Aging: The Jewish Perspective

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Aging: The Jewish Perspective

Asher Finkel

Introduction

The Biblical Tradition, Judaism and Israel

Judaism has developed out of a biblical tradition, a tradition that also affected Christianity directly and Islam indirectly. These three movements are historically revealed religions with a collection of holy writings that are based on prophetic reception of revealed knowledge. Judaism views Moses in the time of Egyptian Bondage (13th Century B.C.E.) as the father of the movement of prophets ending in the Persian period (5th Century B.C.E.). It preserves and transmits a canonical tradition of inspired Scriptures (the Old Testament) with which successive generations of Jews, whether in their land or in diaspora, continue to have a dynamic dialogue in faith and in practice.

In order to deal with the Jewish perspective on aging, one must first determine the meaning and its scope from precisely those determinants affecting a biblical orientation as the frame of thought for the emergent Judaism. The particular attitudes, value judgments and practical measures about aging, after all, flow from a perception of life itself. Responses to critical events and the period of aging are governed by a human consciousness of oneself (the intrapersonal), of a Being transcending oneself (the transpersonal) and of others who are either persons (the interpersonal) or non-persons (the subpersonal). These four human relationships embrace the total experience of living and they receive meaning and guidance from the religious system. The biblical tradition indeed has revolutionized human consciousness with its distinctive view of the four realms of relationship. The Bible establishes a sacred cosmos for Judaism as a religious system and offers a constructed world order for the Jewish society evolving in history, within which one lives and finds significance.

The Jewish orientation grew out of an earlier prophetic movement which challenged and negated the polytheistic religious expression and their mythopoeic frame of thought in the prevailing Near Eastern civilizations of Old Testament times. The classical prophets offered a new religious orientation of monotheism and a historical framework for human salvific development.
many centuries from early amphictyonic times to the end of the Judean monarchy (12th Century—6th Century B.C.E.) for the Israelite society to emerge out of its struggle and tension with the dominant forms of nature worship and with the polytheistic expression of the Near Eastern world.

After the Exile (6th Century B.C.E.), the monotheistic community of returned Judeans accepted the Pentateuchal canon as its constitution (Nehemiah 8-10). The transmitted prophetic works and other religious writings that came to reflect and support the Mosaic tradition were edited and included to form the authoritative texts for the historical community of Jews. The canonical Scriptures became the guide for the Jewish state in its self-determination, when complete freedom from Hellenistic Greek rule was enjoyed in the days of the Maccabean rulers (163-142 B.C.E.). The biblically oriented society adopted a theocratic model for living which produced different interpretative parties. All these sects shared in the common acknowledgement of an allegiance to the Bible but they differed on its application to daily life. The hermeneutical differences resulted in the teachings of conservative and liberal Pharisees among the people, as well as in the practice of the priestly Sadducees in the Temple and that of the stricter Essenes.

After the fall of Jerusalem, Judaism emerged as the rabbinic interpretation of a "way of life" without sacrifice and Temple. It adopted the liberal Pharisaic teachings and their hermeneutics. The diasporic situation became the historical setting for the developing rabbinic system. It began especially after the defeat of Bar-Kochba, the false national messiah, and after the edict of Hadrian forbidding the return of Jews to Jerusalem and to biblical life (135 C.E.). Judaism lived apart from Judea and has developed its legislation and socio-religious model in Galilee and in Babylonia. The rabbinic system spread into the European continent, North African countries and the Persian Gulf where Jews lived. In these lands, Judaism remained under constant threat of forcible conversion and extinction by the dominant faiths of Christianity and Islam. It learned how to cope with its precarious situation with an abiding hope of return to its homeland.

In 1948, following the genocidal action against European Jews by Nazi Germany, the world through the United Nations organization recognized the independence of Israel. This recent event in Jewish history offered for the first time since the Maccabees the opportunity for the creation of a Jewish state. Israel, despite its
hostile neighbors, is free to develop its own institutions and legislation which will remain within the bounds and be conscious of its biblically oriented tradition. The diasporan Jewry which faces assimilation maintains newer forms developed out of an adjustment with a modern philosophical and cultural setting. The contemporary phenomenon of Judaism as the religio-cultural expression of an independent democratic state and as a socio-religious community in dispersed lands is analogous to the historical times following the Babylonian Exile and during the Hasmonean rule. The two separate existences for the Jewish people give rise to forms recently studied with regard to aging and they will be considered in the conclusion.

