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*Seeing Beauty in the Face of Age*

*L'shanah tovah.*

During this past year, I sat with an older member of our community. His wife had fallen in their home, and was now in a local rehabilitation hospital. Her recovery was not progressing as well as they had hoped. They were together what felt like their entire lives, having met in high school. They never dated anyone else. They never loved anyone else.

75 years. Not perfect years, but here they were, together.

Over 75 years, you make a lot of decisions: where to live, what careers to pursue, whether to try and have children, if so, how many, where they will go to school and how to raise them, financial decisions, and with whom you will share the most important moments in your lives.

But they had not anticipated this particular decision.

She was not in medical crisis so the medical ICU was not an option. Returning home didn't feel safe. And the rehabilitation hospital was nearing the end of what it could provide.

I visited with them in the Rehabilitation center for a morning. We spent most of the time looking at their wedding albums.

When I asked about next steps, their faces dropped and they changed the subject.

Later, while his wife went to physical therapy, this loving, sweet man brought out a folder of brochures of independent living centers, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes. Another folder had pictures of assistive medical devices that he was hoping could be installed in their home.

In the margins of the brochures he had taken notes. The notes were simple: where should she go? what do I do? who's going to help us?

He had spent days poring over the various options, and had met with a support network of people who tried to help him understand the options. Still, he felt paralyzed.

I began sifting through the information with him. I then spoke with the medical team and reached out to friends of mine in the elder care field. It felt like we were making progress towards a decision.

As the time came to move his wife out of rehabilitation, he had yet to take any next steps to arrange for her care.

Together with the social worker, we sat with him and discussed, again, the various options.

He buried his face in his hands and asked us again and again, "How am I supposed to know?"

That evening I called a friend. "What are we missing?" I asked.

A wise and caring soul, she asked me in return: "What questions is he asking?"

I told her: he's not saying much. He keeps repeating: "how am I supposed to know?"

She seemed to understand. "He's not asking you about where to place his wife." she told me. "He knows she can't return home. His question is: 75 years and I'm about to be alone. ***How am I supposed to know how to be alone?***"

In the coming days I spent more time with this man. What I came to understand is that he was living with two very real possibilities.

One: which setting will be the best place for my wife to regain her strength and live well?

And two: which setting will help her to die with any integrity and grace?

At that time, these two radically different next steps were, in his mind, equally viable and true possibilities.

She did move to an assisted living facility soon after.

As he moved her in, we sat down together. He had a new set of questions. Is this what she wants? How do I know? What's next? And will she forgive me?

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Over the last generation, each of the movements in the North American Jewish community has made many important strategic decisions about the future of Jewish life and identity.

Many of these decisions were based on studies that young Jewish adults were making different choices than their parents. They were not seeking membership in synagogues and other centralized or formal Jewish institutions. They were identifying themselves as less religious than Jews had in the past. They wanted to experience different traditions and cultures. They wanted a more universal approach to religious and spiritual thought and practice. Judaism as a religious tradition was being re-evaluated. Jewish identity, priorities and even ideologies were shifting, as they have again and again over the last two millennia.

But this time felt a little different, as the blessings of prosperity and the openness and shared experience of Jewish and non-Jewish community presented new realities.

There has been an enormous investment in helping Jewish youth feel connected so that the tradition would become an integral part of their personal identities.

From every angle - financial resources, global collaboration, programmatic innovation - investing in our youth has been *the* work of this last generation.

This is our work as well, and a priority for us at Reyim this year and in the coming years. It's not only a commitment to the future of Jewish identity and life as a whole, but also to the personal life experiences of *each* of our children. Jewish identity, while shifting, is still strong.

But as an important teacher of mine taught me many years ago as she was helping to develop a culture and prioritize the commitments of a new rabbinical school, when you say yes to something, you are also, by the nature and limits of our human capacity, saying no to something else.

Thank God we've said yes to our Jewish youth, and we will keep doing so. Still, I'm concerned about those to whom we've said, "not yet".

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In the Torah reading called *kedoshim*, meaning holiness, we are taught, "*mipnei seyva takum v'hadarta pnei zaken.*" This verse is often translated poetically and idiomatically: you shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old.

*But we can read it a little differently: you shall rise before an elder and see the beauty in the face of age.*  
*V'hadarta pnei zaken.*

The experience of aging can be painful. We may experience a loss of agency and independence, health issues we never anticipated, and loss of memory. Over the years, many people have shared with me how suddenly and unexpectedly they shift from experts in their professional fields, leaders in their communities, and care takers at home to sitting on the fringes, unable live the way they did, or feeling that they are no longer respected.

As we grow old, we begin to grieve the loss of more and more friends and loved ones.

We witness the aging of our grandparents and parents. They have raised us, counseled us, and fed us. We know it is our work to care for them as well as they cared for us, but even as we try to do so lovingly, we are anguished by the loss of who they once were. We struggle with the change in our relationships.

As our spouses and partners become older or ill, we feel the pain and the weight of being alone for the first time. We take on the role of decision making and nurturing. We often feel like we're in this alone, anxious of the next step, seeking forgiveness for making decisions we don't feel equipped to make, or having to place our loved one in a setting that is no longer home.

For all these reasons, Torah teaches us: see the beauty in the face of age. Understand the pains of aging, and honor them. But also come to appreciate the fullness and the blessings of their lives.

