

How To Grow Old Without Kvetching: A Spiritual Approach to Aging¹

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Kol Nidre Sermon

My mother, who is in her 87th year of life, has a favorite expression. She says,

“It is good to **GET** old but it is not good to **BE** old!”

From the day we are born - as the minutes, hours, days, months, and years tick by, as much as we may try to deny it, the High Holy Days remind us that we are all heading towards our death. It is easy to ignore that fact for most of our life, but eventually the years catch up with us. It may be gradual or it may occur suddenly as one day we look in the mirror or add up all the doctors' appointments we have, and realize, I have become the old person my grandparents were.

Now I know that there are those of you in the congregation who rightfully, or in denial say, this doesn't apply to me yet. But I encourage you to listen anyway. For what I am going to talk about can be helpful to anyone at any age. You may also have a parent that is aging, and you can share this information with them, and with God's help, you too will reach that “magic age” of being “old.”

My goal in this sermon is to help you grow old gracefully without KVETCHING.

One of the hardest realities of growing older is loss. We experience losses through out our lives but they seem to be multiplied as we age.

The loss of a job as we retire or are involuntarily retired by someone else, and the accompanying loss of status and meaning that working gives to our lives.

The loss of physical abilities, no longer able to do the things our body used to be able to do.

The loss of dreams that we realize will not be fulfilled.

The loss friends as we move to a different location better suited to our situation.

And, sadly the loss of loved ones and friends to death.

Sounds depressing, doesn't it?

But I am here to share with you that it doesn't have to feel that way. We can't change the losses that occur but we can change how we approach the extra years that have been given to us.

Can we find a way to let go of the notion that we can stay the same forever? Can we learn to love our bodies as they are at this moment? As our bodies start to fail we are so afraid of becoming

¹ Based on the following books: Wise Aging: Living with Joy, Resilience, & Spirit. By Rabbi Rachel Cowan and Dr. Linda Thal; From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller; Jewish Wisdom for Growing Older: Finding Your Grit and Grace Beyond Midlife, by Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman.

dependent on others. Our culture prides itself on independence but here is a new way to look at this. There is a middle road understanding. In her book, Jewish Wisdom for Growing Older, Rabbi Dayle Friedman says instead of thinking of it as either or, call it **interdependence**. When the elders in an African village were asked about aging, instead of fear, they said they were looking forward to someone kind to take care of them in their older years.

Having others help you has inherent value. It enhances the relationship between both of you. Think of a time when you did a mitzvah by helping someone else. How did it make you feel? What about a time when you offered to help someone and they refused. How did that make you feel? You feel good when you are able to do the mitzvah of helping, but enabling someone else to do this mitzvah is also important. When you allow someone to help you, you are enabling them to do the mitzvah of caring.

Even in our oldest years, we can experience growth, blessing, and learning at the same time as we deal with loss, illness and disability. We can choose life even in the darkness by living each day fully.

Try this exercise. Each night at bedtime, reflect on your day. Ask yourself:

1. What surprised me today?
2. What challenged me today?
3. What disappointed me today?
4. What was the most important moment of my day?

In her book, Wise Aging, Rabbi Rachel Cowan says, “We learn by this stage of life that much of our growth and wisdom has been prompted by **unwelcomed** opportunities. Yet, it is in challenging times that we discover our courage and resilience; we learn that we can bear sadness; we learn that we can appreciate love and beauty in the midst of loss.”

Part of the problem with aging is the society that we live in. We are surrounded by a youth oriented culture. Wherever you look on TV, on your computer, the radio, billboards... there are ads that offer you a multitude of ways to delay and avoid looking older. Skin creams or surgery to get rid of wrinkles, vitamins and supplements to boost your energy, blue pills to boost your virility. Why can't society just allow us to grow older gracefully and in peace?

In our society, the word senior citizen usually comes with negative connotations. What image fills your mind when you think: senior citizen?

(wait for answers)

Bent over, crotchety, confused, slow, angry, frail, grumpy, senile, needy, forgetful, vulnerable, feeble, complaining, useless, ...

Our Jewish tradition views those of advanced age differently. The Torah calls such people **ELDERS**. What image do you get when you think: elder?

(wait for answers)

Wise. respected. Revered. Sage. Influential.