This brief account of a long history of Jewish civilization with its roots in biblical times indicates dynamic cycles of growth. It is a human story of a collective body of Jewish people living with long memories of their former history of birth and decline. These events are recalled affectively in religious celebrations and fast days of remembrance. The Feast of Passover for exodus and the Fast Day for the destruction of the Temple, for example, deepen the commitment to human freedom and to the land of Israel and religious culture, respectively. Due to its biblical orientation, the Jewish people are moved by a historical awareness and corporate consciousness. They relate to one another as an organic whole, both extratemporally — a dynamic link with past and future generations — and extrapatially — a reciprocal concern for Jews of different countries in the present. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of history are affectively imprinted in Jewish consciousness which relates the person to the collective body of his people.

Person-Nation and Imagery of Aging

Our study, therefore, cannot ignore the correspondence of person and nation in relation to Jewish reflections on aging. Already the prophets, in their dramatic use of the parabolic word, depict the people of Israel as a living person. The idea of people convenanted to God was expressed projectively from the human experiential setting of marriage (Hos. 1-3). The nation began as an abandoned female infant who was adopted by God and then entered into a mystical covenant with God (Ezek. 16). It grew out of an affectionately remembered national period of youth (Jer. 2:2). Alas, as Israel grew older she became estranged from her transcendental mate. Israel in exile after the destruction of the Temple is depicted as a separated or widowed old woman (Jer. 3:1; Lam. 1:2). The
prophets of exile echo the nation’s self-image of reaching old age whenaloneness and deterioration set in. Yet Israel can continue to live meaningfully in embracing a prophetic conception of life and prospect for the future. On the one hand, the prophets call for national renewal of life in history through the human act of genuine return to God (Jer. 4:1, 2; Ezek. 18). On the other hand, prophetic vision depicts a collective resurrection after death through God’s act of creative restoration (Ezek. 37). Both prophetic messages were introduced with reference to the nation’s existence in days of destruction and exile.

Pharisaic teaching and rabbinic Judaism have translated these messages into pillars of Jewish faith for the individual. The rabbis insisted on the genuine act of repentance that can be performed anytime during one’s life span. In their view, it becomes necessary to gain a new lease on life as one faces death daily. They also declared that resurrection is a biblical doctrine. In their view, personal life even after death is the ultimate heavenly reward. The strength of the biblical tradition depends on its ability to offer dignity and worth to the individual person and to the historical society he belongs. For the human society is, in the last resort, persons banded together in the face of death. The earthly experience of repentance comes to renew purposeful life and the heavenly promise of personal resurrection overcomes the emptiness of death. In turn, they deepen a concern for dignified life that is filled with doing good in recognition of human work. Thus, repentance and resurrection are linked with the eschatological prospect of human life free from evil. The prophets and later the rabbis speak of the renewal of human personality, which eliminated either its heart of stone or evil inclination respectively. Such a psycho-axiological linkage in Judaism seems to deepen the meaning of aging as the crown of life when rebirth is possible and resurrection is promised.

The person-nation correspondence also reflects a psycho-historical understanding of the Jewish people. The aging nation in history was recently resurrected in its homeland when Jewry in the European diaspora faced death. The Jews in Israel see themselves collectively as an old man returning home to be reborn. He was threatened with annihilation due to antisemitism in Christian countries, but now he must prove himself in a struggle for existence and recognition by Islamic neighbors. He knows the experience of aloneness as an old man, but he must endure the pangs of birth as a new nation.
The Approach

This study focuses on the Jewish perspective on aging of the individual living in society. It is limited to an exploration of the rabbinic tradition as it is rooted in the biblical frame of thought. The perimeters of the tradition have shifted from time to time but the organic system of religion was preserved. In dealing with Jewish attitude and practice, as maintained through the ages, one must view the frame in order to understand the orientation. The way the Jewish society relates to the aged and the way the older Jew relates to himself can be properly evaluated if one sees the interrelatedness of conceptions of the self and the other, of God and life.

