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## ***Shema Koleinu – Hear Our Voices***

**Rabbi Yoel H. Kahn**

**Rosh Hashanah 5770 - September 19, 2009**

I rise this morning to speak to you about a topic about which I am eminently unqualified to speak but about which, many people have assured me, I will soon become an expert.

In our High Holiday liturgy, we read: *Shema koleinu... Listen to our voices*. We ask: *Al tashliekanu l'et zikhah... Do not cast us away when we are old; as our strength diminishes, do not abandon us (Psalm 71:9)*.

Some of us, or our parents, or our loved ones, are old and remain fully engaged with life; some of us have family members who live with us, or in their own homes, or a residence, near or farther away, who are aging and fading; many of us are ourselves confronting each day the challenges and reality of aging – dealing with issues of memory, of strength and endurance, with bodies whose joints and organs are tired. We may be exchanging our mobility and independence for a life characterized by increasing interdependence, perhaps making new connections and forging new relationships, and we may find, as adult children and parents, that we are intertwined in each others' lives more deeply than anyone really wants; in the meantime, we anxiously parse our own and our loved one's conversations, habits and actions for any signs of impending dementia or bear witness to the vibrant personality that was once bound up with this body but is now draining away.

For us, these experiences are new, but they are very familiar to the Jewish tradition; ours is a very ancient spiritual community. The foundation of Jewish ideas about aging is a verse from the Torah: *מִפְּנֵי שֵׂיבָה תִּקְוֹם יְהוָה דְרַתָּ פָנָי זָקֵן וְיִרְאַתָּ מִן אֵלֵי ה' אֲנִי יְהוָה: Before one of graying hair shall you rise, and you shall give respect to the presence of the elder, and you shall be in awe of your God, I am Adonai (Leviticus 19:32)*.

This mitzvah is addressed not to the elder-qua-elder, but to all of us; to us in our relationships with the elders among us, and to the self-which-is-growing-older inside each of us. Some of you here today, everyone recognizes, are our elders; others of you do not particularly see yourselves as an old person—and are, I know, a bit distressed when I and other people think of you in such a fashion. All of us, regardless of our chronological accounting, are aging, every day.

Who is old? The boundary line is clear: an old person is someone who is significantly older than me. For young people, growing be older is desirable—do you remember being five and yearning to be six? At sixteen to be eighteen, and at nineteen “only if I were twenty”? When, in this culture,

do we turn the corner, such that growing older has negative associations – Is it when we are suddenly “over thirty,” and discover that we can’t run as fast as when we were twenty—and, furthermore, no longer trustworthy? Is it forty, which long ago became “the new thirty”? Is it when you turn fifty and start getting mailings, as I did this year, from the AARP? At seventy? Eighty? American Jewish poet Stanley Kunitz, on the occasion of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and contemplating challenges ahead, remarked wistfully: “Oh to be ninety again...”

Perhaps being an older person is marked by the awareness that, by any reasonable estimate, the remaining years we have are fewer than those we have already lived. A core developmental life task as we age is the work of integration, whereby we come to view our life not as being over, or completed, but perhaps as realized. The years we have lived are not “behind us,” but for better or worse, like our parents, something we carry with us. Our attitude towards time, therefore, need not be that “it is being used up,” but rather our life and life experiences are growing fuller and richer and deeper. With such a perspective, wherever I am on my life’s journey, I might look forward and back and see a wholeness, a continuity of completion and anticipation—not just a succession of discarded calendar pages.

Have you ever gone into a store and looked at a rack of greeting cards? All those targeted at people in mid-life emphasize loss—loss of hair, loss of beauty, loss of sexual attractiveness or activity; their humor is rooted in fear. Now stereotypes and clichés often haven a pinch of truth in them, but only a partial truth.<sup>1</sup>

So it is true that growing older is intimately connected with loss... we cannot physically do what we once could; our mental acuity slows down. As our life extends, loneliness encroaches as spouses, siblings and friends become disabled or die. While we may transform our independence into mutual interdependence and cultivate new relationships, aging often involves a loss of our freedom. I remember my grandmother, whom I moved into a nursing home at the age of ninety-six; she would have far preferred to stay in her dark apartment, living on peanut butter and Ritz crackers, than spend a day of her life in the beautiful, well-staffed facility where she felt was no longer in control of any aspect of her own life. However timely, necessary and “better” this move was, we added insult to injury by refusing to hear and honor her truth about what was happening to her. *Shema koleinu... Listen to our voices.*

Many of us are fearful of aging. Do you remember the hand lotion commercial? The mother and the daughter put their hands side-by-side, and... it’s a miracle! We can’t tell them apart; the mother is so fortunate, her hands look so young! This is the culture of denial; see, nothing has changed.

