

# Feel Young & Grow Old

- Yossi Michalowicz

Some people grow old gracefully, while others fight and scratch the whole way.

Andy's wife, refusing to give in to the looks of growing old, goes out and buys a new line of expensive cosmetics guaranteed to make her look years younger.

After a lengthy sitting before the mirror applying the "miracle" products, she asks her husband - "Darling, honestly, if you didn't know me, what age would you say I am?"

Looking over her carefully, Andy replied,...

"Judging from your skin, twenty;  
your hair, eighteen;  
and your figure, twenty five."

"Oh, you flatterer!" she gushed. Just as she was about to tell Andy his reward, he stops her by saying...

"WHOA, hold on there sweetie!" Andy interrupted.  
"I haven't added them up yet!"

Another year has passed since we have seen each other. We have all gotten one year older. We thank G-d that we have made it through the year, but we are anxious over the fact that we are older.

I once heard a comment: Living until 120 is a blessing and a curse. What is the blessing? That you are 120. What is the curse? That you are 120!

This summarizes the irony of aging: On the one hand we all wish ourselves "Biz a Hindred un Tzvanzig." [Until 120], but on the other hand, do you really want to live that long? Do you want to be so old and frail that you can not even enjoy the life you are living? Yes we are happy to have made it through another year, but if we are that happy, why are so many people reluctant to proudly tell you their age?

The question is: how is society dealing with this issue? In a word: "anti -aging." Doctors, scientists, and just about everyone in the health fields are trying to discover new "fountains of youth" in order to keep people young looking and feeling young.

Case in point: ABC News show 20/20 spotlighted the benefits of HGH therapy. Reporter Michael Guillen commented: Wouldn't it be great to feel young all your life? To always have the vim and vigor of a 30-year old, even when you're 60 or 70 and beyond?

Well, to a growing number of baby boomers hitting that big 5-0 the idea of slowing down the clock, maybe even reversing it, is more than just a pipe dream.

Time Magazine, November 25, 1996, "Can We Stay Young?"

From Time Magazine's article "Fountain of Youth": "Most promising of all is the possibility that scientists may someday not only lengthen life spans, but improve them as well. Researchers are starting to talk about the likelihood of people living well into their second centuries with the smooth skin, firm muscles, clear vision, high energy and vigorous sexual capabilities they once could only enjoy in youth."

Efforts to halt aging go back thousands of years - from Ponce de Leon's search for the Fountain of Youth to consuming crushed-up animal testicles for renewed vigor. Today, "anti-aging" medicine is a multi-billion dollar industry in North America. With "longevity" clinics popping up around the country and Internet advertisements for miracle cures bombarding your inbox.

So we see millions of people running around from one health food store to the next, one exercise club to the next. People are taking all kinds of pills, even though we are not sure of what the long-term health risks might be, while the potential benefits are speculative at best.

So what does Judaism have to say about all this? Is the Torah worried that the entire world is turning to the Greek cultured worship of the body. Judaism has always told us to focus on the spiritual – isn't all this focus on anti-aging not in the spirit of Judaism?

However, after studying the sources it is very clear that Judaism is all in favor of being health conscience. Let me sight two prime sources defending this position:

Maimonides in Laws of De'os, 4:1 says: "Having a whole and healthy body is part and parcel of serving G-d, for it is impossible to have understanding and wisdom in the matter of knowing the Creator if a man is ill. Therefore one must avoid things which damage the body and to habituate oneself with things promoting health."

Indeed, R' Avraham Yitzchok Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel tells us that the first stage of Teshuva is a natural physical Teshuva of the body. He explains that "after a person realizes that his own improper behavior is responsible for his life's physical decline, he thinks to correct the situation, to return to the laws of life, to adhere to the laws of nature... so that he may return to live revitalized by all of life's vigor."

Judaism is filled with heroes who were physical titans, in addition to being spiritual giants. Examples are Jacob, David, and Samson.

