

Aging with Honor and Happiness

Last year I turned 60 and realized that even if I am granted the Jewish ideal of 120 years I have more of them behind me than before me. I began to mine Jewish texts and traditions for wisdom about aging. In few other areas have I seen so much dissonance between Jewish values and popular, contemporary American values.

In America, we view old age with fear, disdain, confusion, and dishonesty. We spend more money on surgeries, treatments, and cosmetics to hide old age than on research to treat cancer and its other scourges. For those ages 50 and up, lying about one's age is socially acceptable. We spend billions on birthday parties for toddlers but shun visits to nursing homes. We idolize beauty in the young, but compliment the elderly only if they look "years younger." Rabbi Harold Kushner, describing the stigma of aging, challenges us, "Do you doubt that? Try this little experiment. Go into a store where greeting cards are sold and look at birthday cards for middle aged men and women. They will almost all be about loss, about life slipping, about the fact that we are losing our figures and our vigor."

Jewish tradition regards old age not as a defeat but as a privilege. Older people have more experience, more accomplishments, and more insights. They are less distracted by trivialities, less consumed by competitions, and more forgiving of themselves and others. They have less patience for meaningless tasks and more urgency about creativity and contemplation. They are more open to the world of the spirit, and they have a stronger connection to the larger cycles of life.

I invite you to join me in a three-week Beit Midrash class, "Beautify the face of the Elderly: Jewish Wisdom about Aging," Tuesday evenings, November 19 and 26, and December 3, at 7 P.M.

On November 19, we will explore Jewish texts about aging. How can we preserve vigor in old age? What is the role of the elderly in Jewish teaching and ritual? How do old people make peace with enemies and unsettled arguments? How can the elderly remain active in larger communities?

On November 26, we will look at the relationships of adult men and women with their aging parents. What are the *halachic* (legal) requirements for caring for one's parents in their old age? How do we balance the needs of parents against the resources and capabilities of their children? How are responsibilities divided when there are several children? What if one sibling is more able, materially, physically, or emotionally, to attend to the parents? What about parents with severe mental handicaps? How much truth is wise to share when parents become terminally ill?

On December 3, we will look at different Jewish Ethical Wills, in which a parent writes down what he or she has learned from life, and what they most want for, and from their loved ones after they die. An Ethical Will is a marvelous, if challenging, way for a person to distill what is most valuable to them, and to make sure that it lives on after them. We will learn guidelines for writing our own Ethical Wills.

As all Beit Midrash classes, registration is not necessary. You may simply drop in. There is dinner preceding the class at 6:15 and a live performance of Jewish spiritual music following the class at 8:30. The cost for each evening is \$15. The Chasidic master Reb Nachman of Bratzlav taught that the true standard by which to measure a culture is the reverence and compassion it shows to the aged. Let us join in creating a more just and caring world for the elderly, and the potential elderly, that is, for us all.

Rabbi Weintraub