suicidal ideation. When asked why, he said, “My last friend died last week. I don’t know one single person on this earth anymore. Not one.”

I’ve officiated at over 400 funerals in my years in the rabbinate, I have a file on each one of them. People died from all manner of illness and accidents, but as I scroll through the files of the widows and widowers I have buried alongside their beloveds, a contributing cause of death is invariably loneliness. The poet would call it a broken heart, a rabbi sees a broken soul.

I think of the thousands of elderly in our community and the millions that must be shuttered behind countless doors that we drive by every day, how many of them are sitting in faux leather recliners, peeking through the shutters, hoping that someone will knock on their door?

After a certain age, many of us stop making new friends, we no longer find ourselves in situations that foster new friendships. Synagogue and community is one response to this challenge. Friendships are made here. The Talmud observes, get yourself a teacher and you will

acquire for yourself a friend. Synagogue and community is the antidote to loneliness and isolation.

The second challenge is Grandchildren:
It has been said that grandchildren are God's way of compensating us for growing old, but some grandparents are feeling like they are under paid, not in money, but in meaningful moments. One grandmother confided in me that the only time she ever hears from her daughter is when she needs one of the children driven to or from an activity, wants to vent about something, or needs a free babysitter.

So many grandparents have shared with me the real pain of not knowing their grandchildren; at least not the way they knew their own grandparents. Some of this is the expanse and busyness of the modern family. We live across time zones and oceans, oceans of water and oceans of distractions. I know grandparents that join Facebook just so they can see what is going on in the lives of their children and grandchildren, others schlep to travel sports games so they can squeeze into the busy lives of their kids and grandkids. The emotional pain is knowing they only have so many years to watch them grow and they are doing more and more of it sitting behind the wheel, in front of skype or sitting on the sidelines.

One grandparent wrote, "I want to teach him how to make pickles, just like my grandmother taught me…how to needlepoint, how to build a chair, or change the oil. I want to tell her about the time I was a little girl and made my own clothes, or how to play gin rummy. I want to go fishing, or show him the books I read when I was 10 because I still have them. I want to tell them about stamps, and record players, and how Elvis took the world by storm. I want to talk about the time we all gathered around the TV watching Neil Armstrong walk on the moon."

Restore the Family Dinner, encourage your children to seek advice from their grandparents not just Google. In fact, a new approach might be, don't 'google it', 'grandparent it'. Let our elders be our sages not our *schlepers* – quite frankly, they've earned it.

The third challenge is, we're not done living:
There is some perception that our best years are behind us that we are too old, too slow, too impaired in any manner of ways to contribute in the day-to-day life of today.

In 1995, the world-famous violinist Itzhak Perlman gave a concert at Avery Fisher Hall in New York City. Stricken by polio as a child with both of his legs in braces, just the walk onto the stage was a struggle. After Perlman painstakingly made his way to his seat, the conductor began... After just the first two bars, one of the strings of Perlman's violin broke. The snap could be heard across the auditorium. Those in attendance expected him to painfully make his way off stage to find another violin or new string.

But he did no such thing.

Instead Perlman signaled for the conductor to begin again and he picked up right where he had left off: modulating, changing, re-composing the piece in his head, playing the symphonic work with just three rather than four strings. As the piece concluded, the passionate standing ovation said it all. Wiping the sweat from his brow and taking a bow, Itzhak Perlman said, "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

My dear friend Frank Levy, for whom we have been saying a *mishebeyrach* every week since I arrived as your rabbi, teaches me that all we ever have is the moment we are in. His question as he stares down the barrel of his own mortality at the end of a chemo infusion is, "If all I have is this moment, what am I going to make of it?" What music can I make with a broken string?

His hard-learned perspective mirrors that of Doris Haddock, who walked across the United States at age 90. People asked her why she was doing it, her answer echoes down the corridors of every Senior Care facility in North America, "The secret to a happy life, especially in your later years, is to help other people until you don't notice your own needs and pains anymore."

I'll give one more example, because I too want to show honour to my parents.

A while back, my father Larry retired from 60 years in the clothing business. His retirement lasted about six weeks and then internalizing the lessons of Frank and Dorris he began to volunteer visiting hospitals and senior care facilities with our family dog through an organization called Share A Pet. Six years later he now supervises 350 fellow volunteers who like him have found the secret to a meaningful life is to never stop doing meaningful things.

If Doris Haddock can have this attitude at the age of ninety, while literally walking across a continent; If Frank Levy, can spend every moment he is not in the chemo clinic volunteering for the Red Cross. If Larry, my father and a clothing salesman can reinvent himself as a social worker I think that each of us can look within and ask ourselves what more we can be doing with the time we have? That's why today is called the present, it is a gift, we are fools to waste a moment of it.