R' Kook concludes that "All of our Teshuva will only succeed if it will be, along with its spiritual splendor, also a physical Teshuva which produces healthy blood, healthy flesh, firm, mighty bodies, and a flaming spirit spreading over powerful muscles."

From this sampling it is abundantly clear that Judaism encourages us to maintain the human beings' natural G-d given health. We were created to live a long time, and we are responsible to take care of our physical selves to live a long, healthy, life filled with vim and vigor.

And to this end, yours truly follows doctors' orders and lifts weight and does his cardio 3 times a week, while watching the foods I eat.

So to that end, I wish you all the blessings of a healthy new year. A year where you feel young and have the ability to enjoy life to its fullest. "Biz a Hundret un Tzvanzig" – as a blessing. However, that only would only be half of a blessing. Being physically older just for the sake of living another year is only half of the story of life. We may be blessed with physical life, but does that alone make us happy? Don't we expect to accomplish more than just existing on this planet. If indeed G-d has blessed you with another year of life, what do you have to show for it? What did you do with the precious gift of life that G-d gave you?

The Rabbis teach us in Ethics of the Fathers that as we pass through different periods of our lives, we are expected to show maturity based on our experiences in life. The Rabbis teach us:

"A five year old begins Scripture; a ten year old begins Mishnah, a thirteen year old becomes obliged to observe commandments; a fifteen year old begins to study Talmud; an eighteen year old goes to the marriage canopy; a twenty year old begins pursuit of a livelihood; a thirty year old attains full strength; a forty year old attains understanding, a fifty year old can offer counsel; a sixty year old attains intellectual maturity; a seventy year old attains Teshuva; an eighty year old shows spiritual strength, a ninety year old can excel in prayer, a one hundred year old has spiritually and emotionally disengaged from this world's false illusions."

It is clear from this statement than in addition to the human's requirement to feel young, he is obliged to GROW old. Growing every day of your life – never stopping. Every new decade gives us so much more to look forward to in growth. You have heard of the expression where adults tell their children to "grow up" – Judaism tells us all to GROW OLD. Every day should provide us with experiences that enable us to become more mature, wiser, a better spouse, a better parent, a greater member of the community.

The Hebrew word for an elderly person is "Zakein." The Rabbis tell us that it is an acronym for "Zeh Shekanah Chochma" – meaning this one has acquired wisdom.

The Rabbis compare an older righteous person to fine wine that improves with age. We all would love to drink a vintage bottle of a 1920 Chardenay – it would cost a lot. How much more we should be able to enjoy drinking in the wisdom that comes from a 1920 vintage grandparent, senior member of the community.

But we live in a world where we idolize youth and discard that which is old. We place great doctors and workers into forced retirement in order to let the youngsters in. We put older parents in nursing homes. People are forced into mid-life crisis because companies are downsizing at the expense of people in their 40' and 50s who have overextended their qualifications and are no longer as profitable in keeping as younger workers. While Judaism says that we "Should stand up for our elders, and glorify those with grey hair." Why are the two world views different? Because the former is only interested in feeling young, while Judaism also insists, encourages, and praises the ability to "grow old." Why is this so?

I believe that in mankind's all consuming pursuit to stay forever young, he has neglected to believe in the value of growing old. We mistakenly think that in order to feel young, we have to totally look young and totally think like a young person. You have many well intending parents who want to look like their teenage children, walk like them, dress like them, do the things they do, be friends with them – and that is all good and wonderful. But there has to be one clear distinction: An adolescent has minimal years of life experience, and therefore minimal maturity. An adult, by virtue of their additional years of life, should GROW OLD even after they have physically GROWN UP, and advance in their maturity, kindness, patience, etc.

Just because you graduated university or Jewish day school does not mean that you don't continue to learn. Just because you did acts of kindness as a Boy or Girl Scout does not preclude developing advanced techniques of random acts of kindness. Just because you have learned how to be intimate with someone in your youth does not mean that you can't cultivate a more sophisticated and deeper relationship with your spouse. Unfortunately, our obsession with feeling and looking young has caused us to forget that we should look forward to GROWING OLD.

