

## **Erev Yom Kippur 10 Tishri 5760 (September 19, 1999)**

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg  
United Synagogue of Hoboken

If you were here last week for Rosh HaShanah morning services, you know that my Divrei Torah for these High Holiday services all have a common theme. I like to call it "How to bring the Messiah – in your spare time, working out of your home." I have been sharing the insights that Jewish tradition gives us for how to bring our world closer to the world of the Messianic era.

But before I begin, I have to share a secret with you.

I grew the beard because it makes me look older.

I have always looked much younger than my age, and if I didn't have the beard, you would all think I was still in high school. Anyone who's seen my wedding pictures knows I'm not kidding.

I find it interesting that when this comes up in conversation, when people comment about how young I look, people often say, "You're lucky. You'll appreciate it so much when you get older." And most of the time I take this comment at face value – of course I'll appreciate it later on! Who doesn't like looking young?

But lately I've been thinking about this comment that I get so often and about the societal attitudes that it reveals about youth and aging. And with each passing year, I have more and more discomfort with the messages that American culture presents us about what it means to get older.

I think in part it's a symptom of our speeded-up world. When we live our lives at an ever faster pace, it affects virtually everything in our lives. It takes even less time for one year's celebrities to become the next year's has-beens. Clothing and music trends go in and out of style in the blink of an eye. And thanks to the miracle known as Moore's Law, last year's computer hardware is already obsolete, and the hardware from three years ago you can't even GIVE away. Everything has to be new. What's old is dispensable. It slows you down.

And it's no wonder that these cultural messages roll over into our society's messages and assumptions about people as well. If you're not sure about whether this is so, then I recommend you spend a little bit of time in a greeting card store. Check out the birthday cards for age 40, 45, and 50. It's scarcely possible to find a birthday card for these ages that does not refer in some questionably humorous way to memory loss, to hearing loss, to bodily deterioration. And ask yourself: what perspective on aging does this reflect? Or witness the spectacular popularity of products and plastic surgery procedures designed to hide or postpone the signs of age. Studies by psychologists show that children in our society begin to develop negative stereotypes about aging by the time they are six years old.

Perhaps what is most agonizing is that it doesn't HAVE to be this way. This devaluing and denial of aging is not a universal phenomenon. We just live in a country that has a much worse track record than many. And our larger culture could stand to take some very important lessons from Jewish tradition.

There's a story in the Midrash Rabbah from several hundred years ago that discusses the origins of the aging process according to Jewish tradition. The scholars who wrote this text noticed: Early on in the Bible, lots of people lived to what would today be considered very old ages - Adam lived to 930; Noah lived to 900. But the word "zaken," "old," doesn't appear early on in the Bible at all. These people who lived for several centuries are never described as "old." And then,

several chapters into the Bible, we are introduced to the character of Abraham. Now Abraham is 147 years old - you know, just a youngster - and the Bible describes him as "zaken, ba bayamim." "Old, along in years." From this, they derive the implication that Abraham must have been the first person to show signs of aging.

And they created a story to explain how this came to be. They picture Abraham at age 147 travelling around together with his son Isaac, who was just a baby - he was in his 30's. And wherever they went, people treated Abraham and Isaac equally. No one gave Abraham any additional honor because of his age, because his physical condition was no different from Isaac's. So God looked down and saw that this state of affairs was unacceptable - so God innovated the concept of aging. Thereafter, when a man and his son would enter a city, it would be perfectly clear which of them deserved the additional honor and respect that accrues with age.

Imagine that – how we might react differently to aging - if we thought of signs of aging as God's way of pointing out those who deserve additional respect and honor.

The Hasidic master, Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, used to say that the worth of any society can be measured according to its treatment of its elders. On such a scale, how well would our society do?

If you've ever ridden on a public bus in Israel, you notice that, just as is the case here, there are signs above certain seats that specify that these seats are to be reserved for the elderly. But there is a difference – In Israel, the signs quote a verse from the Torah – *'mipnei seivah takum ve-hadarta pnei zaken'* – "You shall rise before those who have gray hair, and you shall honor the face of the elder."

In the Talmud, the question is raised: Why are elders deserving of this special display of respect? And one answer is: one rises in the presence of elders out of respect for their chochmah – their wisdom. Now this idea is somewhat discordant for us because we do not live in a world that prizes wisdom. Our world prizes technical know-how – problem-solving ability – intelligence – cleverness – ability to process information. But none of these is the same as wisdom.

