

SENIOR PAPER

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**Sermons for the Elderly**

by

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My ability to write this Senior Paper developed from the places, people, and learning that I was blessed to experience over many decades. The trip was circuitous, perhaps, but one learns from everyone in all places and circumstances. There is no wasted learning, according to my beloved parents, Goldie, and Dr, Abraham Ginsburg, z”l.

Growing up, I always showed a great interest in studying Jewish texts, practicing Judaism, and being a part of the Jewish community. Since I attended a special high and junior high school that was quite intense in its academic demands, my parents were concerned when I chose to add my attendance at the high school division of Hebrew College to my other responsibilities. Through my studies at Hebrew College high school and Hebrew College, I experienced the pleasure of Jewish studies in a supportive and caring Jewish community. In conjunction with my studies I attended Camp Yavneh, affiliated with Hebrew College, under the directorship of Baruch Levine, a most positive role model and support. At Camp Yavneh I experienced meaningful prayer, stimulating learning, and involved community. Participating in the Hebrew College junior year at Hebrew University and Hayim Greenberg Institute, I heard lectures and studied with some greats, of whose status in the world I was blissfully unaware. I studied “The Story of Joseph” for a year with Nehama Leibowitz, z”l, and Hebrew grammar with Yehuda Amihai, z”l. My missing Hebrew studies after graduating from Hebrew College brought me to a Masters level program at Brandeis University in Contemporary Jewish Studies, where Rabbi Joseph Lukinsky was the advisor for my thesis and a role model for my life. I added Shabbat attendance at Havurat Shalom and developed a community of like-minded friends. Although I involved myself in Jewish community over the years, the spiritual fullness of this part of my life was not met until the gift of the Academy of Jewish Religion became a major part of my life five years ago. My deep thanks to all of those who encouraged me, taught me, and

provided a community for me.

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## Preface

Every weekday, when on the subway going back and forth from the West End of Boston to Dorchester as a seventh grader in Girls' Latin School, I looked at the people who traveled with me. I noticed that the children who sat with their parents always were prettier, more handsome than were their parents.

I set forth an hypothesis. I surmised that it was possible that every succeeding generation became prettier, more comely. I thought about my Mother's poor dental work and my excellent dental care. Certainly, looking at old photo albums, I felt reinforced in my conclusion. Indeed, every generation is prettier than is its predecessor. My parents did not have children until their early thirties. My father was bald, and my mother was not of the stylish variety. I saw them as giants in every way, but I wondered when they began to look so old- to me. I stared at those who sat opposite me and wondered why the young were so much more appealing than were their families of origin.

In time I grew to understand the following: (*Proverbs*: 31:30)

**"שקר החן והבל היופי**

**אשה יראת ד' היא תתהלל."**

"Grace is deceptive, and beauty is illusory.

It is for her fear of the Lord that a woman is to be praised." [1, p. 1655]

I had another moment of contemplating the aging process in my early years of high school. At that time we lived in Newton, since the West End had been demolished under the laws of eminent domain. In front of our home was a beautiful maple tree whose leaves turned the ultimate in red with the becoming of fall. I picked up a striking leaf and put it in my "treasure box" on my bedroom bureau. I took an index card and wrote, "Every season has its beauty." Yes, the blooming of the red was a sign of the end, but there was fire, life, and the giving of joy.

**"... וירא והנה הסנה בער באש והסנה איננו אכל."** (*Exodus*: 3:2)

And Moses saw the burning bush and it was not consumed. (EBGP translation)  
Perhaps, while we are warm, while we can burn with life and love, we will not be consumed.

So, maybe, we have to be mindful of lives in their years of decline. Maybe, we have to look at the aging population as a source of revelation, of knowledge, of opportunity.

I am most interested in writing a collection of *divrei Torah* which will foster sensitivity, respect, and inclusion of the aging population. Addressed to both caregivers, the elderly, and future members of both categories, I will write sermons to give the message of honor, connection, support, and presence of the aging population: aging as a direction, rather than a disease; honor as an entitlement, rather than a choice.

In the middle of the *Torah* is the *Book of Leviticus*. We read the following in the *Holiness Code*, which appears in *Parashat Kedoshim*: 19:32:

“In the presence of an old person shall you rise,  
And you shall honor the presence of a *zaken*  
and you shall revere your God  
I am the Lord.” [2, p. 665]

This forthright statement is the source of much power, discussion, and precedent. We honor our aged from precept, not from mere preference. The above precept is followed by the announcement that God, the Lord, is your God. Maybe, there will not be a human witness to an infraction of this rule, but God will note the transgression.

The elders are honored and not merely protected. In this precept there is no mention of the orphan or the widow. This is not just care, it is *kavod*, honor.

I want to hear a universal, heartfelt affirmative to the Beatles’ question, “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m sixty-four?” (in the spring. God willing)

Eleanor B. Pearlman

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## Notes to the Reader

Numbers in brackets refer to numbers in the Reference section at the end, for example, [2, p 1113] cites Scherman, page 1113.

EBGP in parentheses means the author of this work, for example, (EBGP translation) means that the preceding verse or paragraph is the author’s own translation.

## Introduction

### Increase of Aging Jewish Population

The Jewish population is aging. First, there are fewer children. With dual career families, the postponement of marriage, and the increase in fertility issues, there are fewer children to populate the Jewish community. People are living to older ages. It seems that the congregations are battling to maintain the children, the future of the Jewish people, but also the future of their fiscal solvency. In the battle to continue synagogue solvency, the communities often skew their programming to encourage young family participation.

However, the growing numbers of elderly Jews cannot be ignored by the synagogue community. Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman wrote a conference report which is entitled, *Gearing Up for the Age Wave: A Guide for Synagogues לפני שיבה תקום*. As its name, so is its meaning, כשמו כמשמעו. Her observations and suggestions are based on the trends reported for the aging Jewish population.

She noted in the guide cited above: [3, p. 2)

1. “The Jewish population is growing older at a rate far faster than the general population.”
2. “The 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) found that 19 per cent of American Jews were over 65 years of age, and 23 percent were over 60. Only 13 percent of Americans are over 65, according to the 2000 census.”
3. “The fastest growing Jewish group includes those over 75, already half of the elders.”
4. “Both the aging of the Baby Boomers and continuing increases in life expectancy point to a sharp increase in these numbers in the decades ahead.”

Thus, there is realization that there must be an approach to relating and responding to this growing segment of the Jewish population

**Personal Experiences in Synagogue: the Encouragement of Young Families and the Status of the Aging Outsiders.**

Years ago when I was a member of an exceptional conservative synagogue in Madison, Wisconsin, Congregation Beth Israel, the synagogue board had hired an expert to come to a community meeting to help us choose priorities and directions. The moderator for the day's discussion, with lunch provided, was a highly paid and well regarded facilitator and problem solver. After a day of careful consideration, we voted to spend our efforts, energies, and finances toward developing programming for the young.

I had felt that planning for the future of the community through the enrichment of the children's education was a necessity. The woman who sat beside me, a college professor, agreed with the decision. We both agreed that we could manage without the extra efforts for our respective benefits, but rather wanted resources focused on the young, on the future. It seemed as though the first priority is educating for the future of our people.

I wonder now if we had not disregarded the senior synagogue members, the founders, who tolerated the evolving egalitarianism and personal displacement. There was a sense that we were moving forward. However, I wonder now if there had been a disregard and possible disrespect toward the elders. Through our moves between states and between synagogues, the same choices present themselves. The major portion of the budget was allocated to the Hebrew school. Perhaps, the need to listen to the elders is codified in our tradition because it is not an automatic response.

Last year I was hired as a rabbinic intern in a local Reform synagogue with the goal of



creating programming for the elderly. The seniors reportedly are leaving the synagogue, as their children marry and leave the community, a trend in our area. The rabbi, twelve years ago, was hired with the directive of increasing the number of young families of the diminishing congregation. He was and continues to be most successful in attracting, keeping, and stimulating the young families with his fine school, natural enthusiasm, and warm and gentle spirit.

After twelve successful years and the addition of many young families, the rabbi has looked at the waning group of seniors. I was asked to develop a senior group to address their social needs for community, their intellectual strivings toward learning, and their visibility within the synagogue. For the purpose of eventual funding, I was requested to write a grant to the local Jewish Federation. This synagogue will invite and involve any interested seniors in the various synagogues to the varied programs.. The need to make the invisible elderly a visible group is paramount.

### **Jewish View of Respect toward Elders**

*Parashat Kedoshim*, a *parasha* which delineates the required behavior of the people in order to achieve the status of holiness, appears in the middle book of the *Torah*, in the *Book of Leviticus*. Also known as the *Holiness Code*, the middle or central verse of both the *Book of Leviticus* and the entire *Torah*, is a verse which addresses one's mandated attitude and behavior toward the elderly: (*Leviticus* 19:32)

“In the **face** of the **gray-hair** you are to rise,  
you are to honor the **face of the elderly, thus holding your God in awe,**  
I am YHWH!” [4, p. 605]

“In the **presence** of an **old person** shall you rise  
and you shall honor the **presence of a *zaken***  
and you shall revere your God-  
I am HASHEM.” [2, p. 665]

”מפני שיבה תקום

והדרת פני זקן

ויראת מאלהיך

אני ד'.”

The differences in translation are reflective of a discussed controversy: do we honor one simply for being old or do we honor only those who are learned in their old age? The question remains a controversy.

The *mitzvah* described in the above-quoted verse is known as הידור פני זקן, *hiddur pnai zaken*. Danny Siegel notes the struggle with finding a suitable translation for the word *hiddur*. He explained his processing of the word as follows: [5, pp. 50-51]

“Right now . . . my translation of *hiddur* and its root, *hadar*, would be something like ‘beauty, grandeur, awesomeness,’ and my translation of *hiddur pnai zaken* would, rather lyrically be ‘allowing the beauty, light, glory and majesty of our elders’ faces to emerge, reemerge, and shine forth (as we, in turn, benefit from their light)’.”

Thus, he translates the verse as follows:

“You shall rise before an elder and allow the beauty, glory, and majesty of their faces to emerge” [ibid, p. 51]

Danny Siegel states most vehemently that “reverence for older people is most assuredly a *mitzvah*, and whatever it takes to make it happen, Jews are required to do no less than Jews are required to fast on Yom Kippur.” [op. cit.]

In fact, the Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, under the directorship of Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman, is called Hiddur from the above quoted verse. In her literature Rabbi Friedman reports that

“Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College is dedicated to drawing upon Jewish tradition to enrich their lives as they age.” [6, back]

Our sources present many characters, conclusions, and conversations which state or imply real respect for the aged. Although respect for the aged does appear in many forms in our sources, the significance of filial responsibility can be considered as a paradigm for respect for the elderly. Appearing as the fifth commandment in the Decalogue,

“Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you.” (*Exodus* 20:12), [1, p. 156]

is central to the utmost importance of our respect toward the elderly.

The fifth commandment places filial responsibility in a unique position. First, “it is the first command directed to man as a social being” [7, p. 1]. Its inclusion in the Decalogue is testament to its significance. Moreover, it is the only commandment in the Decalogue and one of only three commandments which end with a reward of a lengthened life by its observance. Dr. Albert Micah Lewis rightly notes that the honoring of one’s parents is a determinant of one’s length of days, according to the fifth commandment [8, p. 9].

Thus, the central commandment of the *Torah* and the first social commandment of the Decalogue attest to the centrality of honoring one’s parents and, by extension, honoring one’s elders. Feeling awe toward God may motivate the observance of the central *Torah* verse, while length of life may be a factor in the observance of the fifth commandment. In truth, we all benefit from such observance of respect, awe, and expressed gratitude.

## Goals

Awareness is the first step in making changes. Caregivers, potential caregivers, and the elderly themselves must be made aware of the contributions of the elderly, the responsibility of the caregivers, and the need to develop a facility for communication among the various groups. Although the eventual goal is that of inclusion, programming, creating intergenerational learning opportunities, and improved communication skills, the writer will concentrate in one direction at this time.

The goal of this writer is to present sermons to the synagogue community in order to create awareness of the presence of the sometimes invisible elderly. All members of the synagogue community will hear of the presence and contributions of the elderly in the *Torah* (centering only on the last four *Books of the Torah*). All members of the synagogue will learn to use the *Torah* as a way to learn respectful communication skills with sensitivity to the other. The *Torah* holds within it excellent models for the understanding and the appreciation of the human condition.

In fact, the *Torah* can be perceived as a manual to teach proper behaviors. Some of the directives are on the surface and apparent. Other behaviors and attitudes can be deduced by use of language, attention to anomalies, perception of word order, in short, by a close and careful reading of the *Torah* text. One also can learn from the naming and placement (location) of the various *parshiot*.

The writer chose the following *parshiot* from the last four *Books of the Torah* because of their presentation of an apparent or deduced contribution of the elderly, a responsibility of the caregivers/ younger generation, or of the needed sense of connection and continuity between the two perceived groups.

**Theme: The responsibility of the adult/ the adult child.**

1. Helping the Elderly Deal with the Fear of Change

*Parashat Beshalach (Exodus 13:17- 17:16).*

2. Important Conversations with Aged Parents/ the Aged:

*Parashat Terumah (Exodus 25:1- 27:19).*

3. A Sanctuary for our Aged Parents

*Parashat Terumah (Exodus 25:1- 27:19).*

4. Making Peace with One's Parent, A Precondition to Real Help:

*Parashat Metzora (Leviticus 14:1- 15:33)*

5. Rising in Respect:

*Parashat Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:1- 20:27).*

6. Of Highest Importance: Honoring One's Parents:

*Parashat Kedoshim 2 (Leviticus 19:1- 20:27).*

7. Managing the Role Reversal:

*Parashat Shoftim (Deuteronomy 16:18- 21:9)*

**Theme: The Contributions of the Elderly.**

1. The Supportive Presence of Elders:

*Parashat Shemot (Exodus 1:1- 6:1)*

2. Elders as a Source of Support:

*Parashat Yitro (Exodus 18:1- 20:23).*

3. The Contributions of the Seniors:

*Parashat Beha'alotcha (Numbers 8:1- 12:16).*

4. The Elderly as Memory Keepers:

*Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 25:10- 30:1).*

5. The Ethical Will:

*Parashat Devarim (Deuteronomy: 1:1- 3:22)*

6. Elders as Teachers:

*Parashat Eikev (Deuteronomy 7:12- 11:25).*

7. The Elder's Duty to Affirm:

*Parashat Vezot Haberachah (Deuteronomy 33:1- 34:12).*

8. The Elderly, Stabilizers of Society:

*Five Books of Moses*

**Theme: The impact on the elderly and the future elderly.**

1. Making Personal Peace:

*Parashat Va'ethanan (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11).*

2. Easing the Farewell

*Parashat Vayeilech (Deuteronomy 31:1- 30).*

3. Letting Go

*Parashat Vayeilech 2 (Deuteronomy 31:1- 30).*

Through listening to these sermons, rewriting/personalizing these sermons, or creating their own, the interested rabbis and lay leaders can begin to create an awareness of the sometimes hidden elderly communal members. Following the awareness of the entire community, these leaders, through their sermons, can stimulate the development of appropriate

programming for the more senior members. The community will learn to seek ways to communicate with “the other,” as now perceived, and create true community. Awareness of a problematic situation can prove to be the beginning of change.

**SECTION 1. The Responsibility of the Adult/ the Adult Child.**



## The Role Reversal

( *Parashat Shoftim: Devarim: 16:18- 21:9*)

“When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high.

And don't be afraid of the dark

At the end of the storm is a golden sky

And the sweet, silver sound of a lark

Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart

And you'll never walk alone!

You'll never walk alone.“ (“Carousel,” Rodgers and Hammerstein)

One day I will look to my children for care, counsel, and comfort. I wonder what will prepare me and them for the beginning of this progressive role reversal. Will I feel ready to hear their advice? Will I feel less because they have better, bolder ideas? Will I feel the joy of their competence, mourning for my own losses, or, perhaps, a combination of both? I think that I have taught my children the importance of justice, and now will they understand how to be just with me?

Is moving a parent away from all that is familiar an expression of justice? Is taking a parent's car away a just act? Do children become the judges and officers of their aging parents? In some ways, this *parasha* can be very useful to the adult child who does become the judge and officer of his/her aging parent. *Parashat Shoftim* presents some guidelines to help the caregiver feel more comfortable about the making of decisions for the aging parent. And the good advice is evident in the first verse of the *parasha*:

The first verse of *Parashat Shoftim, Judges, Chapter 16: Verse 18* sets a tone for the

priorities of a true caregiver:

“**Shoftim v’shotrim** tieten l’cha b’chol **sh’arecha**  
Asher Adonai Elohecha noten l’cha- **leshevatecha**  
V’**shaftu** et ha-am **mishpat tzedek**”

“Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities-  
Which HaShem your God, gives you-for your tribes;  
And they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.” [2, p. 1025]

Reading this verse out loud, one is struck by the gentleness and softness of the verse. The “sh” sounds of the verse permeate throughout, giving the verse a feeling of calm, quiet, and security- the sound that would encourage a disturbed child to sleep in peace. The sound which would bring comfort to a frightened parent who is anticipating change and fearing the narrowing of his/her life.

