

B”H

Thank you Meredith?,

Three old and retired Jewish woman were sitting out on the porch one sunny afternoon..

Rather than continuing to stereotype old Jewish mothers, I am going to focus on the Jewish perspective on aging, retirement and spirituality.

The Torah considers old age a virtue and a blessing. Throughout the Torah, "old" (*zakein*) is synonymous with "wise"; the Torah commands us to respect all elderly, regardless of their scholarship and piyety, because the many trials and experiences that each additional year of life brings, yield a wisdom which the most accomplished young prodigy cannot equal. It describes Abraham as one who "grew old and came along in days" ([Genesis 24:1](#))--his accumulated days, each replete with learning and achievement, meant that with each passing day his worth increased. Thus, a ripe old age is regarded as one of the greatest blessings to be bestowed upon a person.

This is in marked contrast to the prevalent attitude in the "developed" countries of today's world. In the 21st-century western world, old age is a liability. Youth is seen as the highest credential in every field from business to government, where a younger generation insists on "learning from their own mistakes" rather than building upon the life experience of their elders. At 50, a person is considered "over the hill" and is already receiving hints that his position would be better filled by someone twenty-five years his junior; in many companies and institutions, retirement is mandatory at age 65 or earlier.

Thus, society dictates that one's later years be marked by inactivity and decline. The aged are made to feel that they are useless, if not a burden, and had best confine themselves to retirement villages and nursing homes. After decades of achievement, their knowledge and talent are suddenly worthless; after decades of contributing to society, they are suddenly undeserving recipients.

On the surface, the modern-day attitude seems at least partly justified. Is it not a fact that a person physically weakens as he advances in years? True, the inactivity of retirement has been shown to be a key factor in the deterioration of the elderly; but is it still not an inescapable fact of nature that the body of a 70-year-old is not the body of a 30-year-old?

But this, precisely, is the point: Is a person's worth to be measured by their physical prowess? What is at issue here is more than the disenfranchisement of an entire segment of the population whose only crime is that they were born a decade or two earlier than the rest; our attitude toward the aged reflects our very conception of "value." If a person's physical strength has waned while his sagacity and insight have grown, do we view this as an improvement or a decline? If a person's output has diminished in quantity but has increased in quality, has their net worth risen or fallen?

Pause

We were created to make life on earth purer, brighter and holier than it was before we came on the scene. Seen in this light, the spiritual maturity of the aged more than compensates for their lessened physical strength; indeed, the diminution of one's physical drives can be even utilized as a spiritual asset, as it allows a positive reordering of priorities that is much more difficult in one's youth when the quest for material gains is at its height.

Certainly, the physical health of the body affects one's productivity. Life is a marriage of body and soul, and is at its most productive when nurtured by a sound physique as well as a healthy spirit. But the effects of the aging process upon a person's productivity are largely determined by the manner in which he regards this marriage and partnership. Which is the means and which is the end? If the soul is nothing more than an engine to drive the body's procurement of its needs and aims, then the body's physical weakening with age brings with it a spiritual deterioration as well---a descent into boredom, futility and despair. But when one regards the body as an accessory to the soul, the very opposite is true: The spiritual growth of old age invigorates the body, enabling one to lead a productive existence for as long as the Almighty grants one the gift of life.

### **Life: A Definition**

But there is more to it than that. There is more to the difference between the Torah's perspective on old age and that of the modern world than the classic dichotomy between body and soul, more than the question of material versus spiritual priority.

At the basis of the institution of retirement is the notion that life is composed of productive and non-productive periods. The first 20-30 years of life are seen as a time of little or no achievement, as a person acquires knowledge and training in preparation for the productive period of life. The next 30-40 years are the time in which his or her creative energies are realized; he now returns what has been invested in him by his now passive elders, and invests, in turn, in the still passive younger generation. Finally, as he enters his "twilight years," he puts his period of "real" achievement behind him; he has worked hard "all his life," so he now ought to settle down and enjoy the fruits of his labors. If the creative

urge still agitates her aging body, she is advised to find some harmless hobby with which to fill her time. Indeed, time is now something to be "filled" and gotten over with as she whiles away her days on life's sidelines, her knowledge and abilities filed away in the attic of old age. She has now returned full circle to her childhood: once again she is a passive recipient in a world shaped and run by the initiative of others.

Torah, however, recognizes no such distinction between life's phases, for it sees productivity as the very essence of life: the words "a non-productive life-period" are an oxymoron. There are marked differences between childhood, adulthood, etc., but these differ in the manner, not the fact, of a person's productivity. Retirement and the passive enjoyment of the fruits of one's labor also have their time and place—in the World To Come. In the words of the Talmud, "Today is the time to do; tomorrow, to reap the reward." The very fact that G-d has granted a person a single additional day of bodily life means that they have not yet concluded their mission in life, that there is still something for them to achieve in this world.

Thus, the **aPH**orism "Man is born to toil" (Job 5:7) expresses a most basic fact of human nature. A person experiences true satisfaction only from something he has earned by his own effort and initiative; undeserved gifts and handouts are unfulfilling and dehumanizing. As the Talmud observes, "A person would rather a single measure of his own grain than nine measures of his fellow's."

A working adult, burdened by the demands of life, may nostalgically reminisce on his childhood "paradise" as a time of freedom from responsibility and toil. As a child, however, he disdained such paradise, desiring only to do something real and creative. Challenge a child with responsibility, and he'll flourish; cast him as a passive, unproductive

recipient of "education," and he'll grow despondent and rebellious. For the child, too, is alive, and as such craves achievement; from the moment of birth he is already actively influencing his surroundings, if only by stimulating his parents with his thirst for knowledge and affection.

The same is true of adults of all ages. The promise of a "happy retirement" is a cruel myth: the very nature of human life is that man knows true happiness only when creatively contributing to the world he inhabits. The weakened physical state of old age (or illness, G-d forbid) is not a sentence of inactivity, but a challenge to find new—and superior—venues of achievement.

## **Why**

Indeed, such is human nature: life has meaning only when it is productive. But why? Why was the human being so constructed?

Because G-d created man to be His partner in creation.

G-d is the ultimate initiator and giver, granting us existence and life and equipping us with faculties and resources. But G-d wanted more than passive recipients of His gifts. He wanted a partnership with us, a partnership in which we would create and give as He creates and gives, and He would receive from us as we receive from Him. So He made the drive for achievement the very essence of human life.

## **A Course of Action**

The sad fact remains, however, that retirement, mandatory or otherwise, is a fact of modern living. Year after year, it destroys millions of lives. What is one to do in face of this human and social tragedy? Should one embark on a campaign to change this practice and the value system that

lies behind it? Should one look for the brighter side of retirement and seek to utilize its positive aspects?

Indeed, we must do both. We must change the attitudes of the leaders of the business and professional worlds, and of society as a whole. Most of all, we must change the self-perception of the aged themselves. We must tell them: You are not useless; on the contrary, you are a greater asset to society than ever before, and with each passing day and experience your value increases. The life-changes you are experiencing as a result of your advancing years are not a cause for retirement from productive life, but the opportunity to discover new and more meaningful ways to develop yourself and your surroundings. We must exploit the opportunities that the institution of retirement presents us. Indeed, Long life is a Divine gift, and the Almighty has certainly supplied us with the tools to optimally realize it. Education, like productivity, is a life-long endeavour and the time of old-age is an ideal time to further one's knowledge and connection to G-d.

In conclusion, the Torah's position is clear. Spirituality can give older people a new lease on life. It will enlighten them to their true worth and potential, and transform them from so-called futile has-beens into beacons of light for their families and communities.

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