Growing older has so many advantages. Like the following statement by Jock Falkson:  
“At age 20, we worry about what others think of us  
At 40, we don't care what they think of us  
At 60, we discover they haven't been thinking about us at all!”

Here is another benefit: “The advantage age has over youth is that youth knows nothing about being old, whereas old knows all about being young.”

And finally: “No matter how old some people get, they never seem to lose their attractiveness. They merely move it from their faces to their hearts.”

Pianist Arthur Rubinstein gave one of his greatest recitals at 89.

Actress Jessica Tandy won an Academy Award at 80 for her performance of Driving Miss Daisy.  
Congressman Claude Pepper of Florida was still actively championing the rights of the elderly and the poor at 88.

Simon Weisenthal was tracking down Nazis until his recent death at 96.

Great Rabbis in Jerusalem like R' Ovadya Yosef and R' Alyashuv are leading the Jewish people in Eretz Yisroel even though they are in their 80's.

Happy, productive older people don't necessarily refuse to retire from their jobs. But they do refuse to retire from life.

Rav Klanimous Kalman Shapira writes in his personal journal called “To Heal the Soul” the following:

“If your life's aim is to serve G-d with constant improvement and to reach age seventy beyond your Bar Mitzvah level, then here is the thing to do:

“Each year, clarify a goal and envision the actualized “you” of next year. Visualize who this “you” will be: his attainments...his daily life...his character...and his inner essence. Use this

envisioned “you” also as a gauge to know how far you still have to go. Is your present daily progress enough to create the reality of that envisioned future “you”?

“But if next year comes and you have not actualized that “you” it is as if your life has been cut short. The new “you” was aborted, it is not alive now, you are still an old “you” of perhaps years ago.

This is the meaning of ‘And Avraham was old, advanced in years’ [Genesis 41:1]: the Avraham of this year was the advanced Avraham of this year, not the Avraham of the past.”

The Torah is telling us that Avraham came with ALL his days – this year! He wasn’t the younger Avraham from the past in terms of maturity – He had GROWN OLD! This is the greatness of all of the righteous people: Despite their age and years, they never lost their enthusiasm and excitement for doing new things in life.

The Torah does not tell us much about Avraham’s growth in his younger days, but does tell us the following:

1. At age 48, he founded Judaism and reached out to others.
2. At age 55, he makes his first Aliya to the future land of Israel.
3. At age 70, he made the covenant between the parts with the Almighty
4. At age 75, he makes his final Aliya. Subsequently, he rekindled the spark in his marriage of Sarah on a trip to Egypt.
5. At age 78, he was the winning general of the First World War in History, defeating an awesome army of 2.6 million soldiers, and becomes an ambassador for world peace.
6. At age 86, he had his first son.
7. At age 99, he circumcised himself.
8. At age 100, he had Isaac.
9. At age 103, he moves to Elonei Mamre and opens up a large hotel for guests – which he managed for many years.
10. At age 137, he took the ultimate field trip to Mount Moriah and preserves the eternity of the Jewish people.
11. After that, he remarries and has more children.
12. At age 160, he becomes a grandfather, and teaches them Torah.

Why are all these important things in his life happening later in life and not earlier? I believe the Torah is telling us a clear message: “Your most productive years come later in life – to those who are willing to GROW IN THEIR OLD AGE!!!

Gerontologists have identified three factors that account for what they call, "successful aging":

1. good health
2. ample social contacts
3. a sense of a meaningful existence

And Avraham had them all. This is why we read so much in the Torah on Rosh Hashanah about Avraham – to know what legacy he bequeathed to us his grandchildren.

While "a meaningful existence" can be achieved through taking care of a spouse or volunteering for a good cause, ultimate meaning is achieved through spiritual pursuits.

