

“Will You Still Need Me?”: Thoughts on Aging and Purpose

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD

Kol Nidre 2017

Some sermons take longer to percolate than others. This one has taken about 15 years. That was the first time that it struck me that the lyrics to the Beatle song, “When I’m 64” would be a great hook for a sermon. I decided to give the sermon in the year I turned 64. That will happen next week, so here goes.

Like many Boomers, the Beatles provided the soundtrack to my teen and young adult years. But the song “When I’m 64” seemed to be about my parents, not about me. Until recently that is. I learned that Paul McCartney wrote the song in late 1966 when his father, Jim, turned 64, one-year short of the mandatory retirement age in the UK. Here is the key stanza:

“When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now
Will you still be sending me a Valentine, birthday greetings, bottle of wine?
If I’d been out to quarter to three, would you lock the door?
Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m sixty-four?”

“Will you still need me?” Indeed.

Overcoming Denial

Just to be clear, I have no thoughts of retirement. Thank God, I feel like I am in my prime. I am in pretty good shape physically. And professionally I still have ideas and projects that people and foundations are willing to give me money to deliver. So, preparing this sermon has helped me confront the “denial” that afflicts so many of us who simply want to ignore the nasty little truth that aging happens, whether we are 75, 55 or 35. We all need to learn how to live more wisely because life is always shorter than we hope it will be.

Adat Shalom Programs

Our Adat Shalom community has given a fair amount of attention to the theme of “Wise Aging” over the past decade. About seven years ago, Fran Zamore and Vickie Bremen led a couple of Saging Circles based on a book by Reb Zalman Schachter-Shlomi entitled *From Aging to Saging*. More recently a team of Adat Shalom volunteers, accompanied by Rabbi Fred, were trained by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality to lead year-long courses on Wise Aging. Course leaders have included Carol Hausman, Margie Arnold, Larry Goldsmith and Fran Zamore. All told, between 60-70 members of Adat Shalom have taken one of these courses and another one will be starting this November. I hope that this sermon might lead some of you to consider taking that course.

Admittedly, I still consider myself in the “learner” category on Wise Aging. But I am making progress. I recall an encounter I had early in my rabbinical career. The year was 1978. I was a rabbinical student, still single and not yet 30 years old. I was hired to serve a small congregation in Media, PA. A member came to see me about a difficult personal situation. I listened as attentively and as compassionately as I could. But after about 45 minutes the woman stood up and said to me: “I can’t expect you to understand any of this. You haven’t even lived yet.” Talk about being blamed for what you can’t control! This is when I started to learn that being a rabbi could get complicated. (But I do intend to keep at it until I get it right.)

What I want to share with you this evening falls into three categories: living more fully; living with loss; and living into legacy.

Living more Fully

The reason that I hope this sermon will resonate as much with the Millennials in the room as with the Boomers is because the most important lesson in Wise Aging is that we need to live life more fully. I don't think it is ageist to say that young people waste more time than do older people. It is simply a matter of scarcity. We tend to squander what we have in great quantities; with youth comes the belief that one has all the time in the world to get stuff accomplished. As we age, we become humbled by the realization that the years slip by all too quickly, and that it can all end quite suddenly.

The first question posed to a human in the Bible is when God asks Adam: "Ayeka?" The translation: "Where are you?" is totally inadequate. God surely knows where Adam is. It needs to be translated in street slang: (*dialect*) "Where you at brother?" I can say that looking you straight in the eye. It is not a question about location; it is a question like: "what's on your mind?" "what are you thinking about?" God is asking Adam: "What are you going to do with your life?" A heavy duty question.

There is no stage of life when you can't ask yourself: "What is my life's purpose?" But think how often the answers to the near-term version of that question do not add up to a fulfilled life. Where shall I go to college? What will I major in? What job will I take? Who will I marry? Where will I live? We answer each question at the appropriate time, weighing the options. But as often as not, one wakes up at age 40 or 50 or 60 and decides that they are not entirely happy with their life. Often it is because circumstances change. A job turns sour. A spouse dies. A new opportunity presents itself. But sometimes it is because all the small decisions simply do not add up to a fulfilled life.