There are seven sounds (“sh”) that are utterances of quiet peace. Without even translating or understanding the words, the reader is lulled by the sweet surrender, as this *parasha* begins. The number seven has many other positive associations in the *Tanakh*: rest on the seventh day, rest on the seventh year, the Jubilee Year after the  $7 \times 7 =$  the 49<sup>th</sup> year.

Although people can tremble when they think of judges and officers, Moshe seemingly made an effort to encourage the people to feel secure, calm, and supported in this new *modus operandi*, the appointment of judges. So, the current reader and the ancient listener are brought into Moshe’s speech with a positive and hopeful attitude.

So now it is the task of the adult child to present the anticipated changes to his/her parent

in softness, with gentleness. Moshe understood and we understand that soft tones bring a sense of rest, comfort, and security. In dealing with an aging parent, an adult child would want to create a feeling of Sabbath rest and peace inside their possible agitated and frightened parent.

The first word of the verse, judges, *shoftim*, precedes the word for officers, *shotrim*. In other words, first there should be righteous judges and then officers who would enforce their righteous judgments. For example, in facing a decision of moving a parent, or taking away a car, the adult child has to be gentle, soothing, supportive, and honest. Above all the adult child must take the role of a just judge rather than of an enforcer. The judges set a tone of trusting security before any statement of enforcement is suggested. An adult child must first be comfortable with the justice of the change before becoming the officer or enforcer of this change.

Becoming comfortable with the decision may come about by the adult child seeking consultation . Both in the verse and in life, it is sometimes important to seek out higher, more knowledgeable sources. In the first verse of this *parasha* the courts move from cities to tribes to the people, i.e., from city, to county, to national levels. So, too, in making such a decision, it may be important to consult with those of broader or deeper knowledge and expertise. Thus, the model of the court system can stimulate a tiered, consultative approach to resolving questions, concerns, and possibilities.

In Chapter 16, Verse 20, we read “Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof!” One should surely pursue justice . . .” One does have to chase after justice. I wonder if that is because of the elusiveness of justice. “Rabbi Bunam of P’shis’cha homiletically explained, “One should pursue righteousness only through righteousness” [2, p.1025, Footnote v.20]. Thus, only an honest means can achieve a righteous end. The adult child seeks the most just course of action. Is moving closer to the adult child a safer situation? Is securing a driver a possibility to replace

driving one's own car?

An important part of achieving a just verdict is the focusing on the gathering of information. In a very serious case described in chapter 17, verses 2-5, a method is outlined to assure adequate inquiry. Perhaps, this methodology could be applied by the child as investigator/judge to ascertain that the conclusion, regarding the changes in the parental life, is suitable, just, and the best of the available choices. (*Deuteronomy 17:4*)

“And it will **be told to you**  
and **you will hear**  
then you will **investigate well**  
and the matter is **true and correct . . .**” (EBGP translation)

The clarity of communication between the adult child/caregiver and the parent/elder is of utmost importance. Is the caregiver sure that what s/he said is what the senior heard/processed? In the instances of communication between the caregiver and the senior was the message sent the same as the message received. If the communication is clear between the two parties, then and only then will the caregiver carefully investigate the agreed upon options. Then and only then will the caregiver seek verification that the choices are reasonable in what is available, possible, and manageable. The explored situation and possible solutions are deemed true and “correct.”

Thus, our *parasha* sets forth a model for reversing the roles between adult child and parent.

1. The situation must be approached from a gentle and supportive stance. The “sh” of calmness and reassurance must be transmitted to the senior.
2. The caregiver must have done his/her homework in gathering the best information possible on all levels. One can consult with friends on the “local level,” engage physicians, on the “tribal level, and investigate the various facilities or living arrangements on the “national “ level.
3. The caregiver must have his/her eye on the direction of justice to the senior. The senior must be safe, must be as well cared for as possible, and must be close enough for visits and inclusion in family activities, whenever possible.
4. The caregiver must feel that there was a clear and truthful communication between him/her and the senior in transition. The message transmitted must be the one received and acknowledged on both sides.

And so we move into the role of caregiver, into the role of senior, into the role of our child’s child. With open and clear communication, with the focus on justice, with openness to professional consultations, and with an attitude of quiet, gentle support, these transitions can be more manageable, better tolerated, and more hopeful.

**Helping with the Fear of Change**  
*Parashat Beshalach (Shemot 13:17- 17:16)*

I remember a song from “The King and I” [Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein]:

“Whenever I am afraid  
I hold my head erect  
And whistle a happy tune  
So no one will suspect  
I’m afraid.”

So, songs and singing can serve to bolster one’s spirit. Change is fraught with challenge. Whether a change is for good or for bad, the body reacts to the accompanying stress. Music is a universal soother of the soul. And so the Israelites anticipated, faced, and crossed the Sea of Reeds and later sang a song, perhaps, of triumph, perhaps, of relief. This Shabbat is referred to as *Shabbat Shira*, the Sabbath of Song, as this *parasha* gives us a song which we recite daily in prayer

The constituency of this community of the exodus was delineated in the prior *parasha*, *Parashat Bo*. In effect, Moshe asked Pharaoh for this group to go and serve God (10:9):

“With our youngsters and **with our elders** shall we go

With our sons and with our daughters

With our flock and with our cattle shall we go

because it is a festival of HASHEM for us.” [2, p. 343]

*Uvizknanu*, and with our elders! The elders would have to leave their Egyptian homes and accommodate to a whole new life. Our elders continue to move to unfamiliar communities: distant communities of their children, or unknown assisted living communities, both near and far. The presence of the elders is important to community now, as it was then. The transitions to new

communities for elders is difficult now, as it was then.

The *parasha* begins with HASHEM's determining the direction of the Israelites' travels, after Pharaoh sent them out of Egypt. At the beginning of this journey, HASHEM was very careful with the Israelites. It was better to have the Israelites feel protected, as they began this journey into freedom.

When the elderly need to change communities, the responsible adults have to be very careful and solicitous. These elders are moving from communities where their personal freedoms may have been curtailed by their infirmities, finances, or their diminishing friends. The adult children have explored the various possibilities with their elders. The elders should feel the protection of their adult children as they move into a new life.

And sometimes when there is a bump on the road to change, there is a need to blame others or a wish to return to an earlier time. Such tirades often are angry and repetitious.. When Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites were terrified. They cried to HASHEM and accosted Moshe with five repetitions of the word for Egypt, מצרים, in only two verses:

Thus, in chapter 14, verses 11 and 12, they said to Moshe.

Are there no graves in **Egypt** ? ((14:11)

What is that you have done to us, taking us out of **Egypt**?

Is this not the very word we spoke to you in **Egypt**? (14:12)

Let us alone, that we may serve **Egypt**?

Serving **Egypt** is better than our dying in the wilderness. [EBP]

What we knew was better than what is unknown. The unknown comes upon one as an army of enemies at times. The beloved elder sometimes begs for a retreat to the known, sometimes

silently, sometimes not. The elders may ask for a return to the narrowness that had become their lives, with the word *mitzrayim* having been explained as meaning “from the narrows.”

Moshe, at times a man of quick anger, as when he slew the Egyptian taskmaster, responded to the complaining Israelites with patience, and with the reassurance of a loving parent. In Chapter 14 verse 13 Moshe told the Children of Israel,

Don't be afraid                                  אל תראו

Make yourself stand tall                      התיצבו

And see,    וראו

i.e., face what is. [EBP]

When our elders are faced with the challenges of life, we encourage them. We listen to the feelings behind their complaints and tirades. Don't be afraid, stand tall, face what needs to be faced. We will accompany you on this journey to another place, where you will be safe, secure, and loved. They cannot whistle a happy tune, but, hopefully, we can help them stand erect and assuage some of their fears.

HASHEM could have split the sea with the wind and without Moshe, but a leader must be able to feel and look personally effective. As individuals we must take initiative and move ourselves and encourage our elders to move on the path to a secure, safe, and new life. We work with HASHEM to make changes in the world. Thus Moshe stretched forth his hand over the sea and HASHEM led the sea with a strong east wind. . . (14:21), [EBP]

ויט משה את ידו על הים



ויולך ד' את הים ברוח קדים עזה . . ."

Perhaps, we ought to be careful and not do for our elders what they can do for themselves.

Moshe was a partner with HASHEM in the splitting of the sea. HASHEM was a silent partner.

There were no words, only the wind blew.

When the children of Israel crossed the parted Sea of Reeds and saw their pursuers vanquished, they trusted in HASHEM and in Moshe, the parental figure.

ויאמינו בד' ובמשה עבדו (14:31)

“And they (the children of Israel) believed in HASHEM and in Moshe His servant.”

(EBGP translation)

Having developed their trust at that moment, the Israelites burst forth in song, from which comes the name *Shabbat Shira* the Sabbath of song.

When one looks at the *Shirat Hayam*, “The Song of the Sea,” written in three columns in a brick- like fashion, one can imagine the children of Israel crossing between two walls in safety. One can look at the wall as a kind of protection that is created when we help our elders pass into a new place, a new life. We need to respond to the emergence of hopeful transitions; we need to create the experience of safety, solace, and community.

We must learn to acknowledge moments of hopeful transitions. We need to make formal acknowledgment of hopeful change in the moment. So, in *Parashat Beshalach*, we announce the birth of עם ישראל, the Nation of Israel, in a song that is forever remembered. Certainly, there is a ceremony we can use to acknowledge with hope the transition of our elders to safety and to proximity. As adult children, we can work on either creating or utilizing such a ceremony.

Soon after the crossing the Israelites complained about what was not, what they missed, what they gave up even in their narrowed lives. We, too, will hear such reactions from our elders. So, we must listen, respond, and remember our song from the “The King and I:” **we must suspect that they, our elders, are afraid.**

Perhaps, a song, a sweet ceremony will acknowledge their fear and travail and help them cross to the other side with feelings of hope and protection.

HASHEM helped the Children of Israel cross to nationhood in safety. May we help our elders enter into a new phase of their adulthood in safety and in peace. May HASHEM help בני ישראל, the Children of Israel, and כל יושבי תבל, all who dwell on this earth, as we all take on responsibilities and obligations in partnership with HASHEM. And may we understand the importance of acknowledging transitions with gratitude to HASHEM.

**Important Conversations with Aged Parents:  
The Mishkan: A Structure for Intimacy**  
*Parashat Terumah (Exodus 25:1-26:19)*

We want to discuss issues with our aging parents. However, we often avoid many important conversations until it is too late. We want to know their stories, their wishes. We want to know how to help. We want to find a way to communicate clearly with our aged parents, so that we can bring both peace and comfort to our parents and to ourselves.

As part of my work as a clinical social worker, I ran many workshops on communication skills. The course materials stressed the importance of setting the time and the place for having important conversations. Sometimes a parent refuses or deflects a conversation because the time or the place is uncomfortable.

Our *parasha, Terumah*, “a gift,” with its focus on arranging for the building of the Tabernacle, in effect, describes for us some components that can facilitate good and useful conversations. Indeed, this *parasha, Parashat Terumah*, describes the creation of a holy space in which true communication can occur.

First, from this Torah reading, *Terumah*, we can learn how to ask for what we want. *Terumah* begins with God’s making a request of Moses:

Ch 25: 2: Tell the Israelite people to bring me gifts . . . from every person whose heart so moves him. [1, p. 166]

In verses 3-7, God then listed the requested items and continued to describe His goal, the building of the Tabernacle.

Verse 8: And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” [ibid]

In making a request, God modeled excellent communication skills. First, God was clear in indicating that He was speaking for Himself. God asked for Himself in the “bring ME!” of the verse. God made the request for a Tabernacle on His own behalf.

Rule #1: Speak for yourself. Say what **you** want!

Thus, the adult child may inquire, "I want to know where you would be more comfortable living at this time."

The parent may answer, "I would prefer to stay in this area."

Secondly, God wanted the donated items to be given freely and willingly. God wanted: "gifts . . . from every person whose heart so moves him." The goal is to give all gifts of time and/or space with a full heart.

God only wanted those to give whose heart was open and generous. Our parents, also, would want to receive gifts provided from the heart.

Rule #2: When you respond positively to a parent's request, do so with a full heart.

Thirdly, the word for gift, *terumah*, contains the root for "lifting up." *Terumah*, thus, implies a lifting up, a glorious presentation. In effect, one raises, *marim*, the *terumah*. Cold compliance to a request means nothing. An emotional connection is part of the gift.

Rule #3: The body language of the giver should reflect the willing inner spirit.

A gentle touch, a kind smile, a soft tone would enrich the presentation of the gift.

We now shall look at the Tabernacle itself. The structure of the Tabernacle shows a movement toward intimacy. The first chamber contains the sacrificial altar, the second chamber contains a table, a menorah, and incense, and the innermost chamber contains the Ark of the Covenant. The movement through the rooms is a movement toward holiness.

We move first into the outer room containing the sacrificial altar. The achievement of intimacy begins with the making of some personal sacrifices. The word for sacrifice, *korban*, allows one to become closer to the other. The root of the word for offering is the word meaning "close," *karov*. Sometimes one has to sacrifice in order to grow closer to the other.

For example, an adult child may make the choice of putting a particular parental wish in first place.

The next chamber, called the Holy, has certain gold furnishings: a menorah, a table with two loaves of bread, and an altar of incense. Before truly connecting with the other, one must take several steps. These furnishings provide the necessary atmosphere.

Sitting down at a table, we are on the same level as is our parent. The table has two loaves of bread. In effect, we can imagine a peaceful meal in which quiet discussion can occur. The light of the menorah lets us see things clearly, shed light on any issues, be visible and honest with our parent. One tries to enlighten the other. There are no dark secrets. There are two show breads placed on the table in this room. Both parent and adult child have what to share. The bread can symbolize one's being nurturing to the other. The burning of incense can create a purity or sweetness in the atmosphere. In fact, these spices were necessary to remove any bad odors, caused by any difficult sacrifices. And we all make sacrifices for the other. But the smell, the discomfort of these sacrifices can be sweetened.

In our movement through the first two chambers, one notes a movement from copper to silver to golden ornamentation. Our surroundings help us understand that sacredness increases as we move closer to the Holy of Holies. The holiness, the *kedusha*, of our experience increases as we move closer to the innermost chamber.

And then we are prepared for the golden wonder of the Holy of Holies: the gold Ark that was created to contain the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the words of God. Only the High Priest can enter this chamber one day a year on Yom Kippur. True intimacy/ deep mutual understanding can be only at precious, treasured moments.

So, we can learn from this seemingly arduous description of the building of the Tabernacle some basic lessons in the creation of human intimacy.

God showed us the importance of asking for what one wants.

Intimacy is learned through sacrifice, through mutual nurturing, through communication, with the light of honesty.

We have to pass into a state of intimacy through sitting down, talking, sharing, and seeing one another.

Giving with one's heart creates a truly elevated gift.

Relationships can pass from copper to silver to gold. And we must treasure those few moments when we are in the Holy of Holies.

May you feel the movement in your lives from copper to gold with your parents and adult children. And may you have many moments of *kedusha*, of holiness, in your lives. May your parent-child relationship be one in which honest, meaningful, and relevant communication can occur. May you have the strength and trust to open and resolve the difficult conversations.

Shabbat shalom.

**A Sanctuary for Our Aged Parents**  
*Parashat Terumah 2 (Shemot 25:1- 27:19)*

We have a national sport called baseball. The goal of this game is to return home, after running around a bit. Whatever it takes, the players are determined to reach home. One can skin knees, stain white pants, sneak, steal ( a base). The goal of the player is to run home and be applauded. S/he is fast, is skillful, and wants to be where things began, where his/her journey began. At times it may feel as though there is a tremendous need to get away, to take challenges, to run bases, to earn points. However, in the end, the player wants to return home. If one ignores the team situation and focuses on the vision, the catcher seems crouched in the position of a loving parent, waiting to receive and hug his/her returning child.

As a baseball player, one seeks home base. As a Jew, one can dream of a return to the Homeland. As the God of Israel, God requested the Israelites to create God's home base, God's Tabernacle: (*Parashat Terumah, Shemot 25:8*)

“And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” [1, p. 166]

“*Veasu li mikdash veshachanti betochom.*”

The gift, the *terumah*, to God is to make a dwelling place, a home base for God. *Parashat Terumah, the gift*, describes in detail the plans for building such a Tabernacle, l'havdil, a home base.

