

Kol Nidre 5783: Do Not Cast Us Off In Our Old Age
Kehillath Shalom Synagogue
Rabbi Lina Zerbarini

Just moments ago, we recited the heartfelt prayer, Shema Koleinu – Hear our voice, Eternal One, our God, and accept our prayer. Shema Koleinu, Hear our voice, is a centerpiece of the Selichot, or Forgiveness, prayers which have been recited since the Selichot service before Rosh HaShanah and continue through tomorrow.

In this prayer are included some heartbreaking words from Psalms:

אַל־תִּשְׁלִיכֵנוּ לְעֵת זְקֵנָה

do not cast us off in our old age

and

כְּכֹלֹת כֹּחֵנוּ אַל־תִּעַזְבֵנוּ:

Do not abandon us when our strength departs.

Why on earth would our prayers include these words? Why would we think that God would abandon us in age or weakness?

Because we think that God acts like we do. Because we abandon each other. Because we value youth and strength, and dismiss those who have neither.

In July, I was in Canada when Pope Francis made a visit there. His visit got a lot of coverage, and the New York Times headline read: Pope Francis, Slowed by Aging, Finds Lessons in Frailty. The article discussed how the pontiff, at 85, used his own vulnerability to demand dignity and respect for older people in a world increasingly populated by them.

I learned that these lessons have been a significant focus of his teaching this year. Francis has been experiencing physical challenges: major intestinal surgery last summer has left an impact, is suffering from torn knee ligaments and sciatica. He does not walk easily, and used his wheelchair publicly for the first time on that trip.

One of his bishops had asked him to articulate a new church teaching on aging, “not with words but with the body” because “the old can teach us that **we all** are, in reality, fragile.” This seems to have led the

pope to give a series of 16 talks over this past year on aging - using many words – but also to be more visible himself in his own frailty.

I thought of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who never wanted to be photographed in his wheelchair and had the Secret Service intervene and destroy the photographs of reporters who would not go along. At the time, many Americans did not know that he spent most of his time in a wheelchair. FDR clearly believed he could not be successful if he was regularly seen in his wheelchair. And he used his own illness as a metaphor: the Great Depression was an “affliction” that could be “overcome,” just as he strove to project his recovery from illness.

But being a human being, in a physical body, is not something we overcome. And it is not a disease. It is just life.

And an increasing part of life:

The world is changing. With increased longevity and lower birthrates, the proportion of older people in the population is growing. By 2030, Americans over 65 will make up 21 percent of the population, up from 15 percent a few years ago. By 2060, nearly one in four Americans will be 65 years and older, the number of 85-plus will triple, and the country will add a half million centenarians.

This is true globally as well, where the population aged 65 and over is growing faster than all other age groups. By 2050, one in six people in the world will be over age 65 (16%), up from one in 11 in 2019 (9%). By 2050, one in four persons living in Europe and Northern America could be aged 65 or over. In 2018, for the first time in history, persons aged 65 or above outnumbered children under five years of age globally. The number of persons aged 80 years or over is projected to triple, from 143 million in 2019 to 426 million in 2050.

The Pope opened his first teaching, back in February, acknowledging the reality of this shift:

“Let us reflect on old age. For some decades now, this stage of life has concerned a veritable “new people”, who are the elderly. There have never been so many of us in human history. The risk of being discarded is even more frequent: never as many as now, never as much risk of

being discarded as now. The elderly are often seen as 'a burden'. In the dramatic first phase of the pandemic, it was they who paid the highest price. They were already the weakest and most neglected group: we did not notice them too much when they were alive, we did not even see them die."

And he asked:

"The dominant culture has as its sole model the young adult, that is, a self-made individual who always remains young. But is it true that youth contains the full meaning of life, while old age simply represents its emptying and loss? Is that true? Only youth has the full meaning of life, and old age is the emptying of life, the loss of life?"

As I have been caring for my parents for the past 6 years, I have had a lot of questions about this stage of life, and what there might be to it beyond suffering. It has been terrible to see both my parents decline – my mom with Alzheimer's, and my dad struggle with the loss of his wife as she had been and then with his own health challenges, general frailty and now, dementia.

What is the purpose of this? Is there meaning here? How is the loss of ability, and especially, cognition, anything but a tragedy?

Pope Francis said:

"The meaning of life is not found only in adulthood, say, from 25 to 60 years. The meaning of life is **all of it**, from birth to death...this meaning of life ... is a whole."

Aging comes for all of us, if we are lucky. Despite this reality, it does seem to sneak up on us. Billy Graham was quoted as saying: "Growing old has been the greatest surprise of my life."