The first part presents the structure of biblical thought as it is determined by a particular human response in living due to a transpersonal relationship. Such a religious orientation affects the scope of interpersonal relationship and in turn determines the human attitude towards the older generation of parents, teachers and the aged. The Jewish attitude as reflected in the rabbinic sources will be discussed in the second part. The third part explores aging within the general concept of life. Since it relates to the terminal period of life, two intrapersonal views may result. Either one sees a developmental opportunity for life fulfillment or one may be negatively affected by a period of deterioration. This concluding part is devoted to how the Jewish tradition deals with these opposite possibilities. The three parts of the study flow from selected biblical text(s) which come(s) to capture the basic themes of exploration. All texts from the original sources are translated afresh in comparison with standard works.

Part I

“Even unto old age I am (present) and unto hoary time
I bear (your presence). For I have created and I sustain;
I bear and will deliver” (Isaiah 46:4).

Distinctiveness of the Biblical Tradition

The biblically oriented tradition is rooted in the human response to God’s presence: God has manifested in the acts of creation; he reveals himself in the history of mankind and he holds the promise of salvation. The whole person relates to the wholly Other (the numinous) as a creator who existed prior to and apart from the cosmos. This awareness flows out of a deep sense of being a
creature. "I am nothing but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). As a mortal creature, the person lives in the awareness that he shares this fate with a created world of other persons and non-persons.

Biblical faith is predicated on this crucial distinction between the transpersonal relationship and the subpersonal one. For in the ancient world of nature worship an identity between the two realms prevailed. An affective personalistic response to nature as the arena for the manifestation of divine wills and minds governed the mythopoetic expression of ancient religions. It is found in the drama of the sacrificial rituals and the recitation of creation-myths. Near Eastern myths related how the present cosmic order emerged out of chaos in the birth of gods battling for supremacy and control. God of the Hebrew Bible, however, stands apart from nature as its author. He was not born out of a chaotic world but existed apart as the creator of all. He endures beyond time and sustains all life in time. God can make his presence known to man throughout time but remains the abiding source of deliverance beyond temporal existence.

In mythological thought the sacred cosmos emerged out of chaos and continues to confront the latter as its terrible contrary. Nature itself is determined by a fixed order of seasonal cycles. Myth and ritual come to express verbally and dramatically the account of gods who gave rise to such an order from the beginning. In accordance with this view, society is embedded in nature, whose human members must preserve the cosmic order and social solidarity in the face of chaos. The human being is thus enslaved to an imposed mythical order of gods in nature and to the socio-political order in which he lives. To be in good relationship with the sacred cosmos and the human order will shield the person against the terror of chaos and anomie. To fall out of such relationship is to be abandoned on the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness and nothingness. The power of polytheistic nature religion was rooted in the dread of return to pre-creation state of chaos and darkness. To die is to journey into the netherworld, the realm of demonic monstrosities. Biblical thought has emancipated the person from subjugation to the cosmic order and from the dread of chaos. The human creature is a free being who can choose and shape a course of life. It was God’s intent to create the person in his image and thereby to bestow upon him the intellectual abilities to shape and to control the subpersonal realm.

Human freedom means responsibility for personal decision and
action to do good in the world of persons and non-persons. The biblical tradition, therefore, pays close attention to the growth of human personality that is beset by inner tension between egoistic and altruistic drives. The intrapersonal realm becomes the unique focus of early biblical code ("Thou shalt not covet," Exod. 20:17) and it is the ethical concern of the prophetic teaching. This concern for individual freedom was lacking in the mythopoetic world of thought and precisely Israel's genesis as a biblical people resulted from the event of liberation from human bondage. Through the experience of freedom, Israel became open to a radical new orientation so apodictically expressed in the Mosaic Decalogue.