The relationship of God to Israel historically is compared to that of a child to a parent. The Sages used several Biblical verses to validate the right of making such a comparison. So, when we look at our relationship to God, we are, in effect, also looking at our relationship to our parents. In this way, the fifth of the ten Commandments is a transitional commandment which bridges the gap between the first four and the last five Commandments. The first four are

between a person and God, while that last five are between people. The fifth Commandment contains both relationships, one's relationship to one's elders/parents, and the derived relationship to God. It follows that just as we are directed to build a Sanctuary, a dwelling place for God, so can we derive an instruction for making a dwelling place for our aged parents. So, how can we make this sanctuary, this dwelling place, for our aging parents?

As we read the *Parashah*, we see the care that is taken in how one would make this home. First, in the initial verse of request, the verb used means "and they will make for me (*veasu*)" or "and they will do (for me)." One would think that the word would be *ubanu*, "and they will build." It seems, however, that making and doing come more from inside of a person. Building seems to use one's hands, while making or doing seems to involve one's inner self, one's soul, one's internal creative energy. Whatever home or sanctuary we make for our parents should come from the heart of the adult child.

We find another use of the word *ose* from another source to illustrate the use of the word "to made/do." Another very familiar use of the word *ose*, do/make, is sung every Friday night for Kiddush: (*Genesis 2:2-3*)

*"vayichal elokim bayom hashve-e mikol melachto ashair asa . . .*

*kee vo shavat mikol melachto ashair barah elokim la-asot."*

"And God finished all of God's work that God **did** on the seventh day . . .

because in it God rested from all God's work that God created **to do.**" (EBGP translation)

God created the world for us with the word "*la-asot.*" *L'havdil*, we are making a little place for God to dwell among us.

So one can combine the above two ideas: the idea of comparing our relationship with



God to that of ourselves with our parents, and of comparing the use of the word *la-asot*, to make or do, in God's act of creation to our act of making. We can deduce from the two comparisons, that an adult children must consider how to make a sanctuary for their parents, so that their parents can dwell among them. Finally, a picture can emerge from a related midrash.

My last semester I had the privilege of auditing a course in *Midrash*, taught by Rabbi Eric Hoffman. A midrash in *Shemot Raba, Parashah 32* was so powerful to me that it would have been worth the semester, if this is all that I learned in that class. This midrash served as a key for me to understand what our parents can expect from us and what we, as adult children, can give.

I will translate a portion from this most moving midrash:

“A parable of a king who had an only daughter. One of the kings came and took her (raised her up). He asked if he could go to his land for his sake and take her (to lift her up, *laseit*, means to lift up and also means *to marry*). The king said to the other king, ‘The daughter that I give you is my only child, I am not able to separate myself from her. To say to you that you may not take her, I am not able, since she is your wife. **But do this favor for me, every place that you go, make a small room for me, so that I may dwell near you, since I am unable to leave my daughter.**’

Thus, says the Holy One blessed be He to Israel, ‘ I gave you the Torah, I am unable to separate myself from it. To say to you, You cannot take her, I cannot do. But in every place that you go, make me a house so that I may live in it, as it is written, “*ve-asu le mikdash.*”’

The writer translated the bold letters above from the following Hebrew text:

"אלא זו טובה עשה לי,

שכל מקום שאתה הולך קיטון אחד עשה לי

שאדור אצלכם

שאיני יכול להניח את ביתי."

Let us review then what the components are in making a sanctuary for our aging parents:

1. We are to make a מקדש, a sanctuary for our aging parents. The word מקדש with its root קדש involves a sense of separateness or distinctiveness. Thus, the sanctuary for our parents ought to make/create a sense of autonomy, individuality, and independence for our aged parents.
2. Whatever accommodations we make for our parents should be done from our hearts. We are doing something from our beings in making this place for them.
3. The location rather than the size is of major import. The king in the parable just wanted a קיטון, a word from the root קטן, meaning small. קיטון could be translated as a "small room." However, this possible place must be near the adult children, אצלכם, *near you*. Perhaps, one can consider making addition to one's house, a private room in one's house, or choose a facility within a manageable commute.
4. Of necessity, the nearness may only be emotional: The structure may be built in your heart, so that your aging parent can be with you always.

Thus, the aging parent can join the adult child in a shared home base. In true role reversal, the adult child can open his/her arms to greet the returning parent. The accommodations for one's parent can be as small as the chamber of one's heart. We shall offer our aging parents a location where we can see them, visit them, encourage them, and learn from them. We shall hold the teachings and the memories of our aging parents in our hearts forever.

**Making Peace with One's Parent, A Precondition to Real Help**  
*Parashat Metzora (Leviticus: 14:1- 15:33)*

I entered the waiting area of my ophthalmologist's office and heard the radio announcements about making hospice arrangements, followed by an infomercial about the purchasing of memorials. My insides felt the tension. Will I need to schedule surgery? Will I recover all right? Do I have to think about hospice care and choosing a memorial at this time?

After my examination, I heard good news. I walked into the waiting area and heard "From a Distance" singing out from the radio. Ah, a song of hope, a song of healing:

"From a distance you look like my friend,  
Even though we are at war.  
From a distance I just cannot comprehend  
what all this fighting is for." (Lyrics of Bette Midler)

In fact the process of healing oneself and of reconciliation with one's parents seems to be a way to interpret *Parashat Metzora*. There can be healing, as we contemplate helping parents whom we feel scarred or hurt us in some way. The adult child must be able to remove the poison from within, and cut out the contamination from his damaged dwelling place. The individual can help his/her parents in a healthy manner, once the anger/disease is removed from himself and from the walls of his confinement. Hopefully, with work the adult child can reenter the family camp and be able to assist the aged parents without undue conflict or personal pain.

The commentators understood that *tsaraat* was not leprosy, but rather the disease of evil talk, *lashon hara*. It is a fact that slanderous, inappropriate talk can damage very significant interpersonal relationships, especially between an adult child and his/her aged parent.

Sometimes the role of “intimate enemy” can replace that of dutiful adult child or respectful caregiver. An adult child or caregiver’s caring for one’s aged parents or elders may be extremely difficult if the caretaker bears verbal wounds from childhood and beyond. The *parshiot* of *Tazria* and *Metzora* combine in presenting rituals and processes to remove the disease and contamination in both the adult child as an individual and in relationship with his/her aged parents. We are extending this concept to other caregivers who are responsible for the well-being of other aged family members. We shall focus only on *parashat Metzora*.

We shall look at the illnesses of body and home as symbols for a troubled family of origin, and/or a troubled adult child. Building on the importance of proper talk and the subsequent improvement of human relationships, we shall follow the curative process of these illnesses which can free the adult child to give willingly to the elderly adults. The cures on another level may permit the adult child to take up the burden of filial responsibility with a positive attitude. Looking at the Torahitic cure may prove helpful in healing the person and the household and, thus, in permitting the development of a healthier relationship.

The *parasha* begins with the purification process of a *metzora*, a diseased individual and moves to the purification process of a contaminated or diseased house. One first must make peace with him/herself and then one can make peace with one’s home, with one’s upbringing, with one’s parents. One ought to heal oneself in order to deal more effectively with the care of one’s aged parents.

The process of purification of the individual involved a turning outward to a highly respected and trusted authority, who was able to judge the malady from the outside, from a distance. In the case of the *metzora*, the infected person, “. . .on the day of his purification: he shall be brought to a Kohen” (*Leviticus* 14:3), an external authority figure [2, p. 621].

Only a disinterested party can determine whether the person is diseased or free from disease. One has to be at a distance to comprehend the presence of disease or contamination. The infected person is too close to judge.

Then, (*Leviticus* 14:5)

“ . . . the one bird shall be slaughtered into an earthenware vessel over spring (living) water (waters).” (ibid), (translations in parentheses: EBG translation)

Perhaps, the slaughtered bird was returned to the earth (“into an earthenware vessel”) and then reborn and purified by the “living waters.” Perhaps we have witnessed the symbolic burial of the diseased part of the recovering individual.

After dipping the remaining live bird with other items into the blood of the blood/water mixture of the slaughtered bird, (*Leviticus* 14:7)

“Then he (the Kohen) shall sprinkle seven times the person being purified from the *tzaraas*; he shall purify him, and he shall set the bird free upon the open field.” [ibid]

The Kohen sprinkled the blood on the formerly diseased man’s garment and then set free the living bird, who had been dipped into the blood. Thus, the man who had been imprisoned by his disease now can experience freedom through the flight of the bird, who carries away the clinging blood, pain, and hurt. We heal through the externalization and letting go of our contamination. And the Kohen, the therapist, or the advisor can stand outside to help us identify and cast away the pain.

The *parasha* then moves to the discovery of and reaction to a perceived impurity in one’s house with one’s family of origin. The Kohen first acted as a consultant to identify the problem to the unsure homeowner. (*Leviticus*: 14:35)

“the one to whom the house belongs shall come and declare to the Kohen, saying:

**Something like** an affliction has appeared to me in the house.” [2, p. 625, 627]

Again, there is an appeal to an external authority, at a distance from one’s own person, to assist in the identification of the problem.

The method of extricating both oneself and one’s home from contamination or disease involves an externalization of the demon, the anger, the sickness by means of a very exact ritual. With the help of an outside authority, one’s deep feelings toward oneself and one’s home of origin can be examined externally- at a distance from our core of suffering. If one can experience, analyze, and let go of the contaminated feelings and memories, one may be able to be involved willingly and positively in the care of one’s aged parents or elders.

The person can be renewed by the purification of himself and of his house. The person must divest himself of the removable parts that can hold on to the pollution. Clothes and hair retain dust, dirt, and other impurities. Some pieces can be cleansed and restored, while others have to be reborn or regenerated. The externals (hair and clothing) of man can be regrown or immersed; the contaminated blocks and mortar of the house are replaced..

We sometimes have to move a distance away to return with understanding and compassion to our aged parents or elders. Sometimes, we have to pull back and stand at a distance, so we can see the whole picture without feeling overwhelmed by the flaws, the pain, the contaminated memories. If we can analyze, bury, and replace the contaminated bricks from the walls, we can move back to a “healthy place” with our aged parents and elders. Every adult child and caregiver has to start with him/herself to extricate his/her own disease and contamination in order to build a healthy home.

We want to be able to help our elders with good will and a full heart. We remove the contamination from ourselves first, so that we can then remove any contamination from the adult

child/aged parent or elder relationship.

It always is helpful to look from a distance to see that we all are in harmony.

“From a distance there is harmony

and it echoes through the land.

And it’s the hope of hopes, it’s the love of loves,

it’s the heart of every man.” (Lyrics of Bette Midler)



**Rising in Respect**  
*Parashat Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:1-20:27)*

Every morning I start my day by reading Dear Abby. Today I was shocked to read “Delinquent kids scare grandma,” the title of the featured article. [9] Apparently, a thirteen year old grandson joined with six others to “take . . .down” their 73 year old, five foot two grandmother. The grandmother “took the beating because she was afraid if she fought back she’d be turned in for child abuse.” The article continues: “. . . even though their parents eventually pulled them off her, they did nothing to punish the children for their aggressive behavior.” The question of the concerned friend of the grandmother was, “What can elderly people do to protect themselves?”

I was shocked at the question of the person who submitted this issue to Dear Abby: “What can elderly people do to protect themselves?” The elderly victim seems to be portrayed as the party at fault. We shall look to our *parasha* to develop a stance toward the above reported problem.

According to Nehama Leibowitz, “. . . the first verse of our sidra outlines the purpose of man’s life. What follows are the detailed ways and means of achieving that purpose.” [10] After presenting the idea that every one of us should be holy (You shall be holy, for holy am I, HASHEM your God.” (*Leviticus*19:2), [2, p. 657], our *parasha*, *Parashat Kedoshim*, presents the following as its first law: (*Leviticus* 19:3)

“Every man (person): Your mother and father shall you revere and My Sabbaths shall you observe- I am HASHEM, your God.” [ibid]

Rambam explained that “one should act toward his parents as he would toward a sovereign with the power to punish those who treat him disrespectfully.” [2, Footnote v. 3,

p. 157] One learns how to revere God through revering one's parents. Since parents are put before the Sabbath in this verse, one may deduce that we are not worthy to celebrate the Sabbath, God's gift to us, unless first we show reverence to our parents.

Since aging parents can be considered as representative of the aged, one can also look at another prominent verse for further clarification: (*Leviticus* 19:32):

“In the face of gray-hair, you are to rise,  
you are to honor the face of the elderly, thus holding your God in awe,  
I am YHWH.” [4, p. 605]

This verse appears in the middle book of the *Torah*, the *Book of Leviticus*, as the middle verse in the Holiness Code, another name for *Parashat Kedoshim*. This verse, verse 32, is followed by the remaining thirty-two verses in the Holiness Code. So, we could say that a central component in our holiness, the core of our morality, is our expected treatment of the elderly.

Cited in aggadic sources in both Midrash and Talmud, gray hair seems worthy of both note and veneration.

First, we read in *Midrash Rabbah-Genesis* LXV:9: **And it came to pass when Isaac was old.** R. Judah b. Simon said: Abraham requested (the appearance of ) old age pleading before Him, Sovereign of the Universe! When a man and his son enter a town, none know whom to honor! But if Thou wilt crown him (the father ) with (the appearance of ) old age, one will know whom to honour.' . . . when Abraham arose (the appearance of old age was granted to him: *And Abraham was old, well stricken with age-ba bayamim* (*Genesis* XXIV, 1).” This midrash reflects the question of our Sages regarding the first mention of the aging process in the Torah.

The translation of “ba bayamim” on *The Judaic Classical Library CD* “well stricken with age” is a negative perspective of the aging process. The Stone Humash translated this phrase as

“well on in years,” and Everett Fox utilized “advanced in days,” as a much more descriptive translation without the negative component. We stand before a person who is **advanced in days** or **well on in years**. Certainly the words **well** and **advanced** promote a much more positive image than does **stricken**. The midrash above explained the need to both recognize and respect those who exhibit the signs of aging.

Our second example of the noteworthiness and veneration of gray hair appears in the *Passover Haggadah*:

“Amar Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, harai ahnee k’ven shivim shana . . . ”

“Rabbi Elazar, son of Azariah said: I am **like** a man of seventy . . . ”

The Sages use the “**like** seventy” to explain he was only like an older person. In reality, he was appointed as a young man of eighteen to be the head of the Sanhedrin, the Rabbinical Council.

“(His wife) said to him: you have no white hair. He was eighteen years old that day, and a miracle was wrought for him and eighteen rows of hair (on his beard) turned white.”

[11, 28a]

He received white hair, a symbol of age and a justification for his veneration. His veneration as a true scholar and authority depended on his appearance as an older man:

“In the face of gray-hair, you are to rise . . . ” [4, p. 605]

Thus, in both the midrashic and talmudic *aggadot* we note that with age comes honor and recognition.

As a community how can we facilitate that our elderly feel more the reality of their marching through time and less the negativity of their feeling stricken with age. In order to take the more positive path, it is important to acknowledge what makes any person feel valued.

In *Ethics of the Fathers*, we find an important dictum:

“Simon the Just was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say, Upon three things the world is based: upon the Torah, upon Divine service, and upon the practice of charity” [12, p.14].

The writer would translate these aspects is keeping with the perspective of Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman, as noted below:

The world stands on three things: Torah study, worship, and deeds of loving kindness.

Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman, director of Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism suggested the incorporation of these three aspects in the lives of the elderly:

- “Torah: Lifelong Learning” [3, p. 7]
- “*Avodah*: Spiritual and Religious Engagement” [3, p. 8]
- “*Gemilut Hasadim*: Caring Connection” [3, p. 9]

When working in the nursing home environment, she reported the significance to the elderly residents of providing learning opportunities, of noting and modeling deeds of loving kindness, and of providing opportunities for celebrating holidays, as well as for acknowledging their own milestones and transitions [13].

“You are to honor ( *v’hadarta*) the face of the elderly, thus holding your God in awe.”

(*Leviticus* 19: 32b), [4, p. 605]

The word *hiddur* has a wonderful connotation of beautifying or embellishing. The beauty of the honor should bring beauty and light to the face of the recipient. Danny Siegel translated the above verse as follows:

“You shall rise before an elder and allow the beauty, glory, and majesty of their faces to emerge.” [5, p. 51]

The honoring of the face of the elderly is followed by an expression, “holding your God

in awe.” Rashi’s explanation of this phrase is as follows: רש"י ויקרא פרק יט פסוק לב

(לב)

והדרת פני זקן - איזהו הדור, לא ישב במקומו ולא ידבר במקומו ולא יסתור את דבריו. יכול יעצים עיניו כמי שלא ראהו, לכך נאמר ויראת מאלהיך, שהרי דבר זה מסור ללבו של עושהו, שאין מכיר בו אלא הוא, וכל דבר המסור ללב נאמר בו ויראת מאלהיך.

