

Chayei Sarah: Old Age

- R' Moshe Yitzchok Shulman.

Abraham pleaded with Hashem for old age. What does this mean? The real blessing of life, to continue Hesed and Torah till its end, so that children and parents have the same ideals all through life, as Avraham and Yitzchok. So that Yitzchok and Avraham, according to the Midrash, were identical.

Chayei Sarah: Old Age; M'Avi Mori, Harav Moshe Yitzchok Shulman, zt"l

The Torah portion teaches lessons for our lives and life style.

In particular, the brief statement summarizing Avraham's life: VeAvraham zaken, ba bayamim, vaHashem berach et Avraham bakol. "Avraham was old, Ba Bayamim, "coming on in days", and the Lord blessed Avraham with all things.

Aside from the peculiar expression, ba bayamim, "coming on in days", there is nothing remarkable in this passage, and we would easily pass over it as repeating in brief the fact that Avraham lived a full, blessed life, was the ideal personality for all time, for every Jew to emulate.

So it is with an element of surprise that we read the truly remarkable comment our Rabbis of the Midrash attached to this passage: Ad Avraham lo hayta zikna. Deman demishtaey behadey Avraham mishtaey behadey Yitzchak, behadey Yitzchok, mishtaey behadey Avraham. Ata Avraham baey rachamey, vehavey zikna: sheneemar, veAvraham zaken, ba bayamim.

"Till Avraham, there was no old age. Indeed, Avraham and Yitzchak were identical. And if you looked at Avraham or talked with him, you could imagine yourself looking at or talking to Yitzchak, and vice versa. So Avraham prayed for old age, and his prayer was answered. He became old. As the passage says: "Avraham was old, coming on in days, and the Lord blessed Avraham with all things."

How strange! Were our Rabbis commenting on the first time the word zaken is found in the Torah? But where is the blessing? Why did Avraham pray for old age? Does the answer to his prayer imply a blessing? We are used to consider old age a curse, not a blessing! You have only to read the description of old age in Chapter 12 of Kohelet, "When years arrive of which a man might say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; The sun, the light, the moon and stars grow dark. Strong men stoop. Doors to the street are shut. The bird's chirping is a frightening sound; Walking is terrifying; Nature's beauty is a burden; Desire fails. A man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets. Thus the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."

Is this the blessing for which Avraham prayed? What is the value, the benefit, of an answer to Avraham's prayer? Did our Rabbis mean that till Avraham no man felt the hardship of age, no sickness attacked the body, a person was strong and healthy till the day he died? If this is so, why

would Avraham want to change it? And if this is so, then Avraham brought a curse to the world, and not a blessing!

I once posed this question to a group of people, and heard various interesting answers. One answer, a true one, was that a person must learn how to grow old graciously. The poet, Robert Browning, in his poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra", wrote:

"Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be,
The last of life
For which the first was made.

If a man seeks to retain, at an older age, the pleasures, the passions, and the appearance of youth, he will be an unhappy person living a tragic charade. But a person who seeks to live at every age according to the purpose and the mission entrusted to him by God in this world for that particular time of his life, will be a happy and blessed man or woman.

If in his youth he trains himself to appreciate and to do acts of loving-kindness, to value things of the soul, like the study of Torah and the chance to help others, these traits will last him and grant him pleasures of the soul long after his body retreats from its passions and pleasures. And Avraham was the first and greatest teacher of these values that teach a man to grow old graciously, live in such a way that the last of life is indeed that for which the first was made. That is why Browning's poem is called "Rabbi Ben Ezra". It is Jewish wisdom that teaches this lesson. And Browning's artistic perceptive soul understood this and made him aware that his great poem would have truth and beauty only if it came from the mouth of a Rabbi, a mirror of Avraham who taught this lesson. That is why the Torah stresses that he was ba bayamim, "coming on in days". That is to say, Avraham's every new day was a greater blessing than the day before. Avraham did more good, achieved more nobility of deed, thought wiser and more Godly thoughts, with every passing day of his life.

Andrew Carnegie was famous all over the world, not only in America, for his philanthropy. He used to say "It is a disgrace for a millionaire to die with his millions intact." And that is what impelled him to endow so many libraries, concert halls, and other institutions of culture, at that time giving away 200 million dollars.

There are many scholars to whom Torah was a delight in their youth, who, because of this, have a delight in their old age that keeps them joyous and happy and contented with their life. The great tragedy is the man who has not trained himself with such gifts in youth and who hasn't got them to delight him in age.

Which leads us to another facet of this thought – the attitude of society towards growing old.

In olden times, society thought that youth should enjoy life and its pleasures. Middle age should be philosophical and serious. Old age should withdraw from the stage of life. To use a modern expression, an old man should "retire", and essentially he can do no more than quietly wait for the end.

The Christian philosopher, Augustine, wrote that the prayer of his youth was that God would not remove his passions until he had drunk of the cup of life to its very dregs (Confessions, Book 8 Chapter 7), a thought which is actually a vestige of earlier pagan thinking.

This attitude still survives. It survives in the mandatory age of retirement in so many businesses and professions. It survives in the constant search for youth and young talent, as if youth and talent were synonymous, in industry as well as entertainment, though Catherine Hepburn and Laurence Olivier gave the lie to this philosophy in entertainment, and the success in industry of the Japanese, a people who revere age and do not consider it a bar to productivity, should make us rethink our attitude towards age in industry too.

Till today, for most people in our culture, an old man and woman have lost their worth to society. This too is a remnant of ancient and pagan thinking.

Some ancient people used to expose old men and women to the elements to destroy them, a form of euthanasia. There is a story of a man who was carrying his old mother out to be destroyed. But on the way he stumbled and fell. "Did you hurt yourself, my son?" she asked!

The wise culture, the blessed culture, is the one that recognizes and appreciates the blessings and the contributions of age, and trains its youth to revere and respect the value of age while a person is still young. That is the lesson of the Midrash that Yitzchak and Avraham were identical. "Mipne seva takum" isn't enough. "Vehadarta peney zaken". We must revere and respect, listen to and heed the wisdom of age. Their talents are fully as important, even more so than those of youth! In fact, Judaism finds an entirely new definition of age – "Ein zaken ela mi shekana chochmah". And a young man who has attained wisdom must be treated with the respect due to old age.

So we find a fascinating statement in the Ethics of the Fathers: "Beauty, strength, wealth, honor, learning, old age and children, are all beautifully suited to the righteous, and beautifully suited to the world. As it is said, "Old age is a glorious crown, found in the path of righteousness."

This is the lesson of our Midrash. Ancient people didn't understand it. "Ad Avraham lo hayta zikna". Till Avraham old age was scarcely regarded. It was considered as if it didn't exist. An old man or woman was considered worthless. Came Avraham and taught Yitzchak righteousness and charity and lovingkindness from his earliest youth. Precisely because they had the same values and strove for the same goals, were identical in all spiritual strivings, for that very reason was Avraham revered and respected in his old age. "The best is yet to be, The last of life for which the first was made." And such an old age is a great blessing for Avraham, for his children after him, and for all the world.

They are indeed fortunate, who as we go forward "binurenu ubizkenenu", young and old together, Yitzchaks and Avrahams. That is the great striving of our people today. That shall be our hope for the future.

(Submitted by Nisson E. Shulman)