Last year, I went in for testing to be a kidney donor for a friend. I have two working kidneys and have been blessed with excellent health and thought I would share it. Well, I was surprised when, the next morning, I was told that I was ineligible to donate. I am fine – I am still in excellent health, but I can't share it with my friend – or anyone else - in this way.

I didn't *think* I thought I was immortal, but my sense of invincibility was broken. I had thought only teenagers thought they were invincible, but there I was, at 54, pretty shaken. This experience opened for me a different way of relating to my body and my self.

Many of you are older than I, so I'm sure most of you have had experiences that have challenged your sense of self as a physical human being. And many of you preceded me in caring for parents or other aging or ill loved ones, or are doing it now. Perhaps some of you have had the same questions, concerns, frustrations, sadnesses.

The Pope echoed Mordecai Kaplan when he spoke of the importance of continued growth, inviting everyone to ask, at every stage of life: "How can I grow — in age, that goes without saying; but how can I grow in authority, in holiness, in wisdom?"

What are the growth possibilities of aging?

I see a few. Perhaps you will see others.

We might grow in patience and acceptance

The Pope said: "When you are old, you are no longer in control of your body. One has to learn to choose what to do and what not to do. The vigor of the body fails and abandons us, even though our heart does not stop yearning. One must then learn to purify desire: be patient, choose what to ask of the body and of life. When we are old, we cannot do the same things we did when we were young: the body has another pace, and we must listen to the body and accept its limits. We all have them."

These are not qualities that are easily developed, and perhaps they are more accessible in old age.

We might learn how to receive, to allow others to care for us.

In a society that values self-sufficiency, can we be gracious in receiving care from others?

Many of us do for others. We have probably all been caregivers at some point – as parents, as spouses, as children of aging parents. It is

easy to find fulfillment in helping others. And it can feel hard to be the recipient. Maybe we can learn. Allow others to share their love with us.

We might learn how to acknowledge vulnerability.

Much of our lives, we put on a brave face. We are stoic, not showing others our need. In aging, or illness, we can't pass.

We might learn how to be with loss.

There is no getting around the fact that old age is a time of much loss – the loss of our own former abilities, the loss of partners, family, friends. How do we hold our sadness and grief and also remain aware of the blessings of life? Perhaps our hearts and souls might grow to encompass more of the joys and sorrows of life.

We might expand our capacity to feel worthy just by being.

Our society promotes the sense that we are worthy only when productive. Judaism teaches that the holiest time of the week is Shabbat, when we cease from labor and do not create. When we allow the world to be as it is. And today is Shabbat Shabbaton – the Sabbath of Sabbaths.

It is hard (for me, anyway), to feel my value separate from productivity. But we are holy, just by being. Is old age a time to grow into that reality?

Perhaps there are other things you have learned in your own aging or dealing with being in a body? I would welcome your sharing them with me.

We do not have to wait until we are challenged by aging or illness to explore these possibilities of growth.

And not just growth, elders have the opportunity to teach:

How? A few ways that I have thought of, and I am sure there are more.

First, to be an example of all the learning I just mentioned, and more.

Second, Judaism is a tradition of memory. The life experience of those who have lived longer, for whom history is simply their life, is a store-

house of riches. One that too often goes unvalued, but a treasure nevertheless.

Lastly, those of us who care for those who need care have what to learn. In this phase of our lives, my parents are still raising me. Teaching me how to be more tender. How to be more present. How to not let my anxieties get in the way of loving them. How to be an adult in their presence, and not fall back to the child I was, with all my fears, when they and I were young.

There is so much for the world to learn, if only we will all listen.

In his teaching, the Pope raised the story of Noah, and asked: "Will old age save the world, I wonder? In what sense? And how will old age save the world?"

According to our tradition, it has in the past. The Torah seems to think that, if you want something big done, ask someone old:

Noah - Noah was six hundred years old when the Flood came, and he built the ark to save all that lives on land.

Abraham & Sarah - Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran and were told that they, and their seed, would be a blessing to all the families of the world. Sarah was 90 when she gave birth to Isaac.

Moses was 80 when he led the people out of Egypt and began the journey to the promised land.

There is something big to be done now. The job of elders does not need to be, however, to build and schlep and lead. Pope Francis prayed that all elderly people would be made into "artisans of the revolution of tenderness, so that together we can set the world free from the specter of loneliness and the demon of war."

There is so much brokenness in the world right now that would be repaired if there were more tenderness.

We don't need to be able to drive at night, or move furniture, or shovel snow, or even bathe ourselves to become artisans of the revolution of tenderness. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. It might open

up a sense of purpose beyond producing. And offer perhaps the deepest meaning of all.

Shema Koleinu – Hear our Voice.

Recently, our past president Carol Rubin said: “Aging is not something to be deplored, it’s something to be celebrated! Have a sense of spirit! Of possibility!”

This is a voice to be heard. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be so.