It is possible that one would close his eyes as though he did not see him (the elder). Therefore, it is written, “holding your God in awe.” For in fact, this matter is transferred to the heart of the perpetrator and no one recognizes this in him, other than he (the perpetrator), but (for) every matter that is transferred to the heart (and unknown to the observer) it is written “holding your God in awe.” (EBGP translation)

Thus, according to Rashi, the expression, “holding your God in awe” is used when no person on the outside can bear witness to your thoughts. There are some commandments whose transgression does not result in a particular punishment. There usually is no witness to transgressions of dishonoring or disrespecting one’s elderly parents. Punishment by the court requires the testimony of two witnesses. However, the transgressor should understand that he, the transgressor, must answer to God.

Thus, we move from the question posed by the article: “What can elderly people do to protect themselves?” The answer rests not with the elderly but rather rests in the surrounding community. We, as human beings, are required not only to protect the elderly, but, also are required to beautify and enrich their lives. The grandmother’s friend did not witness the crime, so there could be no legal repercussions. The grandchildren must know that God sees their disrespect.

“And these words that I command you today shall be upon your heart..

You shall teach them diligently to your children . . .” (Deuteronomy 6: 6,7)

Of Highest Importance: Honoring One's Parents  
*Parashat Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:1- 20:27)*

I just finished skimming an article in the *Bostonia*, the Boston University alumni bulletin. I was awed by the excessive solicitation of parents who have provided extra tutoring, coddling, financing, and electronics to obtain the best, as they see it, for their offspring. I wondered if there was a sense of appreciation and a desire for some reciprocation on the part of the well-cared-for offspring. I just talked to a friend who negotiated a move for her physician son to California from Boston while he vacationed, and joked, "He knows he owes me big time. He will care for me in my old age." May it be so.

The reciprocal caring seems dubious in this society. It seems as though some children have been given to without learning to give back, assist, or care for their own parents. Caring for parents may feel optional and intrusive to some adult children.

However, the honoring and respecting of aged parents by their children is the law in Judaism. This law is so important that it is written clearly three times in slightly different versions in three *parshiot*: *Parashat Yitro*, *Parashat Va-ethanan*, and *Parashat Kedoshim*. The version in our *parasha*, *Parashat Kedoshim*, is in a different form, but is reminiscent of the more familiar formulation of the Ten Commandments. Every version adds another dimension to the understanding of these commandments.

Basically, laws are written and repeated in order to reinforce the value of certain moral underpinnings of society. However, when a law is written, it is often because of the occurrence of its obverse. At times a law is needed to inform someone of the right way, because the infraction is a reality. Perhaps, if one naturally honored parents, there would be no need to

make their care a legal document. It is also possible that proper treatment of parents needs reinforcement, as evidenced by these repetitions. Thus, the repetition of laws stands as a reminder for the creation and maintenance of a just society.

The law regarding the treatment of parents is the first one in the Holiness Code, another name given to this *parasha*. The *parasha* begins: (*Leviticus, Kedoshim* 19:1,2)

“HASHEM spoke to Moshe, saying; Speak **to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel** and say to them: You shall be holy, for holy am I, HASHEM, your God.”

[2, p.657]

In other words, “If holiness is some imitation of God, be holy because I am holy.” “(R. David Greenstein, Jan.26, ‘04) In order for Israel to imitate God in God’s holiness, the people must observe the following statutes, the first of which is: (*Leviticus* 19:3)

“Every man: your mother and father shall you revere . . .”

Verse 1 above, begins in a way that emphasizes that the laws to follow need to be observed by everyone: **the entire assembly of the Children of Israel**. For the most part, God’s directives for Moshe to present to the Israelites have the following wording: (*Leviticus, Vayikra* 1:2)

“Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them . . .”

Rashi explained that Moses “assembled the entire nation and taught this chapter to everyone simultaneously” because the majority of the laws are dependent on what is here.” [2, Footnote, v.2, p. 656] The Rashi in Hebrew is quoted below:

“מלמד שנאמרה פרשה זו בהקהל שרוב גופי תורה תלויין בה”

[ibid, Rashi, v.2, p. 656]

Most importantly, in a text where order often signifies importance, the first directive concerns

the treatment of one's parents.

In the Ten Commandments, as reported in *parshiot Yitro* and *Va-ethanan*, honoring one's parents is the fifth commandment. There are commandments listed between man and God and between one person and another on the tablets. The honoring of parents is on the side where all others are between man and God. As we study, we shall see that honoring one's parents is a transitional commandment. The magnitude of honoring or revering one's parents is compared to the importance of honoring or revering God.

The laws in the Holiness Code seem like an alternative form of the Ten Commandments (in *Yitro* and in *Va-ethanan*) with a significant change in their ordering. In our *parasha*, the commandment regarding revering one's parents appears immediately before the commandment for observing the Sabbath. The next commandment concerns the prohibition of idolatry. In the two tablet form the Commandment to observe the Shabbat is just before that of honoring one's parents. The second commandment of the Ten Commandments, which speaks against idolatry, appears in the Holiness Code after both the Shabbat and the parental commandment.

There seems to be a shift in importance or emphasis. Perhaps, the honoring of parents is the model for honoring God. Perhaps, once a person honors one's parents and enjoys God's gift of the Sabbath, one is ready to commit to an exclusive relationship with God. Learning to honor one's parents may bring one to the place where Shabbat is honored and idolatry is unthinkable.

So the question remains: what makes the honoring or reverence for parents so special? The Sages did much contemplation on this topic. There is a long discussion of the weight of this commandment and of its ramifications in *Kiddushin*, a *Tractate* of the *Talmud* [14, 30b].

By comparisons of certain verses, the Sages deduced the position of parents as being analogous to that of God. There is a kind of equality established through the comparison of



certain verses. Similar to the verse (*Exodus* 20:12) “Honor your father and mother” is a comparably constructed verse (*Proverbs* 3:9) that directs a person to “honor God from your possessions.” Also, in terms of reverence, a verse in *Leviticus* (19:3) states “Man shall revere his mother and father,” and in *Deuteronomy* verse 6:13 commands, “Revere HASHEM your God and worship Him.” So in regard to both giving honor and giving reverence, the requirement relates both to God and to parents. Thus, we begin to feel the high status given to parents, given this connection of verses. There is a wonderful statement in *Kiddushin* which speaks to a partnership between man, woman, and God in the creation of a child. Moreover, this same section of Talmud notes that when a person honors his/her parents, God feels as though He lives among them. [ibid]

The Talmud then continues with various anecdotes to answer the question of what the limit is to honoring or revering one’s parents, the distinction between awe and reverence, and the importance not only of the deed, but of the attitude of the doer. After all, some good deeds are done with resentment and annoyance. The deed of honoring one’s parents takes account of the emotion and intention of the adult child.

The Talmud continues for many pages in its elucidation of the reverence and honor to parents. To summarize, reverence means that one should act toward a parent as toward a sovereign. The commandment of revering one’s parents prohibits a child from sitting in his parents’ regular place, interrupting them, or contradicting them, or humiliating them. (14,, 31:b) The commandment of honor refers to serving one’s parents: feeding, dressing, covering , helping them in and out, if they find it difficult to walk (ibid) So, in truth, we learn that reverence and honor are not optional. One does not help one’s aged parents on occasion, but rather it is a constant part of one’s life. Moreover, the actions must be accompanied by a

positive attitude and commitment.

There are some beautiful pieces in the Talmud in response to the question “until what point, until what limit” must we go to honor our parents. We read a lovely story of a Rabbi Avimi who ran whenever his father came to the door, although one of his five ordained sons could have answered the door. Avimi called “yes, yes” to his father en route, so that his father would not feel uncared for even for a moment. Rabbi Tarfon, who is mentioned in the Passover haggadah and on Yom Kippur in the Maḥsor among the list of martyrs, would lower himself to be used as a foot stool, so that his mother could ascend to and descend from her bed on his back. However, there is a limit to revering parents. When a demented parent makes requests inappropriate to the parent-child relationship, the adult child should then hire a caretaker to prevent the crossing of interpersonal boundaries. There are many more stories within these pages of the Talmud, but these few are representative of their caring nature. [ibid]

The fifth commandment is most unique. Not only is it raised to a godlike level, but it also is the only positive commandment between one person and another in the Ten Commandments. Further significance is attached to the fulfillment of this commandment, since its execution results in the receipt of a reward. It is extremely rare for the fulfillment of any commandment to generate a reward. There is a stated reward of lengthening of days, if one is to observe this commandment.

No one ever said that the care of the elderly was easy. However, the Torah teaches us that showing the aged parents honor and respect is a requirement. The parents who gave so much are entitled to be receive care, comfort, recognition. and respect. Their personal needs should be met in a loving and caring environment. We should know before whom we stand, when caring for our aged parents, for they are compared to The Holy One Blessed be His

Name, “Who spoke and the world came into existence.” (14. 30b)

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**SECTION 2. The Contributions of the Elderly.**

## The Need For The Company of the Elders

*Parashat Shemot* (Exodus: Chapter 1:1 -Chapter 6:1).

None of us stands alone. We all depend on those who came before us. We visit museums of natural history, we read about or participate in archeological digs, we pray daily to our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. We stand before God and ask God to remember those who came before us, our relatives, our family, our ancestors, our elders. We all stand on the shoulders of those who preceded us. We need to know and acknowledge our current elders, our זקנים. In times of change, in times of crisis, in times of joy, we turn to them sometimes for their advice and support and sometimes for their mere presence.

There is a feeling of movement, community, and inclusion, as one moves through *Parashat Shemot*. As Moshe and Aaron moved to accomplish their various tasks, they seemed to be accompanied by the *zekanim* ( the elders, זקנים), those who carried the memories, the history, and the experiences of the newly melded people. From here to there they moved with the support, questions, and presence of the seventy elders.

*Parashat Shemot* presents to us with clarity the need for the involvement, the presence, and the inclusion of the elders in our lives. When Moshe spoke to God at the burning bush, God gave Moshe the following directive (*Exodus* 3:10):

“And now go and I shall dispatch you to Pharaoh and you shall take my people the Children of Israel out of Egypt.”

In the initial meeting with God, there is no mention of the accompanying elders. Seemingly, Moshe will face Pharaoh alone. God seemed to be sending Moshe on a solo mission at this time.

However, when Moshe expressed his need to know the identity/ the name of God to present to the enslaved Israelites, God answered not only with a name, but also with an additional directive (*Exodus 3:16*):

Go and gather the **elders** of Israel and say to them, “HASHEM, the God of of your **forefathers**, has appeared to me, the God of **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**, saying, ‘I have surely remembered you and what is done to you in Egypt.’”.

Moses will not go alone, but rather will bring both the immediate elders and the historical elders, the forefathers, with him.

The immediate elders bring understanding, perspective, and life’s wisdom with them. We can visualize Moshe’s walking from place to place in consultation with these elders. Perhaps, it is through these elders that Moshe, the leader, gained the acknowledgment and trust of the people. Perhaps, these elders brought with them a sense and memory of the history of the people. Moshe knew that he alone could not represent such a diverse people.

Not only was Moshe to move with the elders, but he, also, was to experience his connection to our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rabbi Hirsch comments concerning the possible superfluous naming of the forefathers:

“Rabbi Hirsch sees in the stress on the individual Patriarchs . . . a new message to Israel.

The Patriarchs went through many different periods in their lives, from great success to decline and exile, but always God remained with them. So, too, will God always be with their descendants, even when their seems to be little hope of success even survival.”

[2, Footnote v.15, p. 305]

Bringing along the living documentary of their past in the elders and the remembered documentary of their beginning creates a sense of empowerment. We were, we are, and we will

be-with God's help. Moshe needed to access the people through the elders, the source of experience and history and then reach back with these elders to the "elders" of the entire nation, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Moshe was accompanied by the elders in his movement toward Pharaoh. In this continuation of God's directive, we come to understand that the elders were both a presence and a voice. Moshe was to feel empowered by the presence of the elders; the elders were not merely silent partners. They will speak, they will remember, they will serve as holders of memories, of values, of experiences, and of revered position.

We think that the elders will comply with Moshe's request to join him in confronting Pharaoh. We read in the beginning of verse (*Exodus 3:18*):

"And they will hear your voice."

Rashi explained "They will hear your voice" as God's assurance to Moshe that the elders would heed Moshe's call. [2, Footnote v.18, p. 305] We see a hint of mutual respect in this passage.

As the verse continues, we can see the elders as a voice. Those speaking to Pharaoh are reflected in the use of the second person plural verb in this same verse:

**You and the elders of Israel shall come (singular- as a single group)** to the king of Egypt and **say( second person plural)** to him, "HASHEM, the God of the Hebrews, happened upon us. (And now let us go on a three-day journey in the Wilderness, and we shall bring offerings to HASHEM, our God.)"

"... ובאת אתה וזקני ישראל אל מלך מצרים ואמרתם אליו אלהי העבריים נקרא עלינו . . ."

Moshe certainly was the leader. He will come with (the letter *vav* can mean "with") the elders, and Moshe and the elders will speak to Pharaoh.

However, it is most amazing that after the build-up of the importance of the elders, in the end, Moshe and Aaron appeared unaccompanied before Pharaoh: (*Exodus* 5:1)

“Afterwards Moshe and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, . . .”

According to the commentators, the elders were too fearful to accompany Moses to face Pharaoh. Rashi tells us that they were afraid and, consequently, were not allowed to ascend Mt. Sinai with Moshe. [ 2, Footnote v.1, p. 313] In life as in the Torah, sometimes our expectations are not fulfilled. The elders gave Moshe what they could. They filled a real need in giving him the courage to begin. We must be both realistic, accepting, and grateful for whatever gifts our elders can bestow upon us.

Moshe showed great reverence for the elders, both politically and personally. Moshe walked with the elders and intended to act with their support. The elders were with him long enough to give him support and historical awareness. The *parasha* is filled with the presence of the elders who stood with Moshe in anticipation of standing before Pharaoh.

However, we must come to terms with reality:

1. Sometimes our elders leave us before we feel ready to stand without them.
2. Sometimes the choices and actions of our elders are disappointing.
3. But always, we must be grateful for their accompanying us on our journeys to the best of their abilities.

May we emulate Moshe in showing reverence to those who came before us. Their guidance, support, and examples are invaluable to us. May we receive with appreciation the gifts that they are able to give and exemplify and accept and forgive their human limits and faults.



But before Moshe was able to fulfill his commitment to God and to the Israelite people, he had to take his leave of his father-in-law Jethro. Moshe spoke to Jethro in a form of polite, deferential request. Moshe, who just had spoken with God, approached his father-in-law in reverence (4:18):

“So Moshe went and returned to Jethro, his father-in-law, and said to him, “Let me now go back to my brethren who are in Egypt and see if they are still alive.” And Jethro said to Moshe, “Go in peace.”

The softness of Moshe’s request is inferred from the use of the word נא, meaning, *please*:

”וילך משה אל יתר חתנו ויאמר לו

אלכה נא אל אחי אשר במצרים ואראה העודם חיים

ויאמר יתרו למשה לך לשלום.”

*Midrash HaGadol* reports that “Moses did not tell Jethro the nature of his mission, so as not to alarm him” (Stone, p. 311) Certainly this stance reinforces one’s protecting one elder from upset. Jethro’s answer showed his deep understanding. A return to one’s brothers, to home is, indeed, a return to inner peace. Both Moshe’s request and Jethro’s answer were signs of mutual respect..)

## **Elders as Positive Role Models**

### ***Parashat Jethro (Shemot /Exodus 18:1- 20:23)***

Sometimes the perspective and experience of an elder can prove to be invaluable.

A supportive, knowledgeable, and perceptive elder can serve as a real resource. *Parashat Jethro* deals with a most positive and productive interaction between Jethro, the father-in-law of Moshe and Moshe.

Pulling back, the reader can see how elders can contribute, understand personal boundaries, and be of utmost importance to younger families in transition. Jethro is positive, supportive, and helpful. Moshe is attentive, respectful, and open. Moshe, the son-in-law, probably saved his leadership and his health through his father-in-law's presence and intervention. This combination can be seen, as we explore a few verses of the first chapter. Through a close reading of the text, we can watch Jethro's movement and see the value of an elder's contribution to Moshe and Moshe's benefit from such contributions.

From a careful reading of the text, we, the readers, can note how an elder in-law can move in ways that are helpful and non-threatening. Jethro's instructions were heard, because of his manner, his understanding, and his respect. Just as Moshe grew from Jethro's's advice, so, too, can we can grow from the support and advice of our elders. Both people listened to each other, spoke openly with each other, and tried to understand and contribute to the well-being of the other. We shall learn how Moshe and Jethro successfully worked together to help and support each other.