The fourth challenge is being treated like children by your own children, and society in general:

The second half of life can feel like living your life in reverse, we lose our driving license, our independence, eventually our dignity. We devalue the treasures of age when we treat our elders as children, when we substitute television for companionship, when we believe that card games and handicrafts are an adequate substitute for meaningful pursuits. For those who are of sound mind and body, the droning of a TV cannot replace the voices of family and friends, nor can recreation take the place of a sense of significance and purpose in life. We insult our elders when we believe they only need a deck of cards or a jigsaw puzzle to be content.

In the words of the late theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The aged need a vision, not only recreation; the aged need a dream, not only memory."

For adult children caring for our aging parents this can be easy to understand but difficult to put into practice. When the parent becomes the child and the child the caregiver we worry, we struggle, we are racked with guilt.

Rabbi Dayle Friedman, in her book *Jewish Visions for Aging*, outlines three specific areas of concern that children face in caring for their aging parents, they are Guilt, Conflict and Hard Choices.

Guilt. We never feel like we are doing enough. We blame ourselves for not adequately balancing our responsibilities or taking enough time to sit by the bedside of a loved one. And we feel that we have to repay our parents for the care that they gave us. However, we have competing claims on our time and resources – children, spouses, jobs, and a variety of other commitments, and we simply don't have enough time or energy to do everything.

Conflict among family members. If we have siblings, we may disagree with them as to how we should care for our parents. We may share the care-taking responsibilities unevenly, which can lead to feelings of resentment, disempowerment, and anger. Conflicts from long ago may resurface among family members, and it can be emotionally complex to care for a parent because we are used to them caring for us.

Hard choices abound. As our loved ones age, we are called to be increasingly involved in decisions that affect their lives. It can be complicated to figure out how best to care for our parents. Do we take over our parent's finances? Do we allow our parents to continue to drive? Do we move our parents to a nursing home? When it comes to end of life decision-making, when do we decide to stop trying new medications and let our parents pass on? These challenges create enormous stress. Caregiving can be exhausting, overwhelming, isolating and often times depressing.

Getting older is not some sort of disease that only certain unfortunate people catch. . . Even you will find yourself getting older someday. That is, if you're one of the lucky ones. Hillel's Golden Rule applies here as well, do not do to another person (read: your own parent) that which you would not have done to yourself. Your own children are watching and you are next in line.

The last commandment in the Torah, #613, is for each of us to write our own Torah. We fulfilled that mitzvah a few years ago but I've come to realize that's not enough, we are not done writing. The torah we must each write is the torah of our lives, the lessons we have learned, and those we must teach.

I want to suggest a way for parents and children and everybody in between to age with purpose, to add something sacred to a process that appears to have become anything but. The concept is to go from Aging to Sage-ing, to restore the role of Elder of the Tribe, guardians of

tradition, knowledge, and history. Parents, their children and their children's children as well as our society needs the counsel of elders now more than ever.

There is a Jewish custom dating back to the Middle Ages of writing an Ethical Will, a parent's letter to his or her children and grandchildren offering hope, guidance and wisdom for life in the years ahead. Decades, even centuries later, ethical wills often become the most meaningful possessions a family has.

Some choose to give their ethical will to their loved ones before their deaths, one woman I know gathers her family together every three years, reads her torah to them and then begins writing another to be shared three years hence. Others write them as part of a Wise Aging group, a program I hope to bring to Temple Sholom in the year ahead that guides us in a reflective process to new understandings about our lives, ourselves, and our values as we age.

An elderly man was once asked, *why he was planting fruit trees by the side of the road when it was clear he would not live long enough to see them bear fruit?* The man replied, *when I came in to this world there were fruit trees and I ate of them, just as my ancestors planted for me, so too I plant for my children.*

As we contemplate the stark reality that we have more life in the rear-view mirror than on the road ahead of us, let us once again be planters of trees. To use the time, however long, however short we have remaining to write our torah, to plant our seeds of wisdom, gleaned from a lifetime of experience so that they may bear fruit for future generations. So that in the planting we add meaning and purpose to every remaining day.

Let us "rise before the aged and show deference to the old." On this Day of Judgement let us be judged on how we honour and treat our elders. Let's show them the respect and empathy they so richly deserve.

And we, who suddenly realize that we have more life behind us than ahead of us, may we be blessed with wisdom beyond our years as we each make the transition from respecting our elders to becoming them.

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[i] StatsCanada
[ii] Atul Gawande, "Being Mortal"
[iii] Rabbi Ed Feinstein, "Acquiring Words"
[iv] Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson