

Chayyei Sarah Nov 14, 2020

The Life of Sarah

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Genesis 23:1-25:18. (read aloud, Chapter 23)

I am offering this drash in honor of my reirement – not retirement but reirement – as I have just completed more than 40 years of full-time employment and will be reducing my time to just 20 hours a week, beginning Monday. New opportunities are arising. But more on that later.

The Parasha is called Chayyei Sarah, the Life of Sarah, but it is really about the death of Sarah. We learn that she lived to be 127 years old, that she died in Kiriath-Arba (Hebron) and that Abraham cried at her death and then buried her.

Sarah is the only woman in the Torah whose age we know, but aside from the fact that she gave birth at 90 we are told nothing about how she experienced her old age.

When I studied gerontology 45 years ago, we were instructed to divide the physical aging process into three groups – roughly, the young old (55–65 years of age), the middle old (66–85), and the old old (85 and older). Falling decidedly into the middle category myself, I rebel at this breakdown as rigid and old fashioned. I would much rather look towards a long future, taking heart from Biblical characters like Sarah or even more so Methuselah who lived the longest of all figures in the Bible until the age of 969.

Long-lived ancestors like Sarah and Methuselah also figure in Christianity and to some extent in Islam, many other religions have longevity myths, including Hinduism, the Falun Gong and Jainism, the most extreme, where Shantinatha, the oldest Jain ancestor, was said to have lived over 800,000 years.

Some apologists explain these extreme ages as ancient mistranslations that converted the word "month" to "year", mistaking lunar cycles for solar ones: this would turn Mesuthesah's 969 years into a more reasonable 969 lunar months or just about 78 solar years.^[5]

But why bother citing these ages at all? Anyway, why is Sarah the only woman in Tanach to be bestowed such honor? Specifying Sarah's age could be the author's way of underscoring the miraculous nature of her pregnancy. Who would ever have thought a 90-year-old woman could give birth to the son of promise, Isaac? The answer: no one, including Sarah, who laughed at such a preposterous thought (hence the name given the child—Yitzhak, "he laughs")! When God makes a promise, however, God can be counted on to fulfill that promise, regardless of the seemingly impossible odds of its fulfillment

All this got me to thinking about the nature of old age in the Bible.

Our first elder did not live in retirement, but rather began a journey at an old age where he continued grow, learn, and achieve. As an old woman, Sarah takes on motherhood – another kind of journey.

There are many references to the decline and challenges of growing old in Jewish texts. But other references clearly teach us that good things can also happen in old age, and that there is health and strength. Do these texts point to a spirituality of Jewish aging? Can growing older be a time when we do not end our journeys, but begin them? And if we do, what is the journey that allows us to obtain a good old age, to retain vitality?

In general, Torah considers old age to be a virtue and a blessing. Throughout the Torah, "old" (*zakein*) is synonymous with "wise." The Torah commands us to respect all elderly, regardless of their scholarship and piety. Wisdom comes from the sum-total of trials and experiences that are amassed in each year of life – something that even the most accomplished young people cannot equal. I hasten to add that this notion is not unique to Judaism – many traditional cultures respect the elderly – but it runs contrary to the common American view of old age as a period of rocking-chair retirement, where you are expected to leave the workforce for an indefinite period of leisure and relaxation, the so called golden leisure years. That view of retirement dominated our parents' generation and still prevails in much of our society today.

In brief, this Western concept of retirement is based on the notion that life is composed of productive and non-productive periods. The first 20-30 years of life are seen as a time of little or no achievement, as you acquire knowledge and training in preparation for your productive period. The next 30-40 years are the time in which your physical and creative energies are realized and invested in others, most often your job, your children or others in your family and community. Finally, you enter the "twilight period," where the period of "real" achievement is set aside in favor of settling down to enjoy the fruits of your labors. If the creative urge still agitates your aging body, you are advised to find some harmless hobby with which to fill your time. Indeed, time is now something to be "filled" and gotten over with as you while away the days on life's sidelines. Gradually, your life makes a full circle back to childhood and once again you are passive recipient in a world shaped and run by the initiative of others.