First, Jethro was an excellent person for one to emulate either as an elder or as a

caregiver. He listened. As the *parasha* opens, Jethro's first activity was to listen, a stance he took throughout his visit with Moshe. It is exceedingly important to listen for clues and to gather information before interjecting comments or advice. He was a thorough listener: (*Exodus* 18:1)

“And **Jethro . . . heard everything** that God did to Moshe and to Israel, His people- that Adonai had taken out of Egypt.”

An elder who truly listens can be most helpful and supportive. One can truly benefit from a listening ear from someone who already has met many of our own challenges.

When Moshe shared his story with Jethro, he seemed to stress the heartache, the travail.

Moshe

“told his father-in-law everything that HASHEM had done to Pharaoh and Egypt for Israel's sake- **all the travail that had befallen them on the way**- and that HASHEM had rescued them.” (*Exodus* 18:8)

Jethro's response was totally positive and uplifting.:

“Blessed is HASHEM. Who has rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh. . . (*Exodus* 18:10).”

Jethro focused on the rescue and did not repeat the word “travail.”

We can derive much support from an elder. Jethro showed positive reinforcement, when he responded to Moshe's stories of both adventure and trouble. In effect, Jethro made a party to celebrate the good, the hopeful, and the God of Israel. Each of us has within us the power to be or to become that supportive elder.

Age does give a sense of perspective. Jethro taught by example the importance of acknowledging and sharing the joy of the moment. He gave an elevation offering and a feast

offering and

“ . . . Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with the father-in-law of Moses before God. (18:12)”

The elderly are most aware of the vagaries of life and can teach us the value of seeing joy and fulfillment in the moment. They can teach us the need to share the transient moments of success and pleasure.

Jethro also taught us the importance of knowing one's place in the family. He knew that Moshe and Zipporah were the primary unit, a fact reflected in the various verses describing the family reunion: The word for “his wife” always is placed as close to Moshe as possible. This is not about Jethro's breaking up a family, but rather it is about Jethro's support of and respect for the unit of his daughter and her husband:

(18:2) And took Jethro the father-in-law of **Moshe** Zipporah the wife of **Moshe** .

In the Hebrew text we can see how Moshe envelopes his wife Zipporah:

. ויקח יתרו חתן **משה** את **צפורה** אשת **משה** אחר שלוחיה .

Zipporah is surrounded by Moshe in this first verse describing the reunification of Moshe with his family. The sons are written into the next verse alone, as the primary relationship has to be that of Moshe and his wife.

(18:5) “ And brought Jethro father in-law-of Moshe and his sons and his **wife to Moshe** to the Wilderness . . . “

"ויבא יתרו חתן משה ובניו **ואשתו** אל **משה** אל המדבר

אשר הוא חנה שם הר האלקים."

Again, Moshe and his wife are separated only by the preposition “to.” Jethro wisely brought his

children to the wilderness, a word that has within it the word to speak. Speaking in the shadow of the mountain of God, Moshe and Zipporah must have spoken from the honesty and truth of their souls. Their reunion was in a holy place. Full of life experience and acumen, Jethro chose the place and knew his place.

Jethro without words seemed to know how to facilitate the meeting between Moshe and his family. He knew when to step aside and when to step forward. Life experience brings a great deal to the negotiating table. Jethro was an exemplary father-in-law and interpersonal facilitator.

Jethro observed Moshe at work. Jethro knew that the work would weaken both Moshe and the other leaders.

“You will surely become worn out- you as well as this people that is with you-for this matter is too hard for you, you will not be able to do it alone.” [2, *Exodus* 18:18]

Moshe could not judge every case. He was unable to work from morning until night. Jethro’s observation and recommendation resulted in the appointment of judges for lesser courts. Only the most complicated cases would sit before Moshe. Jethro’s life experience taught him that one must delegate responsibility. We all must hear the voice of practical self-preservation and reasonable delegation of duties.

Moshe then showed Jethro great respect, as he saw Jethro off.

“וישלח משה את חתנו וילך לו אל ארצו.”

Moshe sent off his father-in-law, and he went to his land. [2, *Exodus* 18:27, p. 401]

Ibn Ezra [25, p. 145] compared this leave taking with Abraham’s seeing off the angels in *Genesis* 18:16:

“ואברהם הלך עמם לשלחם”

“And Abraham walked with them and sent them off” (EBGP translation)

The comparison of Moshe’s leave taking of his father-in-law and Abraham’s seeing off the angels creates a touching picture. First, Moshe’s hospitality is compared with that of Abraham, known for his kindness to strangers. Secondly, Abraham is taking leave of the angels. Perhaps, Moshe treated his father-in-law as a most royal messenger.

As caregivers, as seniors, as potential participants in either category, we can watch Jethro and learn from his extraordinary example.

1. An elder can be resourceful, understanding, and helpful. Jethro came, saw, and conquered Moshe’s overwork problem. He felt useful in using his gifts and Moshe was a fortunate recipient.
2. An elder can have and teach a deep understanding of family. Jethro had a deep understanding of family based on his own life experience.
3. An elder who feels useful is productive and positive. Jethro used his acumen to serve as a support and advisor to Moshe.
4. An elder can teach us the need to celebrate the good amid the transience of life, based on his own longevity and experience.
5. We must emulate Moshe in his respect for Jethro.

Jethro moved from hearing to speaking, to doing. May we follow his example and contribute to the joy, celebration, and appreciation of life. And may we celebrate, acknowledge, and revere the many contributions of our elders.

**The Contributions of The Seniors**  
*Parashat Beha'alotcha (Bamidbar 8:1-12:16)*

As a nineteen year old I worked for a week at Kibbutz Sa'ad in Israel. Our basic task was the fastidious scraping of pots as the initial step in kashering them for Pesach. Luckily, I only had that particular job for two days. I said, "Dayainu!"- only to myself- of course. Our overseer could have been trained in ancient Egypt.

Mercifully, I was upgraded to working with the sewing contingent. My inserting fresh elastic into pajama bottoms was a good match for my sewing prowess. However, the best part of my new assignment was my co-workers. I was surrounded by elderly women, who spoke Yiddish, and who worked only the morning in what was lovingly referred to as the *mahsan begodim*, clothes warehouse. I imagine that Joseph must have placed the grain in some sort of *mahsan* during the seven years of plenty in Egypt. Any connection to slavery is purely coincidental.

I remember how moved I was, as I watched these elderly women contribute to the kibbutz community. I thought about how the elderly usually are cast aside, locked away, separated from a natural community. These elderly women were engaged in productive work, were involved in easy conversations. They would finish their day with a sense of accomplishment and belonging. Every woman would give according to her ability and receive according to her need. I knew that this was a model to be emulated: the elderly must be acknowledged, appreciated, and connected. The elderly have much to give. Everyone benefits.

Our *parasha*, *parashat beha'alotcha*, illustrates two cases in which the elderly continue to be counted and valued. As in the *mahsan begodim*, these elderly are assigned duties which benefit the entire community. The work accomplished is real. Moreover, these elderly

individuals must have ended the day with a sense of satisfaction, inner peace, and belonging.

The participation of the elderly in both cases in our *parasha* must have given value to their lives and enrichment to their respective communities.

Our first example deals with the Levites who were fifty and older. Both the text and the opinions of several commentators seem to reflect the continued respect and inclusion of the older Levites. We shall look at the text for further clarification.

After describing the tasks, God then noted the age qualifications for the various functions of the Levites (*Numbers* 8: 23-26):

8:23 HASHEM spoke to Moses saying,

24 This shall apply to the Levites: From twenty-five years of age and up, he shall join the legion of the service( **ba-avodat**) of the Tent of Meeting.

25 From fifty years age, he shall withdraw from the legion of work (**ha-avodah**) and no longer work (**ya'avod**).

26 He shall minister (**veshairait**) with his brethren in the Tent of the Meeting to safeguard the charge (**lishmor mishmeret**), but work (**avodah**) shall he not perform (**ya-avod**).

From the above text we note a distinction between the work (*avodah*) of the younger Levites and the service/ministering (*shairut*) which the older Levites support or uphold (*shomair*). The elder Levites seem to remove themselves from the difficult physical pieces of the work and concentrate on administering the details.

Some of the commentators help with the definition of the age-related functioning of the Levites. According to Rambam, from age twenty-five “a Levite may volunteer to assist his fellow Levites,” although he must wait until age thirty to be assigned a specific task. [2, Footnote v.24, p.777, 778] Rashi noted that “a fifty-year-old Levite is forbidden only to bear the holy Tabernacle artifacts on his shoulder, but he continues to perform the rest of the Levite service, such as singing, closing the Temple gates, and loading the wagons. . .” As stated in verse 26, he does continue to “minister with his brethren in the Tent of the Meeting.” (2, p. 778) Although



the specific work (**avodah**) is relegated to the Levites under fifty, there are other ministrations open to them.

Thus, we see that the elder Levite continued to be a visible part of the Levite community. He continued to function in a way commensurate with his strength and stamina. He remained a clergyperson of status, recognition, and usefulness. From each according to his ability; to each according to his need. The commentators are very careful to assign continuing importance to the aging Levites.

Our second example of honoring the contributions of an elder is evident in the conversation between Moshe and his father-in-law in Exodus 10:28-32. Moshe wanted Hobab, his father-in-law (another name for Jethro) to accompany the Israelites on their journey. The dialogue clearly represented the value of Hobab to Moshe and to the Israelite community.

The good that Hobab could do for the community seems to be implied by the use of various forms of the word “good” in this dialogue. Thus in Verse 29b:

Moshe: “Go with us and we shall **treat** you **well**,

for HASHEM has spoken of **good** for Israel.”

לכה אתנו והטבנו לך,

כי ד' דבר-טוב על-ישראל.

A form of the word good (טוב) appears three times in Moshe’s final argument on the subject of Hobab’s joining the Israelites (v.32)..

“And it shall be that if you come with us, then with the **goodness** with which HASHEM will **benefit** us, we will do **good** to you. “

”והיה כי תלך עמנו והיה הטוב ההוא אשר ייטיב ד' עמנו והטבנו לך.”

When Hobab stated his desire to return to his land and birthplace.

Moshe seemingly begged Hobab not to leave them. Moshe cited Hobab's knowledge, competence, and life experience as very necessary for their travels (31b).

“Since you **know our encampments in the Wilderness** and you **have been as eyes for us.**”

Hobab had the eyes to see externally and to understand internally. He knew the places that the Israelites had camped during his year of residing in their camp. Moshe noted that Hobab would bring insight, understanding, and memory. Hobab had the outer eye of a scout and the inner eye of a sage. Moshe saw Hobab, an elder, as a person of great value to the Israelite community.

Thus, in our *parasha*, Levites once appointed would continue to function as Levites. The elder Levites would continue to serve, albeit in a capacity more in keeping with their physical strength. Hobab, if he chose, would be a person of honor among the Israelites. His history, knowledge, and insight only increased with the passage of time.

The name of the *parasha* means “and you shall raise up.” The raising up is in connection with the lighting of the Menorah in the Mishkan. Society as a whole can be lifted up when all the citizens can feel functional and connected.

“And you shall raise up.” The elderly Levites, the special functionaries, did not lose their place through aging. They continued to be members of their group, raised above the other Israelites due to their special service.

“ And you shall raise up.” In this uplifted world, an elderly Hobab is valued for his memory, and for his perceptive eye. We all are raised up by including the elderly in our work, in our lives, and in our communities.

**The Elderly as Memory Keepers**  
*Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 25:10- 30:1)*

Sometimes we need reassurance, perspective, a sense of balance, a sense of context. Yesterday I had the privilege of visiting Rabbi Moshe Szenes, ר"מ, as he sat in a special chair, arranged for his comfort, in his nursing home room. Rabbi Szenes is a Rabbi Emeritus of the congregation in which I serve. To me, he is THE Rabbi Emeritus. The fan blew, he spoke softly in a little voice. I am sure I received more by the visit than did he.

He shared with me memories of my dear parents, ז"ל, and respect for my younger brother Richard, who trusted him completely. Being in his serene and composed presence was powerful. I felt blessed that Rabbi Szenes remembered my parents, who died 10 and 15 years ago respectively. He even remembered the room of my father, whose last years were in a nursing home. Rabbi Szenes knew my dear mother, who suffered from Alzheimer's Disease, and my father, who suffered. And so, I share with you the importance of memory, the importance of being with someone who remembers, who has stories about and connection to those whom we now miss.

Sometimes the elderly tell us stories which bring us to happier times, which bring a smile. About five years ago I visited my parents' graves and found a problem. I approached the man at the entrance to the cemetery to show him the problem.

As we approached the grave, he said with delight, "Oh, it's the Doc!" He noted my Aunt Ida in an adjacent grave "who never married." He told me wonderful stories about the generosity of my grandfather, Reuven Alter, the father of five children and local grocer, who gave necessary supplies to families on credit. He remembered my father as a young physician who was honest with him about the impending death of his Mother, ז"ל. Instead of a sad

graveside visit, I had a family reunion. Thank you, Mr. Gabor.

And in *Parashat Pinḥas*, a most complicated and busy *parasha*, we find the comfort of a woman who has traveled through the centuries with the Israelite people. Her presence, her being in a most tumultuous time, can provide solace, comfort, and security. The presence of an aged person can have a most positive affect on those who are finding their respective ways. Both Rabbi Szenes and Mr. Gabor are keepers for my memories.

*Parashat Pinḥas* began with rampant idolatry, a resultant plague, a violent act, and then HASHEM asked Moses and Elazar son of Aaron the Kohen to take a census, “as Moses and Aaron had been commanded to do thirty-nine years before.” [2, Footnote v.26, p., 879] Rashi noted that “God wanted to count His children who had survived the plague.” [ibid] Abarbanel noted the importance of knowing the “numbers of eligible fighting men,” and Ibn Ezra focused on learning the numbers to determine allocation of property after the conquest. [ibid] For all or any of the above, census taking would be useful.

However, the taking of the census brought a wonderful gift to the Israelites. A listing of the names brought before the people the presence of a 400 year old woman who had been with the Israelites before their going down to Egypt to join Joseph. Serah bat Asher, the daughter of one of Jacob’s sons, “was one of the sixty-nine souls who went down to Egypt with Jacob.”

(*Genesis* 46:17)

“**Asher’s sons:** Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Breiah, **and their sister Serah**; and Beriah’s sons, Heber and Malchiel.”

This same Serah bat Asher has her own verse in the listing of the census in our *parasha*:

(*Numbers* 26:46)

“ The name of **Asher’s daughter: Serah**.”    "ושם בת אשר שרה."

Also, the significance of this woman is reinforced by her presence by name in I *Chronicles* 7:30, where part of the verse in *Genesis* repeats itself:

“**Asher’s sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Breiah, and their sister Serah**.”

Both the appearance of this daughter’s name and its repetition spark the creation of midrashim. Midrash thrives on anomalies. What is this four hundred year old woman doing in both our coming into and our going out of Egypt?

According to the related midrashim, Serah functions as the source of memory. She verified Moses as the leader and also knew the location of Joseph’s bones to be found and transported out of Egypt at the time of the liberation. According to *Midrash Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 47, Serah knew the words by which the redeemer of Israel would identify himself. When Moshe’s prophesy, “poked pokadeti,” matched the formula her father Asher taught her, she was able to authenticate Moshe as the redeemer. (15) In *Sotah* 13a , Serah told Moshe the location of Joseph’s bones, so that Moshe could bring them out of Egypt to Canaan, as promised. Serah, because of her age and memory, was instrumental in the recognition of Moshe’s authenticity as redeemer and the fulfillment of the promise to Joseph.

At a time of transition from a desert people to a conquering nation, she validated who they were, their role in history, and their fulfillment of a process and a promise. After the plague, the abominations, the killing of Zimri and Cozbi, the Israelites had the memory, the assurances of Serah, not by any current act, but rather by her mere presence. The text in which her name appears merely states her name, but does not mention any of the deeds deduced or created in the midrashim. Thus, we can deduce that her mere presence was enough. Nothing is

mentioned in the verse other than her name. However her name held an entire verse. She was a unique woman whose longevity was a source of security, wonder, and memory.

The truth of the midrash perhaps lies in the universality of meaning. Our elders do understand the process of our respective journeys. They have learned how to recognize the authenticity of others. They know how to help us connect to the past and to bring the bones of our families with us on our travels. We can look to our elders for advice, perspective, and history. Moreover, just as Serah appeared in the text without taking any action, we can learn that the mere presence of the elderly in our lives is enough. They do not have to do, they just have to be, with God's help.

We all crave the presence of those who remember, of those who share our histories, our disappointments, our triumphs and our losses. Serah's presence gave validity to Moses' position of leadership and to the Israelites' movement toward nationhood. Rabbi Szenes and Mr. Gabor gave a sense of reality to my past, a sense of presence to those whom I no longer can visit, see, or touch.