Judaism has a different perspective. According to a midrash, this was indeed the way of the world until the time of Abraham. Before Isaac was born, no outward signs distinguished the chronological age of one person from another. So when Isaac and Abraham would go out together, Abraham would get carded, too, because no one could tell them apart... But Abraham, one hundred years old when his son was born, felt unappreciated for the person who he had become and the life he had lived. He asked, therefore, to be crowned with outward signs of his age—and thus it was as a

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<sup>1</sup> This is an example of a false synecdoche, in which a partial truth replaces the complete truth; placing such a false truth at the center is what Judaism understands “idolatry” to be.

reward that the physical signs of aging entered the world.<sup>2</sup> Wrinkles and gray hair, then, are not of any inherent worth, but they are the outward markers of the older person—the experience in the vessel—and thus they are a crown of honor, not an excuse for Botox injections.

מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּקְוִים וְהָ דִרְתָּ פְּנֵי זָקֵן *Before one of graying hair shall you rise, and you shall give respect to the presence of the elder.*

Notice the second phrase “*v’hadarta pnai zaken*” – glorify or honor the face of the aged.” Who is the Torah addressing? The verb *hadar* usually means “to make beautiful or adorn.” It’s a mitzvah to spend money on nice things which enhance the fulfillment of a mitzvah; it’s nice to have a beautiful menorah, or mezuzah, or candle sticks. Of course ordinary candlesticks will do; I have often, when traveling, lit birthday candles on a plate and they worked just fine—but *hadur mitzvah*, it’s really nice when there are shining candlesticks with tall tapers on the table.

Our task, the Torah teaches, is *hadarta pnai zaken*... to honor and to glorify the face of the elder. This mitzvah begins with the self, with our own acceptance and embrasure of who we are, as aging and growing individuals.

We look in the mirror and recognize some wrinkles and more than a little gray, we discern some subtle changes that affirm the truth of our changing circumstances... *Hadarta p’nai zaken*— the mitzvah is to name and not hide this truth, honoring the transformation and recognizing its beauty. . In Judaism, self-respect and self-love begin with the ownership and acceptance of one’s advancing years as a sign of honor.

Perhaps we can turn our attention from being—When did I cross the threshold? How did this happen to me?—towards becoming: What does it mean to become an elder? How might I claim and own this title and position in life?

For many people, there are significant rewards in growing older. Competition, egocentricity, immaturity and haste may be gradually replaced by reflection, patience, wisdom and perspective. (This is how I know I am not there yet!) When we are honest about what we can do and what we can’t, when we ask less about what we need to be doing and more of what we want to be doing, when we are engaged with the world—on whatever scale—our own engagement with ourselves is invariably less pressing. Growing into elderhood begins with the mitzvah: *Hadarta p’nai zaken. You shall honor the face of the elder.*

Elsewhere in the Torah, in the Ten Commandments, we learn “honor your father and your mother that your days may be long on the earth.” Now the *mitzvot* are not given to the *children* of Israel, but to the *people* of Israel. This mitzvah is addressed to us: the adult children of parents a generation older than we are. My own capacity to see the elders in my life as being fully engaged and alive, and not simply old and therefore shutdown, was taught to me many years ago by Ursula Sherman, *aleha ha-shalom*, a long term Beth El member and the parent of one of my childhood friends. When she was in her late fifties—at the time I was a college student—Ursula told me about how her relationship with her own mother was changing, and how she hoped to transform it in the years ahead. I have never forgotten this conversation—it was the beginning of my understanding that people have the capacity to learn, grow and change at every stage of life; it helped me begin to see my own adulthood not as a static phenomenon that you arrived at and then, you’re done! --but as

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<sup>2</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 65:9 and BabylonianTalmud, Baba Metzia 87a.

dynamic; and I began to appreciate that the older person, no less than the child or the younger adult, is capable of learning, changing and growth. We too easily confuse a loss of hearing with an inability to listen; decrease of visual acuity with the loss of insight; and slowness of movement with the decrease of passion. The task in our meeting with our elders— including our own elder selves—is to listen and respond to the truth of the moment, to be the Buberian Thou in true meeting. Thus we pray: *Shema koleinu—Hear our voices, do not turn away.*

“Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long on the earth.” Let’s be honest. There is no empirical evidence that people who are respectful to their aging parents will in fact themselves live longer on this earth. Rabbi Harold Kushner has taught that if we show respect and honor to our elders now, we will be fashioning a world in which we ourselves need not be fearful of growing old, a world in which length of days will be known as a time of joy and not a burden.

We do not have time today to speak about how shriveled and torn the so-called social service safety net has become—it was never adequate to start with, and it has been devastatingly cut over the last year. I know we cannot speak of aging in our society without addressing public policy and social services. For this morning, though, I am going to focus on ourselves.