Throughout most of history, elders occupied honored roles in society as sages and seers, leaders and judges, guardians of the traditions, and instructors of the young. Someone you look up to and would go to for advice. The word “elder” appears 141 times in the Torah. And it is always associated with importance. Which better describes **you**? Are you a senior citizen or an elder?

Deuteronomy (32:7) says, “Ask your father and he will tell you. Ask your ELDERS, and they will explain to you.”

And in Job (12:12) we read, “Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?”

At the Golden Calf incident, Moses broke the first set of commandments out of anger and went back up the mountain to get a second set. Tradition tells us that both sets, the broken and the whole, were kept and placed in the ark together. The Talmud reminds us, “Respect the old man who has forgotten what he learned. For the broken Tablets have a place in the Ark beside the Tablets of the Law.”²

“Yes, yes” you might say. “But I have aches here and there, and I am alone, and... you should only know....” How do we **change the focus** from aches, pains, and losses to realize that the accumulation of years also brings wisdom, maturity, and insights. Somewhere along the line we begin to realize that while we spent most of our life acquiring stuff, there is something greater than the material world that we can see with our eyes and understand with our rational minds. This is the stage of our lives where being, creating, feeling, and enjoying, can take precedence over striving. In the past we have worked hard to obtain the material things we need to survive – food, housing, clothing, transportation. We no longer feel the need to accumulate stuff. **Now we have time to attend to our soul.**

Instead of kvetching, now is the time to say, “Can I convert my extra years into a blessing rather than a curse?” Psalm 12 teach us to “Count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart.” One way to do this, which is something you have heard me say over and over, is to show appreciation. Can you find a way to say, “I am thankful that I have lived this long and hope to live longer still.”

(See handout)

There are some beautiful blessings in our morning liturgy. It is a great way to start the day. One is the Modeh Ani prayer. It thanks God for allowing us to wake up to a new day. There is a prayer for our soul, and a prayer for our body. Both are important. (There is a handout on the bench outside with these blessings, along with some good books to read and a website URL called, Jewish Sacred Aging.” Please take a copy home with you.)

When we say the Mi Sheberach prayer for someone who is chronically, or terminally ill are we wasting our breath? The prayer calls for healing of body **and** healing of soul. We pray for the capacity to feel whole even when the body that carries us is broken. Our bodies may change and

² Excerpt From: Wiesel, Elie. “The Forgotten.”

face limits, but it enables our souls to become unbounded. To achieve spiritual growth we need to learn to **let go** of our own self-importance and surrender some part of our desire to be in control, so we can pay more attention to what our soul is telling us.

While we have been taught to take pride in our bodies, we have to remember that humans are ultimately worthy simply because we are beings created in the divine image. Slowing down is merely responding to the reality of physical limitations, but it is NOT a moral failure.

The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that every day offers each person a particular and unique piece of sacred learning. The opportunity for learning from this particular day will not return so we must be aware and alert to what we can learn each day.

Here is another way to look the sunset years of our lives. Our ancestors were farmers. Each Jewish holiday has an agricultural component to it. Passover celebrates the new planting season. Shavuot, the spring harvest, and Sukkot, the last harvest. We have spent our lives growing the crops of life. Now it is Sukkot, time to reap the benefits of our harvest. In his book, From Age-ing to Sage-ing, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Sholomi talks about aging as a time to “Harvest Life,” a time to “bring one’s earthly journey to a successful completion, enjoying the contributions one has made, and passing on a legacy to the future.” How can you make the harvests of your life into something meaningful and durable?

One way we do this is by reviewing the stories of our past, deliberately mining the lessons contained in them. This is called a **Life Review**. Since time is stretchable, not linear, we can reframe and reshape it. We can reach back into the past and repair events and relationships that we perceive as failures or disappointments.

We do this by recontextualizing our past as part of our life review. This means looking back at a past event or relationship that caused us pain and seeing if we can put it in a different context, searching for ways to repair and heal those wounds. For example, can you think of an event in which you felt that a person wronged you, for which you are still angry today? Looking back on it now, with years of life experience in between can you put it better perspective? Did you learn something from that event that helped you in the future?

The art of life repair enables us to heal our psychic bruises as we re-envision our perceived failures into successes. We return to relive and reinterpret these past events as we reassure, bless, hold, and forgive ourselves by finding the hidden meanings or lessons within our more difficult experiences. Only then can we drop our huge baggage of complaints.