So I ask you to treasure our elderly. They do not have to do anything other than be. They have value in helping us face the challenges, as they hold within themselves memories, challenges, and goals, both thwarted and fulfilled.

It is not important to debate how could Serah be for four hundred years. It is important to acknowledge and respect the presence of those who know from whence we came. The elderly are a most important link in the chain of our lives.

## **The Ethical Will**

*Parashat Devarim (Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22)*

There are treasures more valuable than Aunt Lizzy's Orrefors crystal! Indeed, there are memories, stories, values, experiences, and ideas that are the real family heirlooms. As a people, our legacies have had to be portable. Our ideas, our values, our learning could move from place to place, while our materials often were left or destroyed in many times and spaces. We are the People of the Book and we bring our legacy with us in our travels on this earth. When we are no more, we want our successors to know some of our stories, some of our struggles, some of our wishes and prayers for them, and some of our own dreams. We want our successors to paint us in vivid color and to carry forward some of our treasured learning and some of our critical memories.

And Moshe knew that his days were numbered. He wanted to leave the People with a record of their history, their rules, their obligations to God and to each other. God will no longer lead them with either fire or clouds. The people will have to find their own way. We now are the People of the Book and are about to enter the foreign land of Canaan. Without the Book, we are not a People. Without our history, we are lost. Without rules and order, there is chaos. And so Moshe, in effect, dictated or wrote his ethical will, the contents of the entire Book of Devarim, with the exception of the description of his own death.

And at a certain time in our lives, we recognize that our days are numbered. We want some of our stories to exist after us. We want our loved ones to understand some of our struggles, some of our choices. Hopefully, our descendents will remember, for the memories keep alive our values and connection. To concretize this approach, one needs to write an ethical will, a behavior modeled by Moshe in our *parasha*, *Parashat Devorim*.

“Unlike traditional wills that transfer worldly possessions, an ethical will bequeaths values, ideas, and personal reflections to family members and other loved ones.” [16, p. 1] Not a legal document, an ethical will is often in the form of a letter to a loved one. The writer chooses the timing of both the writing and the presentation of the ethical will. Some may choose to discuss such a document with one’s inner circle. The writer may enjoy the experience of sharing both memories and blessings in person. Every ethical will is a unique document, reflecting those ideas, wishes and memories of major significance to the writer.

To derive the direction of Moshe’s ethical will, we shall analyze part of the first verse, the beginning until the cantillation mark, an *etnahta*, which indicates a rest or minor break. In analyzing a Torah text the assumption is that every word, the order of every word, and the associations and repetitions of every word are all significant.

And so Moses spoke to all the People. Our *parasha* begins with Moshe’s articulation of his ethical will (*Parashat Devarim* 1:1),

“These are the words that **Moshe** spoke to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan . . .” Moshe put forth what he needed the People to remember. Moshe spoke for himself, as the *parasha* begins. He, Moshe, will speak these words from his own heart. As a person he has internalized the words and the will of God. He will transmit God’s will and God’s words through himself, as a prophet. The people will no longer have the direct connection to God, afforded by Moshe. They will listen to prophets in the future, but the guidance of the flares and clouds in the desert will be absent from Canaan.

With our last written and spoken words, we want our children and descendants to hear our voices, to hold our memories. We hope that their decisions will consider our understanding,



our wisdom, our regretted choices.

The preeminence of what Moshe presented is not the grandeur of Moshe himself. Rather the *parasha* begins with,

“These are the **words** that **spoke** Moshe to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan”

“Aile **hadevorim** ashair **debehr** Moshe el-kol-yisrael be-ever ha-yarden.”

Although the English translation of the verse appears awkward, it accurately reflects the emphasis and direction of the verse. (EBGP translation)

We worship an unseen, invisible God. *Hadevorim*, the word for *the words* or *the things*, is the same in Hebrew. The things that Moshe was bequeathing to the People are his rendering of God’s words. His words are the content of his legacy to Israel, rather than are any material treasures. Moshe knew that he faced his death, that life is transient. He knew that the transmission of the values, history, beliefs and obligations of the People were the only legacy of substance. Perhaps, what we say is the only real legacy we can leave. Our words, our writings are more important than the forgotten crystal.

And again, “These are the words that Moshe spoke **to all Israel** on the other side of the Jordan“ Moshe spoke “to all Israel.” Here Moshe does not speak to the Children of Israel, for they now are an adult people ready to shoulder their own responsibilities. They will have to fight, plant, harvest, feed their families, care for the orphans and the stranger. They will have to take upon themselves the obligations of an adult, the responsibilities of a mature People. They now are Israel.

And we the seniors, the adults, want to be understood, to be remembered. We want to extend into the future those learned lessons, those impacting experiences, those terribly meaningful, and central personal philosophies. We want the privilege of being remembered as

people and of having our ideals, dreams, memories, and values live on after we are no more,  
And still again,

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel **on the other side of the Jordan**“

And they, all Israel, will cross the Jordan. Moshe will not enter the Promised Land. He very much knew where he stood. The etnahta, a cantillation sign creating a slight separation from the rest of the verse, appears under the word “Jordan.” Moshe will remain on the other side of the Jordan, separate from the People. And may Moshe Rabeinu, rest in peace. They will cross; he will stay. Our adult children will move on to inherit their Canaan, their Promised Land. We remain behind.

We can help create a picture of ourselves to share with our family, progeny, and friends. We, also, can use the process to clarify our own values. Depending on when we choose to write such a document, we can redirect our lives in keeping with the values that we now have articulated clearly to ourselves.

One’s closing can be in keeping with that of Moshe, l’havdil.. One can write an ethical will as a way to make peace with the past and to form a connection to the future. One can take this opportunity to reflect on one’s values, to recount one’s history, and to accept one’s choices. The following are suggested topics to explore for inclusion:

“My happiest times/my saddest times

Expressions of love and gratitude

Lessons I have learned from life experience

Successes and regrets in my life

How spirituality has been a part of my life

Episodes in my life where I learned something

My ancestral background and family stories

Influential people in my life

Familial obligations

Favorite Torah or Rabbinic passages

Things that I have done that I regret

Hopes and blessings for future generations

Funeral and burial preferences.” (17, p. 93)

May our memories be for a blessing. May we emulate Moshe in giving some meaningful familial, ethical, spiritual, and historical understanding of our lives to our successors. May we learn from Moshe the utter importance of passing down the values which we hold dear. May our progeny, through the help of our ethical wills, understand and remember some of the struggles of their progenitors. May Aunt Lizzy’s descendants understand the importance of the crystal, given by a sister-in-law who died too young.

In the Egyptian country  
Where the moon is always there,  
I saw a little butterfly, flying in the air.  
It moved its wings so gracefully all around the field  
And then it sat down  
And its skin began to peel.. (by the 8 y.o. EBGp)

**Elders as Teachers**  
*Parashat Eikev (Devarim 7:12-11:25)*

On Shabbat afternoon I have the privilege of visiting a woman Gertrude P. who is my mentor, teacher, and friend. She is in her nineties now, and she has used many of her years to study Jewish texts formally and informally. If a class in her synagogue is given and she can find a ride, she is there to listen, question, remember, and share. She has helped many a Jew become a bat/bar mitzvah through her patient and precise tutoring. She has worked with the motivated, the discouraged, the suffering, the proud. She has never accepted payment, but feels paid by the accomplishment and learning of those whom she has tutored. Gert continues her contribution to the community with kindness, dedication and humility. Gert lives a life of courage and contribution. And it is of Gert whom I thought when I read *Parashat Eikev*.

Knowing Gert P. very well, I know that she considers herself a small, almost insignificant contributor. *Eikev*, from the word meaning *heel*, may allude to a sort of considered unimportance Gert P. may associate with her current teaching contributions.

*Eikev*, in the context of the *parasha*, alludes to insignificant commandments. Rashi states that “if they (the Israelites) are careful to observe even these neglected commandments, they can be sure that God will reward them with His covenant and kindness.” [2, Footnote v.12, pp. 980-981] Thus, Gert’s teaching and our minor observances are truly important to the community’s welfare.

Moreover, the meaning assigned to *eikev*, *because of*, in the Fox translation adds another meaningful dimension. [4, p. 885] The first verse of the *parasha*: (7:12) reads as follows:

“. . . **because of** your harkening to these regulations . . . then YHWH will keep for you the covenant of loyalty that he swore to your fathers.“ [ibid]

Thus, Gert P., your contributions are most worthy of reward, in keeping with the spirit of *Eikev*, where the observance of every commandment is duly noted. *Eikev, because of*, the contributions of Gertrude P. and other seniors, our communities are enhanced, enriched, and educated.

Although the elderly can contribute to the community simply by their presence, elders enrich the community and enhance their own lives by serving as teachers. The second paragraph of the *shma*, in *parashat Eikev*, illustrates the importance of elders serving as teachers for the community.

Teaching is not just between parent and child, but rather the commandment to teach applies to every person: The Talmud infers (*Sanhedrin* 19b) “that one who teaches Torah to someone else’s children is regarded as if he had begotten them.” [2, Footnote v.7, p. 737]

The elderly are obligated to fulfill all of the commandments. This directive is spoken to everyone without either stated or implied excuses: (Excerpted from *Deuteronomy* 11:18-19)

“So put these words of mine in charge of your mind and body. . . teach them to your children, using them **when you sit at home** and **when you walk about**, **when you lie down** and **when you stand up** . . .that your days and your children’s days in the land that Adonai promised to give you may be as numerous as the days that the sky overlooks the earth. [18, p. 106]

Mentoring, teaching, advising are possible for many elderly who sit alone, discouraged, often bored.

This descriptive section seems to make it easier for all elderly people to teach, regardless

of their physical strength or stamina. Whether sitting or walking, lying down or standing up, the elderly person is able to transmit learning to others.

An elderly person can tutor a child in his/her home, so that finding a ride to the synagogue is not an issue. A physically healthy elder can take a short walk with a child to teach, to discuss, and to share stories. And a child or an adult learner can visit an elder in an assisted living facility and talk to them in a position that works for the elder. An agile mind may be stuck in an immobile body.

Moreover, the Sages, in effect, created a “sliding scale” so that one could fulfill the commandments in a way consistent with their physical and mental status. [19, p. 16] For example, a person unable to recite the *amidah*, a prayer requiring the standing of the worshiper, may say the prayer while sitting. One who does not have the endurance to complete the entire liturgy may abbreviate the *amidah*. So observance of commandments is modified, but not curtailed. We can teach, we can learn for who we are at the moment.

Our senior teachers as well as our *parasha* teach of the need to express gratitude for our gifts to the Source outside of ourselves. The senior teachers bring with them gratitude for those blessings which they have experienced, those gifts that were theirs. While the young have a sense of wanting satiation, the elderly transmit the need to bless for what is or what remains. My father, z”l, in his last years would say that he was doing the best he could with what he had left.

In our *parasha* we learn to appreciate that gifts emanate from God. Seniors do understand and transmit both joy and gratitude for their gifts: As written in verse *Deuteronomy* 8:10:

“You will eat and you will be satisfied, **and bless** HASHEM, your God, for  
the good Land that He gave you.”

The need is to move away from self aggrandizement to the appreciation of God's presence: The elderly understand that there is no room for self satisfaction in a transient world, where man plans and God laughs.

A long life brings with it the knowledge of the impermanence of material gifts and the corresponding need to be grateful to the Other for that which is: ( *Deuteronomy* 9:4)

”Do not say in your heart, when HASHEM pushes them (the enemies) away from before you, saying, “because of my righteousness did HASHEM bring me to possess the Land and because of the wickedness of these nations did HASHEM drive them away from before you.” [2. p. 985]

You are at the mercy of a power greater than yourself, and must maintain a sense of humility and awareness of the presence of HASHEM in this world.

The slowing down of gait, allows the elderly to transmit to the younger student a need to look and see what is, rather than rush through the hillsides. The lingering on a word, a phrase, a moment in time, brings to the young student an appreciation for the relishing of a taste,

According to our sources, we can learn much from the elderly. The main reason given in the sources to respect the elderly is that “advancing years enhance one’s wisdom.” Since the older person has passed through the trials of life, s/he is looked upon as a source of counsel, becoming filled with the spirit of discretion and knowledge.” (Folkman, p. 32) In this way the term *zaken* came to mean a wise man. Gayle Friedman notes the link between old age and wisdom by citing a passage from *Masechet Berachot* 39a:

“If wisdom is not here, can old age be here?”

Gert, as a member of the group known as “the elderly,” continues to be both teacher and

learner. In fact this *parasha* reinforces the need of all elders to teach and contribute for his/her own well-being and protection. As noted in *Masechet Kiddushin* 82a:

“ (The Torah) . . . guards him from all evil in his youth and gives him a future and hope in his old age.” (19, p. 13)

*Eikev* is translated as “*the reward*,” by several commentators. Gert is rewarded by her longevity, her connection, and her contribution to community. Gert rewards the community by sharing her insights, her compassion, and her scholarship. The elderly know that there is much beyond their powers. The self-centeredness of youth is broadened into an appreciation of something bigger and beyond themselves. The elderly teach the youth this lesson through active teaching and simple example.

May we make space in our communities to create teaching experiences for our elders. Their words come from learning and from life.



## **The Elder's Duty to Affirm**

*Parashat Vezot Haberachah (Deuteronomy 33:1- 34:12)*

I sat opposite my father, Dr. Abraham Ginsburg, z"l, in his spare, nursing home room. A picture of his medical residency class hung on the wall. The only other decoration in the room was a spread American eagle, hanging over the doorway, the gift of a long-deceased and much respected patient. "E pluribus unum," one from many, was inscribed on one wing, perhaps also a statement of the smallness of an individual in this universe. The slogan also was a paean to America for a man whose father had come from Dvinsk, had a small grocery store, and had raised two Harvard graduates, one M.I.T. graduate, one Phi Beta Kappa from Boston University, and one who suffered.

My father had retired from his medical practice only when he could no longer stand. He loved medicine and had encouraged me to join my two brothers in becoming a physician. When I was thirty-five years old, he offered still again to pay for my medical school tuition. He believed that "the only thing that does you any good is the good you do." To my father medicine was the most direct way of helping others. And he did.

During this visit two weeks before his death, I had decided to ask my father if it was all right that I had not become a physician. When asked, my father looked at me and said, "Yah, well, all right." I was and am grateful for his response. My father once had my mother to make the effusive, warm talk, but now he was devastated and alone. My father's words, his tone, his emotion remain with me. He had tried to give me his dream, but he had accepted my refusal. So, I accepted his words as a blessing.

And as Moshe prepares for his own death, his last words are of blessing. "Vezot haberachah," and this is the blessing. Moshe ends his stay on this earth with words of blessing.

As the aged and the future aged, we all should think about leaving “our people” with words of blessing, comfort, and acceptance.

*Ve Zot habrachah*, and this is the blessing. The midrash, which looks at anomalies with questions, wondered about the first word. *vezot*, **and** this. An “and” usually signifies a continuation of something else. *Midrash Rabba* points out the verbal connection that the word **vezot** makes between the conclusion of the blessings that Jacob gave his sons in *Genesis* 49:28 before his death and the beginning of the blessings that Moshe gave the tribes before his death. Thus, one can note the placement of the word **vezot** in the blessing of Jacob:

"כל אלה שבטי ישראל שנים עשר **וזאת** אשר דבר להם אביהם ויברך אותם איש אשר כברכתו ברך אתם."

“All these are the tribes of Israel-twelve-**and this** is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them; he blessed each according to his appropriate blessing.” [2, p. 283]

And the connection through repetition to the blessing of Moshe: (*Deuteronomy* 33:1)

"**וזאת** הברכה אשר ברך משה איש האלקים את בני ישראל לפני מותו."

”And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of God, bestowed upon the Children of Israel before his death..” [2, p. 1113]

Some other scholars also commented on this anomaly, “**and this**”. Rashi stated this observation in his terse, direct, and informative style: “And this is the blessing- like the blessing of Jacob.” According to Nehama Leibowitz through this device our Sages wanted “to stress the continuity of the religious message spread by the Fathers of the nation, its prophets and leaders down the ages. . .” [10. p.2] .

Before giving individual blessings to the tribes, Moshe first blessed the People as a

whole. Moshe began his farewell address by reminding the People of their worthiness. He assured them of God's love: (*Deuteronomy 33:4*)

“Indeed, You loved the tribes greatly . . .”

When one blesses children, one first must prevent rivalry by noting the equality of the love dispersed among them. Moshe hoped for the unity of Israel; one hopes one's children will stand together. Moshe's last phrase before proceeding to the individual blessings was his vision of “the tribes of Israel in unity.” (*Deuteronomy 33:5*) May it be thus with our children.