There are psychologists who have been conducting studies trying to determine exactly what this word "wisdom" means – and what qualities exist – almost exclusively in the AGING mind – that merit this designation. Here are some of their findings:

"wisdom" includes the ability to convey an understanding of details and events in their larger context – in the context of the flow of generations;

"wisdom" includes an understanding of life's uncertainties and an appreciation for them; and

"wisdom" includes an understanding of our lives' peaks and valleys -- and strategies to manage them.

And these psychologists also find that there's only one way to acquire these qualities that we refer to as "wisdom." And that's -- to live a long time.

But American society does not prize wisdom. And as Rabbi Harold Kushner points out, that means that Jewish tradition and American society have fundamentally different answers to this important question: "As we grow older, as we lose physical grace and gain wisdom, as our bodies sag and our souls ripen, does that represent a net gain or a net loss?"

I find it interesting that when people are struggling to think of the word they want to say but they can't quite remember it, or there's a sudden muscular pain in a part of the body that's never given

trouble before, people call that "a senior moment." And it's true - that's one kind of senior moment. But I wish that when a person has the opportunity to be surrounded by children and grandchildren -- that that would also be called a "senior moment." That when someone is consulted by a younger person to resolve some work-related issue, or some personal issue, when one has the opportunity to be a mentor and to share accumulated wisdom, that should also be called a "senior moment."

But the opinion that elders are to be respected because of wisdom is just one opinion in the Talmud. The other opinion mentioned in the Talmud is that elders deserve this high level of respect - even if they are not wise. Why? Because it all has to do with the number of miracles we've seen in our lifetimes. The older we are, the more life experience we have, and the more miracles we have seen. So when we become elders we command respect – for the sheer quantity of life that we represent.

You notice that this is a revolutionary way of understanding how we are affected by the passage of time. Once again, quoting Rabbi Kushner, "If society teaches us to see life as an expendable resource, something that gets used up as we live it, then we will be dismayed at the prospect of growing old. Each birthday will send us the message that we have LESS life remaining than we did a year ago. But Judaism helps us to learn to see life not as something that gets used up, but as the accumulation of treasure. When we take this message to heart, then with every passing year, we see ourselves as having more life than we had the year before, because of all the new insights and experiences that the year has brought us."

I remember coming to a realization in December of my first year of college when I came home for winter break and I went to the synagogue, and I realized: "This is the first time I've really seen babies since I went away to college. This is the first time I've interacted with elementary-school-age children since I went away to college. This is the first time I've really spent time with older people since I went away to college."

And at that moment I realized how unnatural it is to live in an age-segregated community. And how valuable my synagogue was for me as I was growing up, because it enabled me to interact with people at every point along the age spectrum, to be continually energized by the exuberance of young children and by the wisdom of elders. And I decided that finding such communities was going to be a priority throughout my life.

And this is something that I treasure in our congregation in Hoboken as well. Now, the aspect of this congregation that is most distinctive – the aspect of congregational life for which we win awards, for which we receive national media attention – is our success in providing a warm community for young adults in their twenties and thirties. But over the next year I know our community can be ever more effective in demonstrating how much we value our congregation as an intergenerational community – providing Jews of all ages a chance to interact with each other, providing a comfortable home for those who have been here for six months, for six years, for 60 years.

The Biblical book of Malachi concludes with a prophesy about the coming of Elijah the Prophet - Eliyahu HaNavi, who will herald the arrival of the Mashiach. And the text reads: *ve-heishiv lev avot al banim, ve-lev banim al avotam*. "And the hearts of the parents will be turned towards the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents." How interesting that one of the things that characterizes a Messianic era – one of the things that characterizes a perfect world – is an image of cross-generational cooperation-- a vision of the cross-generational interaction that is becoming more rare in our increasingly age-segregated society.

This Yom Kippur, as we note that we are each one year older, let us remember that our attitudes on aging inform our priorities at EVERY stage of our lives. As we will say in our yizkor prayers tomorrow, *limnot yameinu ken hoda', ve-navi levav chochmah*. "We pray to God: teach us to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom."

We now rise for Shma Koleinu, As we each implore God: *Al tashlicheinu le-et ziknah, Kichlot koheinu al ta'azveinu.* "Do not cast us away when we are old. When our strength diminishes, do not leave us."