The Jewish tradition does not deny or turn away from the realities of loss which accompany growing older. Isaac loses his eyesight, King David has poor circulation and cannot stay warm at night. If we are to honor *p’nai zaken*, the elders in our families, communities and those among us who are elders ourselves, we must be able to acknowledge and accept the pains and grief, losses and setbacks which cannot be denied, even as we seek to mediate their impact. When we hear of a problem or pain, we often feel it so deeply that we can’t help, it seems, but rush in to fix it with a string of suggestions and ideas about “here’s what you can do.” Or we try to fix it by minimizing the reality—its’ not such a big deal, you’ll get over it,” Or we simply don’t go there, not in conversation or, sometimes, by physically staying away. *Shema koleinu. Al tashlikeinu l’et zikna... Hear our voice. Do not cast me off in my old age; when my strength fails, do not forsake me.*”

As we age, we may come to question our purpose and ability to contribute and make a difference. But the Jewish responsibility to fulfill the mitzvot has no mandatory retirement. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that God needs you and the community needs you. Heschel wrote: “What a person lives by is not only a sense of belonging but a sense of indebtedness. The need to be needed corresponds to a fact--something is asked of a person, of every person. Advancing in years must not be taken to mean a process of suspending the requirements and commitments under which a person lives.”<sup>3</sup>

The rhythm and discipline of Shabbat and holiday, of *tzedakah* and prayer, of study and teaching, can and should be sources for us of meaning, of purpose, of engagement with self, with community and with God. We must reread all the *mitzvot* in the light of a well-known rule from the Jewish legal tradition—one is obligated to fulfill the *mitzvot* one has taken on, but only to the extent of one’s ability. The prayers can be abbreviated, the worshipper may remain seated, the quantity of wine or food adjusted. So long as the person is acting with proper *kavvanah*, presence and attention, the obligation is fulfilled. “The mitzvah I give you today is not too hard for you to do...” the Torah

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<sup>3</sup> From “To Grow in Wisdom” in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (1966; repr. Schocken, 1988) and well worth reading.

teaches, “it is not beyond your reach.” If my mobility and range of motion keeps me from reaching as far as I once could, then we need to recalibrate the expectations and adapt our tools so that what *is* doable is valued and honored; the elders among us must know that the community needs you, and the entire congregation has to assume responsibility for facilitating their participation in the life of the community.

*Al shelosha devarim ha-olam omed*: the world stands on three pillars; *al ha-torah*, study and learning, *al ha-avodah*, the encounter with the sacred, *v'al g'milut hasadim*, and on engagement with the needs of the world through acts of social justice. Instead of asking the elders we meet—and, I want to emphasize, for the elders in the room, I am speaking to you too—instead of just asking “how are you today?” or, steering the conversation to “What did you used to do?,” what would it mean to ask: “What are you studying or learning?” and “Where do you find meaning in prayer?” and how about “What mitzvah project of the community can we include you in?” In lieu of segregating our elders into social clubs, bingo games and the like, what if our expectations for our elders and for our community was of an intergenerational Jewish community, with a ritual life, study and action as primary commitments?

Two programs at Beth El this year reflect these goals. A model of what I have spoken of this morning is our Chai lunch group. Our elders invite the entire congregation to join them on the second Thursday of the month to meet a speaker from the congregation addressing a topic of current interest. Jonathan Simon, our Adult Ed chair, is curating our speaker series and our next speaker; I hope that many of you will attend on October 8<sup>th</sup> in the Sukkah, and that you will help us make this program a success by contributing as speakers, hosts, drivers and making calls to remind our elders that we would welcome their presence and participation. You will soon receive an e-mail inviting you to join a *chavurah*, a community within our larger community. You may choose to join a *chavurah* that consists entirely of people in your age demographic, but I hope you will consider joining a cross-generational *chavurah*, where people of different ages come together in community and common purpose.

When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, the Levites would stand on the steps each Shabbat morning and sing Psalm 92 – A song of the Sabbath day. As the multigenerational crowd would ascend the steps into the sacred precincts, this psalm would celebrate the creativity, faith and honored place of the elders of the people:

*The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree, as a cedar of Lebanon will they grow. Planted in the house of Adonai, in the courts of our God they will flower. Even in old age will their creativity flower and joyful they shall be; telling of the rightness of the Eternal, my Rock in whom there is no wrong.*

*Ken yehi ratzon*. So may it be. Amen.

I am indebted to many people over many years who helped me prepare this sermon. As Scholar-in-Residence at Congregation Sherith Israel, San Francisco, I was invited to speak at a program on “Finding Meaning in Later Life” in February 1992. At that time, my colleague, Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman, director of Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College ([www.hiddur.org](http://www.hiddur.org)), graciously provided me with resources and ideas, including the quote from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, reminded me of the hand lotion commercial, and introduced me to the midrash about Abraham being crowned with the signs of aging. Rabbi Friedman discusses these and many other resources in her book, [Jewish Visions for Aging](#) (Jewish Lights, 2008). At Beth El, Vivian Clayton helped me reframe my thinking about these issues. I am also grateful to the members of Beth El who have invited me into their lives and whose experiences and stories have inspired and informed these remarks.