Even more courageous and adventuresome are those rare souls who transform their whole existence to God-centered lives in their seventh decade. Nate and Irma Charles, who had made aliyah from America, moved into Jerusalem's Old City when they were in their early 60s. Natie started studying with various rabbis there, and discovered that he had a lot to learn about Judaism. Religiously, Natie and Irma were Jews with a limited background. "Once I started learning Torah," Natie recounts, "I got a whole new perspective on what it means to be a Jew." Natie and Irma's three children were already grown. The single black spot in their lives was that one daughter, married for 12 years, had not succeeded in becoming pregnant. When Natie consulted a rabbi in Jerusalem about this, The Rabbi suggested that it might help if their daughter were to observe a particular mitzvah.

Natie phoned his daughter back in America, and passed on the rabbi's advice. Her terse reply was: "You've been in Israel so long you sound like the Moonies."

After several more months, and a failed adoption attempt, she decided to take the Rabbi's advice. Seven weeks later she phoned her parents. Natie picked up the phone and heard only silence.

"Hello? Hello?" he kept asking. Finally came their daughter's choked voice: "I'm pregnant."

Natie looked at Irma. Two emotions surged up in both their hearts: Exuberant joy and overwhelming gratitude to God. "At that moment," Natie recalls, "it was clear to both of us that we had to give something back to God. We decided to keep Shabbos and kashrus and the other mitzvot."

It was a total change of lifestyle for Natie, 63, and Irma, 62. Natie started to wear a kippa and to learn Torah every day -- a practice he has continued for the last 20 years. Irma became the devoted "Bubby" of an entire community of yeshiva students and young couples. Her cooking skills -- in her newly-kashered kitchen -- became legendary as she routinely fed a dozen guests every Shabbat night. More than 25 young people filled "the House of Charles" for Kiddush every Shabbat morning. On the eve of her 70th birthday, Irma published a popular cookbook-cum-memoir, "Adventures in Bubby Irma's Kitchen." The book begins with the words, "I am thankful to the Almighty, who has allowed me, even after all these years, to enter into His world and has given me the opportunity to learn about Torah and mitzvot."

Changing life-time habits is difficult, not only because the force of inertia hampers such efforts, but also because adopting a new action subtly incriminates one's previous actions, instigating the defensive response, "What was wrong with the way I was doing it before?" In her book, Bubby Irma describes the conflicting inner voices that beset her after she had learned that an egg must be cracked into a glass and checked for bloodspots before being considered kosher:

One day, I was baking my famous Babka, and as I always did, I started to break the eggs into the dough. A little voice inside said, "No, no, I have to crack the eggs into a glass and check that there's no blood."

I walked away from the dough and got a glass to crack the egg into. But I couldn't crack it. I heard a voice again: "Irma, you've been cooking for 39 years and never cracked an egg into a glass. It's ridiculous. Don't do it!" So I walked back to the dough and started to crack the egg. Again I was stopped by a voice that said, "Irma, if you are going to do something, do it right." So I cracked it into the glass, and what I saw and smelled put me into a state of shock. Not only was the egg rotten, but it was full of blood and even had a part of the beak formed. I dropped it and stood there in awe of Hashem. He had found a way to get His message across to me.

When Pablo Picasso was 85, he was asked why his later paintings were more innovative than his early ones. How could the later paintings have more of the boldness and fire of a young artist's work? Picasso's reply was, "It takes a long time to become young."

Ladies and gentlemen, thank G-d we are a community that encourages growth, and many of us have done so well, in so many ways:

1. We have brave adults who are breaking their teeth learning to read Hebrew and are now able to lead the services on a parent's Yahrzeit.
2. We have couples who are making serious efforts to improve the quality of their marriages after so many years.
3. We have ladies in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s who are taking the plunge in the Mikveh for the first time.

Small changes, big changes – but they are growing – in their older years.

Our observance of Rosh Hashanah requires us to make goals of growth similar to Avraham – be it in increased exercise or better diet, increases kindness, increased Torah learning, being a better spouse and parent. Talk about this at your Yom Tov table. Make concrete, well defined, measurable goals, that you can constantly refer to during the year – so that when you look at yourself next year, you will see a healthy, young feeling person who has successfully grown older by a full year.

Have a Shana Tova – a good year – may we all FEEL YOUNG & GROW OLDER