Be honest with yourself. Did you jump to conclusions in your youth that you have not reexamined in your maturity? Knowing what you know now, is it possible that you might come to a different conclusion. Even if you don’t condone what happened, can you understand why the person might have done it? Was it a personal failing of theirs that was not meant to hurt you? No one in is perfect.

Are you able to say, “The facts were facts, but my conclusions back then were wrong.”

Do you find this hard to do? Here is an exercise to try. It is called, "A Testimonial Dinner to my Severe Teachers."

First list all the people who wronged you in some way. Then, with the life experiences you now have, invite them back into your life, to a virtual "dinner." Then thank them and bless them for the unexpected good that resulted from the apparent injustice inflicted on you. Reach back with warmth and assurance from the present, let your elder self hold your unhealed younger self, trembling with anxiety. Then your elder self says with great compassion, "I bring you a message from your future. You're going to make it."

In harvesting our lived lives, try to suspend the normal ways in which you evaluate success or failure. Search for the deeper, sometimes more elusive patterns that may be operating beneath the surface of everyday events.

Life repair doesn't eliminate our pain; it helps us come to terms with it. If we meet our pains with courage and faith, we will emerge on the other side, with a renewed commitment to life. In this process we also forgive ourselves for the pain that we caused others.

Since time is stretchable, we can also turn the clock ahead and make an appointment with our more enlightened self in the future. To visit your future self, sit quietly, take a few deep, calming breaths, and then count slowly from your actual physiological age to 120, the biblical age that Moses reached, an age of completion and accomplished wisdom. Look into your inner Elder's compassionate eyes, feeling reassured about your progress so far. Ask for a word of guidance or a blessing for proceeding on your path."

Eternal God, give us the strength to review our lives with an open and forgiving heart, to gain new insights and understandings of the past, turning our failures into successes, to nurture our souls, and to embrace our future with the goal of working on "harvesting our lives" towards a meaningful and healed conclusion. Let us be able to say, "It is good to get old AND it is GOOD to BE old." Amen

Song: O, Guide My Steps

MORNING BLESSINGS

APPRECIATION

(I am thankful that I have lived this long.)

מודה/מודה אני לפניך, מלך חי וקים, שהחזרת בי נשמתִי בחמלה רבה
אמונתך.

Modeh/Modah (for a male/for a female) ani l'fanecha, Melech Chai V'Kayam, she-he-che-zar-ta bi nishmati b'chemlah rabah emunatecha.

I offer thanks to You, ever-living Sovereign, that you have restored my soul to me in mercy: How great is Your trust.

MY SOUL

(I give thanks for the wonder and uniqueness of my soul.)

The soul that you have given me, O God, is a pure one. You have created and formed it, breathed it into me, and within me you sustain it. So long as I have breath, therefore I will give thanks to You, Eternal God and God of all ages, Master of all creation, God of every human spirit. Blessed is the Eternal, in whose hands are the souls of all the living and the spirits of all flesh.

אלהי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא.
E-lo-hai n'sha-mah she-na-ta-ta bi t'ho-rah hi.

MY BODY

(I am grateful for the parts of my body which function properly even as I acknowledge those which do not.)

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe. With divine wisdom you have made our bodies, combining veins, arteries and vital organs into a finely balanced network. Were one of them to fail, O wondrous Maker and Sustainer of life - we would lack the strength to stand in life before You.

ברוך אתה יי רופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות.

Ba-ruch A-tah A-do-nai, ro-feh chol ba-sar u-ma-fli la-a-sot.

Source of our health and strength, we give You thanks and praise.



Our life is the single greatest work of art we will ever make. Occasionally we need to step back from our life like an artist stepping back from his or her canvas, seeing what needs changing for the painting to be complete.

Suggested Reading

Wise Aging: Living with Joy, Resilience, and Spirit, by Rabbi Rachel Cowan and Dr. Linda Thal

From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older, by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller

Jewish Wisdom for Growing Older: Finding Your Grit and Grace Beyond Midlife, by Rabbi Dayle Friedman.

Website

Jewish Sacred Aging <http://jewishsacredaging.com>

Jewish Sacred Aging is a forum for the Jewish Community with resources and texts that feature discussions on the implications of the revolution in longevity for Baby Boomers and their families. We encourage you to participate in the discussion.