So, although Moshe would no longer be with them, he clarified the constant and continuing love of God for the “congregation of Jacob.” (*Deuteronomy 33:4*) The *Torah* would be the heritage of the “congregation of Jacob,” a name without the contentiousness enmeshed in Israel, “the one who strove with God.” As the current and future elders of our community, we can focus on the continuation of the family through our children or through our students, for they are our future. We each have tried to give them our heritage, and, hopefully, they will strive and struggle to make it their own..

When Moshe blessed the individual tribes, he tailored every one to the recipient. Every blessing reached for the golden center of every tribe, the unique gift of every tribe:

“Of **Levi** he said . . .(33:8) Bless, O Hashem, his resources, and favor the work of his hands; smash the loins of his foes and his enemies, that they may not rise.” (33:11)

Of **Benjamin** he said: May Hashem's beloved dwell securely by Him; He hovers over him all day long; and rests between his shoulders.” (33:12)

Of **Zebulun** he said: Rejoice O Zebulun in your excursions, and **Issachar** in your tents.” (33:18)

“Of **Naphtali** he said: Naphtali, satiated with favor, and filled with Hashem's blessing; go

possess the sea and its south shore.” (33:23)

Every blessing fit the individual’s character, responded to the physical home (or psychological make-up) of the individual tribe. Moshe found it in his heart to accept the differences and to accept every one for the essence, the gift, the uniqueness of its being.

Thus, should aging parents be with their adult children. My mother left me and my brothers with her last words of “I love you,” a moment engraved in my soul. If there were disappointments, they were not worthy of mention. So, should we leave our children with words of unconditional love and acceptance.

Although Moshe seemed quite accepting of the differences among the tribes, some of Jacob’s blessings expressed anger and disappointment. Thus, Jacob’s blessing to Reuben reads as follows: (*Genesis 49:3-34*)

3: Reuben you are my first born,

My might and first fruits of my vigor . . .

4: Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer,

For when you mounted your father’s bed,

You brought disgrace- my couch he mounted!”

Although Moshe was not positive about Reuben, at least he was terse and noncombative. Moshe did not refer to the source of Reuben’s diminished status: but was merely descriptive:

(*Deuteronomy 33:6*)

“May Reuben live and not die,

Though few be his number.”

Jacob’s describing his son Benjamin as a “ravenous wolf,” (*Genesis 49:27*) has a lot different flavor than Moshe’s prayer for the tribe of Benjamin:

“May Hashem’s beloved dwell securely by Him.” (*Deuteronomy 33:12*)

The sons seem to have grown into tribes that Moses could bless with softness, appreciation, and praise. Perhaps, we all should learn from Moshe.

Since we never know the day of our death, we should try to end conversations on a positive, supportive note. Like Moshe, let our blessings reflect our knowledge and understanding of our children, their gifts, their gold. Let our constant and final messages be ones of love and acceptance. Our last words will be remembered. Hopefully, these words will be our last gift to them.

The Elderly, Stabilizers of Society  
*“The Elders of” the Five Books*

We all need to feel accompanied, to feel secure, to feel supported. When my elder daughter was to be married, I knew I would have consulted my mother, z”l. She always seemed to know what to do, was not ambivalent in her decision making, and did what needed to be done effectively and efficiently. Indeed, she founded a Hebrew school, so that her children would learn Hebrew and grow to be part of the Jewish community.

However, I learned that her mother was her stabilizing force. I noticed that after her mother, my Bubbe Brass, died, my mother lost her total control, her iron backing, her visible power. She, too, felt more capable, more emotionally steady, simply safer with the presence and warmth of her most giving and perceptive mother, Rachel Leah, for whom my eldest was named.

So, I came to really respect the role of the elder as a support, an advisor, a confidant. My mother would say that she had been me, but I had never been her. Age brings with it a sense of what’s important, what will pass, and what warrants compassion. My Bubbe understood that people were to be looked at with understanding and forgiveness. When I once expressed anger about a rather demanding and seemingly selfish aunt, my Bubbe began to describe this aunt’s life and suggested a gentler approach. She did not judge me, but rather guided me.

L’havdil, Moshe, too, faced many decisions, dealt with his own powerful emotions, and, at times, felt overwhelmed by the enormity of his task. When Moshe spoke with God out of the burning bush, God’s message was that “You and **the elders of Israel** shall come to the king of Egypt.” (*Exodus* 3:18) God’s vision was that Moshe would have the support, the company, the presence of the elders in dealing with the Egyptian monarch. Moshe’s tragic flaw seemed to be one of anger. I think Moshe may have needed to surround himself with elders, who can give life

a different perspective.

Utilizing the “Bar Ilan Judaic Library,” I decided to conduct a search of the different forms of the word *elders*, זקנים, in the *Torah*. What was most interesting to me in my search was that the forms of the word used in the *Torah* seemed to indicate identity and belonging.

*The elders* seemed to be written primarily as nouns in the *semichut* or possessive form. To illustrate, a *semichut* form, *zikhnai moav*, the elders of Moav, is a concise form that can be lengthened into *haz'kanim shel moav*, i.e., the elders of Moav. The elders were representative of or connected to a particular city, a nation, or a place. In the *Book of Deuteronomy*, we note the following:

"וּכְלֵי זִקְנֵי הָעִיר" "And all the elders of the city . . ." (21:6)

"זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" ". . . all the elders of Israel . . ." (31:9)

"אֵת כָּל זִקְנֵי שְׁבֵטֵיכֶם" ". . .all the elders of their tribes . . ." (31:28)

They were not just “the elders,” but the elders who belonged to or were representative of a specific place or a particular people. I thought about some of our disoriented, disconnected, and isolated elderly. The elderly need to be connected and consulted.

Variations in the form of the elders were the two instances in which the exact word was *ziknecha*, meaning “your elders.” This strong ownership was in two very important moments: the finding of a corpse between cities and the farewell poem of Moshe, both in *Deuteronomy*: In the first case, (21:2)

“**your elders** and judges shall go out and measure toward the cities that are around the corpse.”

The second case involves the farewell song/poem of Moshe to the people: (32:7)

“Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation. Ask your father and he will relate it to you, and **your elders** and they will tell you.”

A footnote in Stone reminds us that “it is the responsibility of leaders to refine the behavior of their followers.” [2, Footnote v.7, p. 1043] It is of utmost importance that the society created is one in which a traveler is not allowed to “go on his lonely way without food or escort.” [Ibid, Rashi] The second example emphasizes that handing down the *Torah* keeps us a People. The two examples together present a striving for the creation of responsible leaders who work to create a just society based on a study of and adherence to the principles of the *Torah*. We can look to our elders for role models.

It seems that the frequency of the appearance of the elders was in direct proportion to the stress of the particular event. In *Genesis*, “**the elders** of his (of Joseph’s) household and **all the elders** of the land of Egypt” were part of the procession that brought the remains of Jacob to Canaan for burial. (50:7) In *Exodus*, a rather stressful time, the phrase “the elders of” appeared five times. The first time occurred at the burning bush, when God advised Moshe to “gather the elders of Israel” and tell them about God’s remembering the Israelites and acknowledging their troubles in Egypt. (3:16) In *Leviticus* there is only one mention of “the elders of,” in conjunction with their putting their hands on the bull to be sacrificed when the entire community follows an incorrect ruling. (4:15) In *Numbers*, where there are four appearances of the phrase “the elders of.,” Moshe’s confrontation of the rebels Dathan and Aviram required the supportive presence of the elders: (16:26)

“So Moshe stood up and went to Dathan and Aviram, and the elders of Israel followed him.”



In other words, Moshe would not face the rebels alone, and might have been with the elders for their balance, perspective, and presence.

However, *Deuteronomy* presents twelve usages of the phrase “the elders of,” more than twice as many as its nearest competitor. Some of these phrases in *Deuteronomy* were utilized in making difficult rulings which affected the lives or disgrace of one’s children. The elders were appealed to twice in regard to dealing with a rebellious son (21:19,20) and once in regard to the shaming of a bride. (22:15) The elders were there at times when good judgment, sense of balance, and dependability were required. The elders move slowly and carefully, a helpful characteristic in making life determining decisions.

A reason that *parashat vayelech* begins with the word *vayelech* ,”and he went,” may be to emphasize that Moshe was getting ready to go, to leave this earth. The numerous extraneous repetitions of *הוא* (“hu”), translated as “he” or “that one,” refer to God and Joshua, respectively, who will remain after him. Moshe spoke about God and about Joshua in the third person. He is talking about his God and his successor, rather than to them. He is moving out of the triangle and diad of communication. We keep our elders with us by keeping them within the circle of communication. We need to speak to our elders and not about them.

At the beginning and at the end of *Parashat Vayelech*, Moshe spoke to the elders, explained the Torah, left them with his legacy.

“Moshe wrote this Torah and gave it to the Kohanim, the sons of Levi, the bearers of the Ark of the covenant of HASHEM, and to **all the elders of Israel.**” (*Deuteronomy* 31:9)

דברים פרק לא פסוק ט

ויכתב משה את התורה הזאת ויתנה אל הכהנים בני לוי הנשאים את ארון ברית יקוק

ואל כל זקני ישראל:

“Gather to me **all the elders of your tribes** and your officers, and I shall speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth to bear witness against them.” (Ibid 31:28)

דברים פרק לא פסוק כח

הקהילו אלי את **כל זקני שבטיכם** ושטריכם ואדברה באזניהם את הדברים האלה ואעידה בס את השמים ואת הארץ:

He first entrusted the Torah to **all the elders of Israel**, as the Israelites still were a united camp. When Moshe finished his directive, he spoke to **all the elders of your tribes**, as the Israelites were to live as tribes on the other side of the Jordan. He trusted the elders to learn, transmit, and remember. Our elders have a sense of who we are, of what we need, and how they can support us.

The *Book of Deuteronomy* is a book of Moshe's struggling with his decreed death, his passing the leadership to another, his leaving the earth in pain, and his determination to have the Israelites understand and hold true to its own mission, the transmission of the *Torah*. He wrote his final legacy in song, perhaps, as an easier way to remember the messages of the Torah. I suggest that the intensity of this final Book, replete with Moshe's intense struggle, warrants the appearance of "the elders" fifteen times in this Book. If their presence is felt by the reader, it certainly is felt by Moshe, the protagonist in this powerful saga.

At difficult times, Moshe required a bevy of elders;. We all benefit from the support, knowledge, experience, and balance of elders.

My mother always wanted to tell me about my Bubbe Brass's experiences in her small town near Odessa. I know a few stories. I yearn for more. There is no one to ask.

I pray that we all recognize and utilize the support and comfort of the elders that travel before us. Let us realize that our consultations with them bring us a sense of security, and the elders, a sense of deserved importance. Let us learn from the life experiences and knowledge that our elders have acquired on their respective journeys.

Through telling their stories, the elders will experience a sense of bestowing their memories onto the next generation and, we will experience a sense of continuing the connection. By listening to their stories and really knowing them, we may feel their presence and strength. We may even develop a greater understanding of ourselves to share with the next generation. When we listen we show our valuing of the speaker and his/her history.

May our elders always feel valued and connected. And may we do our part in transmitting the incalculable value of their presence, by including the elders, admiring their accomplishments, and facilitating their lives.

**SECTION 3. The Impact on Both the Elderly and the Future Elderly.**

## **Making Personal Peace**

*Va-ethanan* (Deuteronomy (3:23-7:11))

A four year old boy sat on my office floor with a pad of paper, some crayons, and a stuffed toy resembling a red apple with a green worm exiting its side. I was speaking with his mother, who was unable to find a sitter for our morning session. He sat composed, busy, and quiet the entire session. And then it was time to end the session. He, a self-contained and gentle little boy, refused. I asked him if it was hard to leave his drawing unfinished. He nodded. So, the lovely child, the son of an artist and an architect, finished his drawing and left in peace. He left in peace with a sense of closure, of wholeness, of *shelamut*. Would that we all could leave with such a sense of inner peace and outer accomplishment.

*Va-ethanan*, and I pleaded. The *parasha* opens. Moshe described his appeal to God to permit his entering the land of Canaan, a privilege God already revoked. My heart is moved by the appeal of Moshe, as he begged to cross the Jordan and culminate his intense journey. We all have plans. We all may have to leave some of our plans for others

I think about all of us: the elders, the aspiring elders. Will we have the strength, the tenacity, the resources, the health, the short term memory, and, primarily, God's help to see us to accomplishing our respective goals? Will our accomplishments look like what we envisioned for ourselves? Will we have the privilege of finishing the coloring of our apple/worm project? And if not, will we go peacefully or will we "rage into the darkness of the night." Perhaps, we can find guidance in Moshe's example.

*Va-ethanan*, and I pleaded. *Va-ethanan* is a reflexive verb, i.e., the action is both made

and received by the subject Moshe. The root denotes mercy and connotes a softness, a gentleness in self judgment. Moshe must consider himself worthy of merciful judgment before reaching out to God for God's mercy. According to Samson Raphael Hirsch, *va-ethanan* is utilized for one to "gather himself internally ..., so as to get his mind in the right mood" [21,p.37,v. 23]. We must look into ourselves with *henun*, with mercy and compassion.

*Va-ethanan*, and I pleaded. Having reached into himself for his own mercy and forgiveness, Moshe then addressed God. Moshe prayed that God's sense of mercy would take precedence over God's judgment. Adonai, God of mercy, Elokim, God of judgment. Gur Aryeh explained the combination of the two names as follows:

"Although You sit in judgment, have mercy upon me with Your Name that connotes mercy."

And we await the answer and pray that God's mercy will take precedence over God's judgment. We have experienced much goodness, much fullness. We ask to continue our journey. We ask to enter the places of our dreams, the Canaan of our souls.

*Va-yitabair*, and God passed into Godself. As Moshe reached into himself to ask the question, so did God reach into God's self for the answer. God's answer began with the same reflexive verb form. According to Rabbi Hirsch's translation of *va-yitabair*, God passed over the border of God's inner self to take a stand against Moshe with the whole of God's personality [21, p.39,v. 26].

Moshe approached God from the center of his being and was answered from God's center. The only person who ever saw God face to face joined with God from the depths of his being. From the parallel reflexive verb constructions evolves the belief that both descended to their centers to find their respective truths.

We must accept the final answer of God. We reach out in prayer for time, for health, for strength. We approach God in honesty and hope and we trust in God for God's answer.

And Moshe received his answer to his plea to live out his dream, to lead the people into the land of Canaan. God's answer was direct, definite, and disappointing:

“The Lord said to me, ‘Enough for you!

Never speak to me of this matter again.’” (3:27)

God told Moshe, “Rav lach . . .” You have finished your task on earth. Moshe, as always, knew his responsibility to the people. Moshe's response was to teach what the people needed to know in order to succeed as a people. He wanted to be sure that they had that which was denied him. He would review all the laws with the people, so that they would be allowed to take possession of the land.

“and now, O Israel, hearken to the laws and regulations that I am teaching you to observe, in order that you may live and enter and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.” (4:1)

Moshe accepted his fate and used his remaining time to pass on the legacy of God to God's people Israel. Moshe thought that his goal was to enter and conquer the land of Canaan. His strength, his gift, was the ability to transmit the laws, the binding force of the People of the Book. Perhaps, his forte was not as a military leader. In any case, he accepted God's decision.

And sometimes we must adjust our dreams. Sometimes we must take comfort in what we have had the privilege to accomplish. Sometimes we can see accomplishment in the privilege of the journey.

We never know the implications of our contributions. Indeed, the gift of Moshe had

taken us into exile and beyond as a people.

“It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

[22, p. 45, ch 2, v 21]

We may not complete our drawing of the apple, but we can leave the idea and the excitement to others.



## **Easing the Farewell**

*Parashat Vayeilech (Deuteronomy 31:1- 30)*

**“And he said: Your children are not your children . . .**

**You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are set forth.”**

[23, pp. 11-18]

**“For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. [23, p. 18]**

**Kahlil Gibran. *The Prophet***

There are things that I hope to see in this life. I remember that my mother, Goldie Brass Ginsburg, ז"ל, once told me that she wanted to live to see me married. When I grew up, most women married at twenty-one or two. I ended up missing the “perfect age” by five years. In fact, we both ended up marrying at about the same age.

When I became engaged, I remember telling my mother that I was afraid to marry because of her expressed wish. She was astonished that I was living with the understanding that my marriage would lead to her death.. She assured me that she hoped to see a lot more. She enumerated a few specifics and then made the general statement of there always being more. She was careful this time not to encourage a similar interpretation.