I guess with a young infant running around through her 90's, Sarah couldn't have fathomed this life-cycle rhythm. But elsewhere in the Torah – not today's parasha – we do find one single reference to this kind of hard cut-off between work and no-work at a specific age. In Numbers 8:23-26, we read:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying:

- 8:24 'This is that which pertains to the Levites: from twenty and five years old and upward they shall go in to perform the service in the work of the tent of meeting;
- 8:25 and from the age of fifty years they shall return from the service of the work, and serve no more;
- 8:26 but shall minister with their brethren in the tent of meeting, to keep the charge, but they shall do no manner of service.

In general, however, Torah, does not make a clear labor-distinction between life's phases, for it sees productivity as the very essence of life: the words "a non-productive life-period" are an oxymoron.

There are marked differences between childhood, adulthood, etc., but these differ in the manner, not the fact, of a person's productivity. Retirement and the passive enjoyment of the fruits of one's labor do have their time and place— that is, in the World To Come. In the words of the Talmud, "Today is the time to do; tomorrow, to reap the reward." The very fact that God has granted a person a single additional day of bodily life means that you have not yet concluded your mission in life, that there is still something for you to achieve in this world. Each morning in our prayers we recite a blessing of gratitude: to live this day means that there is still something for us to achieve in this world. Traditionally, old age – at least for men – is meant as a time for study; accordingly, the Lubavitcher rebbe created many old-age study centers where elderly disciples could go to learn – compensating, as it were, for the lack of study-time during their years of hard work.

But the Bible has a lot more to say about old age. Knowing that most of us at Fabrangen are older than 50, even or 60 or for many 70, I hope what I am offering speak to you. For example, here are three other references.

[Psalm 71:9](#)

“Do not cast me off in my old age. When my own strength fails, do not abandon me.”

The first phrase -- “Do not cast me off in my old age” --is a geriatric reference. However, “When my own strength fails, do not abandon me” can happen anytime. Our strength, which might be our physical strength, our health, our spiritual strength, our mind acuity, or anything, when that fails, please be there for me. This is a call for relationship, for community, and for mutual support.

[Proverbs.16.31](#)

“Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is attained by the way of righteousness.” This one makes me laugh as I still have more brown hair than gray, so I have to wonder how I have failed in righteousness compared to most of my peers.

[Psalm 90:10](#)

I particularly like this translation from the Jewish Virtual Library “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.”

We leave the darkness and we fly away? Moses still lived to be 120. Sarah to 127. My mother’s best friend to 107. The journey can continue well past 80 or even 90 years....

Bottom line: There is no old-fashioned retirement in Judaism. This does not mean you must die while working a paid job, but it does mean that we are obliged to continue our journey; to explore, to study and to be useful to the end.

According to Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the day that you were born is the day God decided the world could not be preserved without you....If you are still alive, it means you have something left to do-

In secular terms, the Torah is telling us: Keep the little grey cells working to the end! It is not enough to indulge in pleasures, to rest on your laurels. As opportunities arise, you should study, travel, learn a new skill, advocate for justice and/or volunteer for community work... You must THINK. You must DISCOVER. You must DO.

When people ask me about retirement I always say, Don't focus on what you retiring **FROM**. The challenge is, what are you going to retire **TO**? The focus should be on the future, however much time is left.

Now my challenge to you – especially my fellow 50/60 -pluses, is the following question: What opportunities, what journeys – spiritual, physical, emotional – do you have in mind for your older age – more accurately, for whatever period is ahead of you. See if you can name one new thing today that you plan to do. Even if it is small; it should be something new. I will share my own plans at the end of the discussion.

Take courage from our ancestors, from Abraham and Sarah who started their new journeys at an advanced age. Commit to something in the chat, or share it aloud, or save it for later. To me, that is the lesson of Chayei Sarah: it is never too late to start something new.

So here are some of my plans: I am declaring it so I will go through with it. As opportunities and good health allows, I have decided to become a teacher of English as a Second Language, to advocate for Prison Reform and to lead workshops in Alternatives to Violence, a Quaker-led program. And to build my relationships with many of you. Amen.