Nothing takes more courage than to get on the balcony, look at your life objectively and decide that you need to change course. There are numerous examples in our own Adat Shalom family of people who have changed jobs or made other significant changes in their life, some of them inspired by their work around Wise Aging. One participant told me that the course changed her life-long belief that her self-worth was determined by what she accomplished in her job. She retired earlier than she might otherwise have done and now enjoys more time engaged with art and music. Another Adat Shalom member was inspired by the course to move to Israel for a year to engage in serious Jewish learning, a life-long dream that, until she took the course, never seemed quite possible.

It turns out that asking oneself a serious question about life's purpose is also a pre-requisite to living a more spiritual life. American society bombards us with messages that ties our self-worth to job status, income, wealth and material possessions. The Jewish tradition however suggests that our self-worth should be tied to other things called *middot* or soul traits. Acts of compassion, acts of generosity and acts of justice are what makes a life worthwhile. An attitude of gratitude; an attitude of joy; an attitude of humility is what makes for a happy life.

Living with Loss

With all that said, I don't want to sugarcoat aging. If we had a choice, most of us would take a Peter Pan pill and stay young forever. But that is not an option.

With aging comes loss; loss of many kinds. For those who raised families, the first adjustment required is when children you raised move out of the house to live on their own, sometimes, far away. The relationship between the generations changes forever and it is often experienced by parents as a form of loss. There is also loss associated with retiring from a job. Not only is there a loss of income but, along with it, a loss of purposeful work, a routine, a network of colleagues and the status associated with a job. As aging takes a toll on one's body there is a loss of stamina, strength and good health. For many, aging also takes a toll on our mental faculties. And finally

comes the death of friends, relatives and life partners, reminding us that our own days are numbered as well.

Judaism has a clear teaching on how we should deal with loss. It comes from the laws governing mourning. The thrust of all of Judaism's teachings is that we need to experience it deeply. We shovel earth on the coffin in the ground; what results is a spine chilling thud of finality. And we are instructed to make the deceased the topic of discussion at a *shiva* gathering, not sports, not the weather and not the movie we saw last weekend. A couple of thousand years after the rabbis established these customs, the helping professions realized the emotional benefits of embracing loss fully.

A story is told of a student of the Kotzker Rebbe. He was on his deathbed with family all around him. In a weak voice, he asks his wife to bring him some wine. Puzzled but acceding to his wish, she brings him wine upon which says the *bracha* and shouts "*l'chaim*". The family is shocked. The man replies: "I lived my life, doing my best to fulfill God's will. I did it with a joyous heart. My death too is part of God's plan. Why should I not celebrate it? *L'chaim!*"

The moral of the story extends to all other forms of loss. While we don't welcome it, life happens. And with life comes loss. How do we accept it and not allow it to paralyze us? With an empty nest comes a stage of life that provides more time to travel and to volunteer for good causes. With retirement comes the opportunity to find an encore career, reinventing oneself in the process. And when friends start losing loved ones, everyone in the survivor's orbit is given the opportunity to re-define "family" and "community", extending ourselves to the survivor in ways that might not have occurred to us when that person was still partnered.

Yom Kippur provides good annual practice to prepare for loss. The one thing that is sure to exacerbate the pain of loss is when there has been conflict between people that has gone unaddressed. If one were to follow the Yom Kippur practice of asking forgiveness of those we have wronged and to be gracious in forgiving those who have wronged us, it would dramatically reduce the resentments and estrangement that often arise within families. All the symbols of Yom Kippur—wearing white, abstaining from food and drink, reciting Yizkor—engages us in an elaborate role play in which the theme is death. All to remind us that we should not postpone doing the things that are most important to us.

Living into Legacy

Several of the Adat Shalom members that I interviewed who took the Wise Aging course talked about how the experience encouraged them to give some attention to their own legacies. This is not a self-indulgent exercise.