So, we all hold on to expressed or unexpressed wishes. I like to call them *shehechianu* moments, related to the prayer we say when we hear good news, wear new clothes, or simply celebrate that God allowed us to live until this time. Sometimes we are privileged and sometimes we are not. And so it was with Moshe in *Parashat Vayeileich*, who spoke to the people on the last day of his life about his unfulfilled wish, i.e., that he “shall not cross the Jordan.” (31:2)

“ he said to them:  
A hundred and twenty years old am I today;  
I am no longer able to go-out and to come-in,  
**And YHWH said to me:**  
**you are not to cross over this Jordan!**” [4, p. 997]

Our *parasha*, named after the first important word, *vayeilech*, begins with a word that was problematic to commentators. If a word is extraneous, according to the methodology of *Torah* study, there is a need to determine a reason for its presence. Ramban, wondering about the presence of this word, explained that Moshe “**went** from his own dwelling near the Tent of the Meeting and walked through the camps of all twelve tribes to bid farewell to his beloved people.” [2, Footnote Ch. 31, p. 1094] Sforno further explained that Moshe **went** to console the people “over his impending death, so that their sadness over his departure would not cloud their joy in having sealed the covenant.” [ibid] Ibn Ezra also described Moshe’s moving from tribe to tribe to announce his death and to assuage their fears. Ibn Ezra suggested that Moshe blessed the tribes at this time, although the blessings appear later in the text. [21]

(א) וילך - הלך אל כל שבט ושבט להודיע שהוא מת שלא יפחדו, וחזק לבם בדברי יהושע, על כן כתוב אחריו ואתה תנחילנה אותם (ז). ולפי דעתי, כי אז ברך השבטים, ואם ברכותיהם מאוחרות במכתב:

*And he went*- he went to every tribe to announce that he would die and that they should not be afraid, and he strengthened their hearts (encouraged them) with the words of (he said to Joshua in verse 7) Joshua, therefore after this it is written, “and you shall cause them to inherit it.” And I think (according to my opinion) that at that point Moshe blessed the tribes, even though the blessings are written later. (EBGP translation)

The above three commentators acknowledged that the word’s presence required an explanation and agreed that Moshe needed to walk among the people, bid them farewell, and give them assurances for their future.

*L’havdil*, this writer had another idea about the presence of this seemingly extraneous word. However, before analyzing my derivation, I first would like to explain why the presence

of a seemingly extra word warranted the response of these three commentators.

In reading the *Torah* there are certain assumptions. First, one assumes that every word is significant. There are no extra words. Thus, every seemingly extra word must be explored for its contribution to further understanding. Also, the order of words, of verses, and of *parshiot* transmit meaning. Things are not necessarily written chronologically: “there is no earlier or later in the Torah,” “אין מוקדם או מאוחר בתורה.” The ordering of words, of verses, and of *parshiot* is for the purpose of deepening one’s understanding of the text.

When I began to read *Parashat Vayeilech*, I wondered about the very word that began the *parasha*, a word which seemed extraneous: דברים פרק לא פסוק א

וילך משה וידבר את הדברים האלה אל כל ישראל:

“And Moshe **went** and spoke these words to all of Israel.”

I was intrigued. We really did not have to know that “Moshe went.” It would have been more direct and concise were this *parasha* to begin with a frequently utilized phrase as illustrated below: “And Moses spoke” **וידבר משה**:

ויקרא פרק כא

(כד) **וידבר משה** אל אהרן ואל בניו ואל כל בני ישראל:

And Moshe “spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the Children of Israel.”

במדבר פרק ט

(ד) **וידבר משה** אל בני ישראל לעשת הפסח:

And Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel to make the paschal offering. (EBGP translation)

דברים פרק לא

(ל) **וידבר משה** באזני כל קהל ישראל את דברי השירה הזאת עד תמם:

And Moshe “spoke the words of this song into the ears of the entire congregation of Israel, until their conclusion” [2, p. 1099]

I then wondered if there was any connection between this *parasha* and *Parashat Lecha Lecha* which begins as follows:

בראשית פרק יב פסוק א

ויאמר יקוק אל אברם לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך:  
”HASHEM said to Abram,”Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and  
from your father’s house **to the land that I will show you.**” [2. p. 54]

The promise to Abram was simply to be shown the Promised Land, the land of Canaan.

Through the shared word, a form of the word *go* or *went*, there may be a possible way to help Moshe make peace with his great disappointment. I wondered if the promise to Abram of only being shown the land would bring some solace to Moshe. In our own lives, I wonder if we can find a way to help our elders make peace with not seeing or experiencing their longed for goals.

We can apply the principles represented in the interpretation of the word *vayeilech*, among the various commentators in helping our elders and, also, ourselves. In keeping with Ramban’s interpretation, which had Moshe walking “through the camps of of all twelve tribes to bid farewell to his beloved people," we can facilitate the visits of significant friends and relatives to the elder who is declining and unable to travel. We can apprise relatives and friends of the situation and offer rides, trips, fares, or even phone calls, when possible. We can help our elders **walk** , i.e., have interactions with those who are significant to them. The visits can be mutually rewarding.

Following Sforno, who had Moshe walk for the purpose of transmitting hope and consolation, we can speak gently to our elders and give them the opportunity to express their own fears, and disappointments, and their hopes for the adult child. The adult children can use visits to share their gratitude for where their parents have brought them. The declining elder can

offer support, reassurances, and acceptance to their adult children. Moshe consoled the people. This moment was not the time for Moshe to either mete out discipline or express disappointment. We can learn from Moshe's example.

Then Ibn Ezra added the dimension of dispensing blessings and of creating a smooth transition. The declining parent can reinforce the competence of the remaining family. The blessings, which Ibn Ezra suggested were given at this point, add the quality of hope, comfort, and consolation to the adult children. The adult children can feel loved, forgiven, and appreciated. The blessings can be mutual, as the adult children can acknowledge their deep gratitude and love for their parents/elders.

I hope that the connection between Moshe and Abram will allow the declining parent to accept more peacefully what they left undone. Moshe was promised more than was Abram. Each generation has its road. Moshe was, at least, shown the land of Canaan, as was promised to the Father of our People. Moshe's reward was not cancelled, but was diminished. Hopefully, our elders will decline with more awareness of the wonders they saw and less pain for the places they did not travel.

In helping our elders, in fact, it may be better to follow our commentators, who had Moshe walking around the camp. It was important for Moshe to walk around, talk to people, understand their fear, and listen to their hopes. Before Moshe spoke, he developed an understanding for the group he was addressing through his personal contact.

As caregivers we can model ourselves after Moshe who visited, listened, assured, and promised. He knew that his leaving was frightening to the people who knew only his leadership. He knew to encourage his successor and encourage the people to follow him.

May we all move with our bodies and souls to reach out to our declining elders, support

their friendships and accomplishments, and ease their passage. And may we continue our lives, comforted by the blessings of our elders, moving forward with their many gifts, and remembering our treasured moments together.

## Letting Go

*Parashat Vayeilech 2 (Deuteronomy 31:1-30)*

My mother, Goldie Brass Ginsburg, z”l, who was very diminished by Alzheimer’s disease, had a rare lucid moment. She looked out the window and spoke to no one and to everyone, “I didn’t think it would be like this.” At that moment of awareness, she realized what she had lost and who she had become. She was no longer able to read or even follow a television program. I was most pained when she started a sentence in a meaningful way, and then slipped into nonsense. Would I have my mother back, if only for a sentence? The tease of lucidity was excruciating.

My father, Dr. Abraham Ginsburg, z”l, whose body was broken and whose formerly gifted mind remained functional, would express dismay and disappointment in what was termed one’s “Golden Age.” When asked how he was, he would answer, “I am doing the best I can with what I have left.” And with loyalty and devotion he struggled to do whatever he could to care for my mother.

So, I turn to our sources for comfort. I note that although the observance of Torahitic commandments is not usually rewarded, there are several commandments whose reward is long life. In *parashat Ki Teitzei*:

“If a bird’s nest happens to be before you on the road . . . and the mother is roosting on the young birds or the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall surely send away the mother and take the young for yourself, so that **it** will be good for you and **will prolong your days**. (*Deuteronomy 22:6-7*)

“A perfect and honest weight shall you have, a perfect and honest measure shall you have, **so that your days shall be lengthened** on the Land that HASHEM, your God, gives you.” (*Ibid 25:15*)

In *parashat Va-ethanan*:

“This is the commandment, and the decrees, and the ordinances that HASHEM, your God, commanded to teach you . . .  
So that you will fear HASHEM, your God, to observe all His decrees and commandments. . . **so that your days will be lengthened.**” (*Ibid* 6: 1-2)

Also, in the Ten Commandments, appearing in *parashat Yitro* and in *parashat Va-ethanan*, the fulfillment of the commandment of honoring one’s parents is rewarded with lengthened days.

Long life must be deemed inherently good, since it serves as a reward.

In *parashat vayeileich*, our *parasha* this *Shabbat*, Moshe shared his own deep disappointment with the ending of his life. The statement he made in the second verse of the *parasha* outlines the causes for his reaction. The verse is as follows: (*Deuteronomy* 31:2)

ב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים בְּרִמְאָה וְעִשְׂרִים שָׁנָה אֲנֹכִי הַיּוֹם לֹא-אוּכַל עוֹד לְצֵאת וּלְבֹא

וַיְהִי הָאָמַר אֵלַי לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה;

“I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in, for HASHEM has said to me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan.’” [2., p. 1095]

We shall explore how every phrase is an expression of Moshe’s disappointment.

We shall begin with the first clause of the sentence:

**“I am a hundred and twenty years old today. . .”**

First, Moshe’s age of one hundred and twenty years may possibly be interpreted as a reminder of God’s anger and disappointment. In the *Book of Genesis* there is a listing of the ages of various descendents of Adam, from Adam until Noah. (Chapter 5) Most of these descendents lived more than nine hundred years. Immediately after the listing of the names and ages of these descendents, there was a reporting of some inappropriate unions. (Chapter 6) Then God decreed



that man would live only one hundred and twenty years, as retribution for their licentious behavior.

“And HASHEM said, ‘My spirit shall not contend evermore concerning Man, since he is but flesh; his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.’” (*Genesis 6:3*)

Although after God’s decree Abraham was granted 175 years, Isaac, 180, and Jacob, 147, Moshe was granted exactly the decreed number.

We shall continue with the second clause which presents some of Moshe’s possible limitations:

**“ . . . I can no longer go out and come in . . . ”**

According to the some commentators, Moshe was aware of his own limitations. Ibn Ezra cited that the going out and coming in refers to going to and returning from war. (The word *latzait*, to go out,” is the word used in reference to going to war, “*latzait lamilchama.*”) Ibn Ezra explained further by quoting Moshe’s possible reasoning:

אבן עזרא דברים פרק לא פסוק ב

(ב) לצאת ולבא - במלחמה, והטעם - כי אילו לא הייתי מת עתה, אין בי יכולת להלחם, ואין לכם צורך למי שיעזוב אתכם, כי השם ישמיד הגוים גם יהושע, והעד: מה שראיתם בעיניכם במלחמת סיחון עוג:

**“To go out and to come in: in war, and the reason: ‘If I were not to die now, I would not have within myself the capacity to fight.’ They have no need for the one who will be leaving them, as God will destroy and nations and also Joshua ( will do the same). And the proof is what you saw with your eyes in the war of Sihon and Og.”** (EBGP translation)

Thus, Ibn Ezra focused on the idea that Moshe was no longer capable of fighting. Moshe stated, “I am not able to go out and come in,” which can mean I am no longer capable of engaging in and disengaging from battles. Ibn Ezra has Moshe then comforting the Israelites with the idea that they no longer have a need for him, as God will destroy the nations and, also,

Joshua (will do the same). Rashi, on the other hand, stated that Moshe continued to have physical capabilities, but his mental capacities were blocked.

Rashi presented several possible options for explaining this phrase, “I will not be able go out and come in.”

### רש"י דברים פרק לא פסוק ב

לא אוכל עוד לצאת ולבא - יכול שתשש כחו, תלמוד לומר (דברים לד, ז) לא כהתה עינו ולא נס לחה. אלא מהו לא אוכל, איני רשאי שנטלה ממני הרשות ונתנה ליהושע. דבר אחר, לצאת ולבא בדברי תורה, מלמד שנסתמו ממנו מסורות ומעינות החכמה:

Rashi asked:

**“Is it possible that his strength became feeble? From a later text we learn (*Deuteronomy 34:7*), ‘His eye had not grown-dim, his vigor had not fled.’ (translation: Fox) But what is the situation? (Rather, Moshe would have said), ‘I am not entitled to (go out and come into the land) as the permission was given to Joshua.’ Another opinion: to engage in the in’s and out’s of a Torah discussion (*lavo b’dvarim* means to discuss), which teaches that the traditions and the sources of wisdom were blocked.”** (EBGP translation)

Rashi did not agree with the idea of Moshe’s becoming feeble. His proof text (*Deuteronomy 34:7*) reported, “His eye had not grown-dim, his vigor had not fled.” In this case the reason would be God’s removing Moshe’s entitlement to enter the Land and giving it to Joshua. The final opinion describes the diminished mental capacities of Moshe, based of the phrase under discussion. This opinion deduces that Moshe was not able to manage Torah discussions at this point. Rashi opposed Ibn Ezra’s idea of Moshe’s physical weakness, but rather cited Moshe’s blocked mental capacities. The removal of Moshe’s entitlement to enter Canaan will not be a part of this discussion.

Rabbi Baruch ha-Levi Epstein (1860-1941) wrote a commentary on the *Torah, Torah Temimah, The Perfect Torah*, which is cited below. Rabbi Epstein presented his position in

response to Ibn Ezra's idea of physical limitation and Rashi's idea of diminished or blocked mental capacity as the major deterrent to Moshe's being prevented from maintaining his leadership and crossing the Jordan

תורה תמימה דברים פרק לא פסוק ב

לצאת ולבוא - מאי לצאת ולבא אילימא לצאת ולבא ממש, והכתיב (ס"פ ברכה) לא נס ליחה, וכתיב (שם) ויעל משה מערבות מואב אל הר נבו, ותניא, שתיים עשרה מעלות היו שם ופסען משה בפסיעה אחת, א"ר שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יונתן - לצאת ולבא בדברי תורה, מלמד שנסתתמו ממנו שערי חכמה<sup>2</sup> [סוטה י"ג ב']:

**“To go out and to come: What could ‘to go out and to come’ mean if not to actually “to go out and to come.’ And it is written at the end of the *parasha, vezot haberachah*, ‘his eye has not dimmed and his vigor had not diminished.’ And it is written there (i.e. in *parashat haberachah*) ‘Moshe ascended from the plains of Moab, to Mount Nebo,’ and we learn in the Braita: ‘There were twelve steps there and Moshe strode them with one step.’**

**Said Rabbi Shmuel the son of Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yonatan- to go out and to come (i.e. to discuss) words of Torah. This teaches that that the gates of wisdom blocked themselves from him.”(Tractate Sotah 13b) (EBGP translation)**

This last commentary, in effect, described that Moshe was physically able to climb twelve steps in one step while ascending to the mountain from the planes of Moav.

(Deuteronomy 34:1) And we learn And in the *Tractate Sotah* 13b, Rabbi Yonatan said that he (Moshe) was unable to manage the in's and out's of the words of the Torah. Thus, we learn that the gates of wisdom slammed themselves shut before him.” (EBGP translation)

**“... for HASHEM has said to me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan.’”**

Although Rashi mentioned the appointment of Joshua as Moshe's replacement, there is no mention of a punitive situation. The controversy seems to focus on whether Moshe lost his leadership and, thus, his opportunity to cross the Jordan due to loss of physical strength or mental acuity.

For whatever reason we select, Moshe “ **shall not cross this Jordan.**”

And the last years of my parents' lives were harsh and difficult. My mother had a strong body that held a mind for whom "the gates of wisdom were blocked." My father could not move easily or well. "His strength became feeble."

In the Talmud in the section about honoring one's parents, the question is asked throughout, "until when." (*Tractate Kiddushin* 31a, 32a)

“עד היכן כבוד אב ואם?”

Until what point/ what is the limit of honoring one's father and mother?

Until what point can Moshe maintain his leadership? . Moshe, according to Ibn Ezra was losing his physical strength, while Rashi seemed more comfortable in describing Moshe's mental deterioration. Moshe had received and transmitted the Law, he had faced Pharaoh, had led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the desert, and he was the only person who ever spoke to God face to face. But no matter his greatness, he was not up to the next task, that of leading the people in battle. His life was not extended artificially and he died with dignity.

When we think of extending the lives of our parents, it is important to ask for whom is the extension. The people of Israel continued with God and with another leader. Moshe was able to die as a capable leader who led the people with full physical and mental strength.

My mother could have died ten days before she succumbed, but we could not deny her antibiotics. My father lived five painful years after being intubated.

May we know when to allow our parents their final peace. May we consider the consequences to the parent of artificially extending their time on earth. May we know until when should we keep our parents alive and when we allow them to join our ancestors.

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