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During these two days of Rosh Hashanah, we read the story of a family: Abraham, Sarah and Isaac.

We first encounter Sarah in Torah at the end of a long list of names that connect the multiple generations from Noah to Abraham. In that list, countless members of Abraham's family are mentioned, but the only thing we know about them are their names. With one exception: Abraham's wife, Sarah. Sarah is the only person among these many generations whom Torah describes. We learn that Sarah is childless.

As we began the Torah reading yesterday morning, Sarah had already *grown old*, long past the time she could imagine giving birth.

Her life was about to change. Our Torah reading began: "*Va'donai pakad et Sara*": God remembered Sarah. After being unable to conceive all of her life, Sarah, at last, *in her old age*, gives birth to a child, a son named Isaac.

Much of our tradition understands this as a story about birth, chosen by our ancient rabbis as the Torah reading because it echoes the theme that we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world.

Birth is miraculous! There's new life, new heartbeat, new breath. And as we look ahead, there's only potential - no limitations, anything feels possible. We even sing about Eliyahu Hanavi, Elijah the prophet, at bris and naming ceremonies, open to the possibility that this child will bring the coming of messianic age, the age of a full, global peace and fulfillment. So we're uniquely exuberant, hopeful, and openhearted. There is, God willing, a long lifetime ahead, to shift and change the world.

All this resonates during the High Holidays; these days are meant to be a reset, a return to the faith that God takes note of us and enables us to experience true joy at the most unexpected moments in our lives.

But in celebrating the story of Isaac, have we forgotten to see the beauty in the face of the aged wrinkles of Sarah?

This is not simply a birth story; not just a story about youth. It is a story about a woman who has spent her life yearning for a child.

Her laughter after giving birth to Isaac was not just an expression of joy. As is often true with laughter, it also expressed her deep-set sadness. Her underlying pain of a life filled with an *unfulfilled* hope.

In chanting this Torah reading during Rosh Hashanah, we are telling a story about the experience of aging. Even in lives full of blessing, how many unfulfilled dreams we have.

In the opening verses in the very next Torah reading, Sarah dies soon. Abraham mourned her and cried out, bewailing her loss.

The blessing that our patriarch Abraham and matriarch Sarah leave us is not just Isaac, not just the future of a people; they also leave us a spiritual legacy of lives lived fully, with compassion, gratitude and wisdom, but also with complex and even painful relationships and regrets.

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Part of the enormous gift of my work is to sit with older members of our community in times of illness and need, at the hospital, and at their homes. I often think that if we really want to ensure Jewish continuity, and strengthen Jewish identity, then what we need to do is bring our children to sit with our elders. Let them hear the stories of the generation that preceded them; the content of their lives, but also the feel, the emotional and spiritual life of the Jewish soul.

As a student chaplain at Massachusetts General Hospital, I received a call to visit older Jewish woman who was ill and moving quickly into surgery. When I arrived, she was being strolled down the hospital corridor towards the operating room. She saw me and asked to stop for a moment. She motioned for me to come near; she put her hands around my head and brought my head close to her mouth. She began to whisper, as the technicians started to roll her again towards the OR: shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad. I walked with her.

I thought a lot about that moment. In a time of worry and fear, she turned to an ancient tradition, words that had been impressed upon her heart and woven into her soul. v'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha, b'chol livavcha uv'chol nafshe'cha u'vchol mi'odecha- Love God with all of your heart and all of your soul, and of all your might, we recite in the shema. She had opened her heart to this ancient instruction.

It's that imprint on our being, when we honor it and care for it, treasure it and attune ourselves to it, that will carry our spiritual lives and Jewish identity forward into the coming generations.

See the beauty in the face of age.

In our community this *mitzvah* means continuing to do much of what we do well.

Care for and honor the people we love who are aging or at the end of their lives.

Create *systems* of care, grounded in *chen*, *chesed* and *rachamim*, in grace and integrity, in loving kindness, and in compassion.

And, just as importantly, honor the unique joy and gratitude that so many older members of our communities feel for the gifts in their lives. Listen when they tell us how blessed they are.

Small gestures make an enormous difference. Reach out to older members. Spend time together.

Ask what they need and help us mobilize as a community to support them. It could be as easy as meals for the month or as complex as determining next steps for a loved one who is transitioning into a new home. It may be reaching out after a member has lost a loved one, or friend and knowing when he or she is alone.

It also means finding ways to listen to the stories of their lives; so we can bring their wisdom into our own lives and those of our children.

During this past year, we have lost many older members of our community. Some were original founders of Temple Reyim, whose participation, leadership and philanthropy is everywhere we look. In very literal ways, we have no Temple Reyim without them.

As is natural and true in every community, as the founding generation ages, we begin to focus on the next generation. It is our future.

Let's make sure, as well, to keep honoring our past.

This year we will be starting what I hope will become an annual tradition of a Shabbat morning that honors the lives, in very personal ways, of the older members of our community.

We will begin the project of listening to and documenting the personal histories and life journeys of elders in our community.

I look forward to doing this very meaningful work together.

As we bring Rosh Hashanah to a close this evening and begin moving towards Yom Kippur, may we be written into the *sefer chayim*, the book of each of our lives, for a good year.

And may the books of the lives of all who came before us be wide open, that we may read and learn, listen and love.

lshanah tovah.