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The View From 60

by Rabbi Judith Hauptman
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'I am becoming a new rabbi and an old rabbi — both at the very same time." This is what I pronounced at my Academy for Jewish Religion ordination ceremony six years ago. I was turning 60 just a few hours after the festivities ended, and according to Ethics of the Fathers (5:21), ben shishim le-ziqnah, old age begins at 60. Two major changes in my life were occurring simultaneously.

Since the Jewish world is paying special attention these days to the needs of those in their 20s and 30s, my question is, will young people think that a 60-year-old rabbi still has something to say to them? If we turn to the great Jewish texts of the past to find an answer, we will discover that they speak, sometimes in riddles, of the physical decline of old age. Chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes is a case in point. But if we look more closely, we will see that their main focus is on how the young are supposed to interface with the old. Aging is an issue for all.

The fifth of the Ten Commandments states, "honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:11). The book of Numbers says, "rise before the elderly; light up the faces of the old" (19:32). How are these terse teachings to be carried out? True, there are Bible stories on the subject, such as Esau cooking for his father Isaac the game dishes that he loved. But what are the abstract guidelines for these relationships? How do we honor parents? Light up the faces of the old?

For a contemporary answer, I did not need to look far. When my son Hillel married Helen L. this past September, her father asked the two of them, in the middle of the wedding ceremony, to bow three times to my husband and me, to thank us for having raised and educated Hillel, and then three times to his wife and to him to thank them for having raised and educated Helen. I found this Chinese ritual deeply moving and very much to my liking.

For an older answer to the question, we can look to the Mishna, the basis of all later codes of Jewish law. Surprisingly, it does not have a tractate, a chapter or even a paragraph on how to treat the old. It has only a sentence or two about the obligations of children to parents. This is strange for a work that deals with the minutiae of Sabbath observance, prayer and kashrut.

While the Mishnah does not elaborate, the Talmud devotes a number of pages to this subject. Like Helen's father, it encourages children to acknowledge parents. For instance, it recommends that a child not wake a parent who has dozed off; that a child render personal service to parents, such as getting them a drink of water if asked to do so. When Rabbi Tarfon boasts in the study house that he has performed kibbud av v'eim (honoring parents) in an exemplary fashion — because he crouches down each morning and evening so that his old mother can step on him when she gets into and out of bed — his colleagues tell him that he has not yet earned their approbation. The voluntary actions he took were relatively easy. The hard part is to refrain from shaming a parent, probably demented, who throws a purse filled with coins into the ocean. For such self-control they would give him full credit (Bavli, Kiddushin 31b).

The Talmud goes on to define honoring parents as assisting them with daily tasks, like eating, getting dressed, putting on a coat and going in and out of the house. That is, honoring one's father and mother, according to the rabbis, is not about teenagers holding back from telling their parents off, but about adult children in the prime of life taking care of parents who are growing frail. Today we hand this job over to nursing homes. Back then, children were one's "social security" for old age. It was daughters, and even

more likely daughters-in-law, upon whom this burden fell. Daughters married and moved out; sons married and had their wives move in (Mishnah Gittin 7:6).

Whenever I ride a bus in Israel, I am delighted to see the words mipnei seivah takum ("rise before the elderly") posted on the front seats. This is an ingenious application of the biblical verse. And I am pleased (but also a little chagrined) to admit that the minute I walk into a Manhattan subway car, which I do very often, some young person immediately gets up and gives me a seat. I would be perfectly fine standing, but I take the seat so that the same offer will be made again the next time an old person crosses a young person's line of vision.

What is the Talmud's interpretation of "rise before the elderly?" At first, the rabbis understand it to mean that one must rise before aging rabbis. They later add that the verse tells us to extend a hand to any old person who needs it, Jew or non-Jew. A number of rabbis claim that they asked old people to lean on them when they needed assistance walking. Finally, the Talmud points out, the old are to be recognized for all that they have seen and done. Just surviving the challenges of life makes one worthy of honor and respect (Bavli, Kiddushin 33a).

When I offered an elective course at the Jewish Theological Seminary rabbinical school last spring, called "Aging in Rabbinic Literature," 15 students registered, almost all under 35. They read the Talmudic materials from their perspective, as young people and as children of parents. I, along with one student over 50, analyzed the passages from the perspective of someone older and as a parent of grown children. The students were interested in finding ways to limit the obligations of the young to the old. I was interested in expanding them. Considering whether Jewish law requires a child to honor abusive parents, the students argued against, because they felt that a parent who abuses a child waives his or her rights to care and respect. I mined the halachic databases for a clear answer, but did not find one.

In the fall of 2004, I founded a free, walk-in High Holiday service aimed at Jews in their 20s and 30s, named Ohel Ayalah, in memory of my mother. For the last six years, young people have attended these services by the hundreds. Do they show up because the service is free and they cannot afford pricey tickets at established synagogues? Yes. Do they show up because they like the melodies? Yes. Do they show up because this old rabbi teaches them things that they find Jewishly meaningful? I surely hope so.

And these young congregants teach me, too. They challenge my refusal to officiate at an intermarriage and make me defend my position. They teach me not to prejudge people based on how they dress. I now know that tattoos and nose studs are not inconsistent with Jewish religious commitment. Most surprisingly, they teach me that sin is a concept that still speaks to them. A young man wrote to me this year that we sang the confession of sins (the ashamnu prayer) too fast. He did not have enough time to connect with it. Wow.

Bottom line: when you reach 60, start something new. Light up the faces of the old, in particular in nursing homes, where people love attention from the outside, since they never get to go outside. Alternatively, reach out to young people. They too love attention. We have what to tell them and they seem ready to hear it.

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