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher and author of *I and Thou* once wrote: "Every person born into the world represents something unique. If not, they would not have been born." I recall using that quote when I drafted the first Baby Naming Ceremony that we used at Adat Shalom in our early years. Parents would read it as part of getting them to think about their dreams for their new daughter or son. But the premise of the quote is even more powerful as we enter our later years. How do we piece together the multiple layers of our life and what story does it tell?

Surprisingly, if we take the time to do the work, we come to a higher level of consciousness about what we accomplished, what we failed to accomplish and the kind of values that were manifested by the choices we made. I have sat with many mourners, preparing for a funeral, during which spouses and children struggled to articulate the deepest hopes and aspirations of their departed loved one. They will say to me: "My Mom, my Dad, never talked about that with me." Isn't it remarkable that people so rarely say the most important things to the people that they love the

most? The Jewish custom of writing an ethical will to give to one's children is designed to address this unfortunate phenomenon.

As I entered into my adult years and began a career as a rabbi, I was frustrated by the fact that I knew more about the inner lives of dozens of my congregants than I did about my parents. I wasn't sure if it was my failure, or theirs'. But think about it. At what point is there an opening for a parent to say to a son or a daughter: "Johnny/Sally: Come sit here. Let me tell you my life story and what I am trying to accomplish with my life." The reply would most likely be: "Dad, that is weird." There never seems to be the right time. Yet, at my urging, I got what I sought from my parents. One of my most cherished possessions today are tapes that both my father and my mother made in which they tell the story of their lives, sharing details that never otherwise would have emerged.

One Adat Shalom member told me that soon after she finished the Wise Aging course she was travelling out west and she bought an attractive wood box holding blank note cards. The box had the word "gratitude" written on it. Now, each night, she fills out one card on which she writes something about the day just ended for which she is grateful. She intends to pass the box on to her children. Think about what a treasured possession that will be for her children and grandchildren who will very much want to know more about what made their mother/grandmother tick.

Paying attention to our legacy is answering the question that Martin Buber posed: "What was the purpose of my life and, after I die, what will I have left behind of value for my children, my descendants and for the community that mattered to me?"

Conclusion

In many ways, the question in the Paul McCartney lyric: "Will you still need me?" is asked by all of us, at every age. Is there any stage of life when we are not concerned about really being seen? About not being heard? About being needed? No. But as we age, what we most fear—not being needed—begins to move from perception to reality. The most effective response? live more fully; learn to live with loss; and live into your legacy.

A final story. In tractate Taanit of the Talmud we read the story of Honi, the circle drawer. One day he passed by an elderly man who was planting a carob tree. He said to the older man: "Kind sir, are you aware that it takes about 70 years for a carob tree to bear its fruit? Do you really think that you will be around to enjoy the fruit of your labors?"

The old man replied: "I am well aware of the nature of the carob tree my friend. But just as my parents planted carob trees for me to enjoy, so too am I planting trees for my children."

Many people know this story only up to this point. And it has a nice ending. But the story does not end there. It moves into a pre-cursor to the Rip Van Winkle story. After the encounter with the older man, Honi has a meal which puts him into a deep sleep. The Talmud says that a rock enfolded him and covered him up for 70 years, the precise amount of time we have been told it takes a carob tree to give fruit. Honi wakes up and sees a man picking carobs from the tree. Honi, unaware of how long he slept, inquires: "Kind sir. Are you the one who planted this tree?"

"No" he replied. "That was my grandfather". Our lives are given direction by the legacies that we inherit.

Postscript

I'd now ask everyone to stand up. Let me encourage you to close your eyes. Think about the people who have planted for you. Those who have made your lives rich and fulfilling. Those who have been role models for you. Those who have been your teachers. Those who helped you figure out what was important in life.

(Pause.) Open your eyes. You may sit down.

If the people you thought of are still alive, make a commitment to reach out to them in the next 24 hours to say “thank you”. If the people you thought of are deceased, make a commitment to share their name and what they did for you with a loved one or a close friend in the next 24 hours.

Finally, as a way to pay it forward and out of gratitude to those who planted for you, make a commitment to do some planting of your own in the year to come.

May each of us be able to live a mindful life, to age wisely and then to know that the next generation will enjoy the fruit of what you have planted.

Shana tova.