The Decalogue and the Four Relationships

The earliest code of the Bible reflects a new orientation as regards four human relationships. The transpersonal relationship is established on the negation of hierarchical gods in the three realms of the cosmos. "Thou shalt not have other gods in my presence . . . those are in the heavens above or those are in the earth below or those are in the waters under the earth" (Exod. 20:3, 4). The cosmos is God's creation. "For God created the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them" (20:11). This creator is not an otiose god but is ever present in the human world. His providential presence was experienced in the historical event of exodus. "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt" (20:2). A holy day is set apart weekly to be open to God's presence. On the Sabbath, human life can enjoy sanctified rest in the abstention from daily work and its problems. The person deepens the sense of "imago dei" (being in the image of God) in the witness to God of creation. For the biblical notion of "imago dei" is linked with God's intent of human stewardship for the world He created (Gen. 1:28). The rabbis explain that the human being entered into a partnership with God in the work of creation. Thus, the subpersonal relationship as distinct from the transpersonal one is legislatively linked with the human concern for restful existence of the animal kingdom. "It is a Sabbath to the Lord your God . . . for you . . . and your cattle" (Exod. 20:10). The rabbis teach (Babylonian Talmud), therefore, that causing pain to animals is biblically prohibited.

The interpersonal realm is likewise affected by the transpersonal relationship. The Sabbath promotes a human concern for the subjugated people. This lesson is particularly stressed in the
Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue. "In order that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. For you shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 5:15). The interpersonal commandments are also linked with the transpersonal ones in the Decalogue. They are unconditional prohibitions to promote the sanctity of life. "Thou shalt not murder" (Exod. 20:13). For "whoever sheds blood is considered as the one who abnegates the 'imago dei'" (Mekhila ad loc.). The rabbis teach that anyone who destroys a human life is seen as if he destroyed the entire cosmos (see Part 3).

In a unique way the Decalogue ushers in the interpersonal legislation with the predicate that the blessing of long life rests in the human show of respect to the older parent, father or mother (Exod. 20:12). For a society that honors its aged values human life and is therefore blessed with longevity. In the Decalogue the biblical prescription of filial piety governs the social ethics. Like its counterpart of transpersonal demands, it reveals a new orientation for Israel. For the Decalogue concludes with the climactic law governing intrapersonal realm: "Thou shalt not covet." The rabbis consider this principle as the core of the biblical legislation. For it focuses on the inner world of the person, on his drives, intentions and thoughts. The Decalogue links the intrapersonal concern with the interpersonal laws. The Mosaic legislation guides the inner world of the person in contrast to ancient Near Eastern culture and law.

The biblically oriented community is rendered distinct by religious motivation for social action. Thus the book of Genesis offers the historical contrast between the archetypal representative of the Mosaic faith, Abraham, with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the model of a depraved idolatrous society. Abraham teaches "the way of God to do righteous and justice" (Gen. 18:19). Whereas, "the cry (of the oppressed) in Sodom and Gomorrah is so great for their sinfulness is very grave" (18:20). Abraham exemplifies the biblical way of altruistic concerns coupled with a loving faith in God. His first act of prayer is an intercession for the others, the sinful community. "Will the judge of the universe perform an injustice?" (18:23-32). The question of theodicy expressed in terms of the human predicament, which reveals the affective faith of the biblical person in relating the transpersonal encounter with the interpersonal concern. Thus, the social world becomes the arena
for translating the biblical consciousness of God’s presence. So did Jesus the Jew teach and likewise it was advanced by the contemporary Hillel and the later Akiba, the pillars of rabbinic legislation. A show of love in human relations is the governing principle of the Bible.

*God’s Presence and Human Response*

The biblical tradition is theocentric and it is governed by a theology of Presence. To live in God’s presence dictates the way one conducts himself in the other relationships. Human consciousness can be open affectively to the awe-inspiring experience of God’s apartness or can be deepened by the soul yearning for God’s nearness. The way of awe and the way of love relate to the anthropological view of the Bible. On the one hand, the person is a mortal creature conscious of his finitude and perishability (“nothing but dust and ashes”). On the other hand, the person senses a creative partnership with God in the cosmos (“a little lower than God,” Ps. 8:6). The biblically oriented individual aspires towards a fulfillment of his partnership with God through responsible actions of concern and love for both the interpersonal and subpersonal realms. In this manner, the person gains dignity and worth as an earthly creature (“crowned with glory and honor”). Egoistic aggrandizement is therefore the gravest intrapersonal sin in prophetic thought. Its folly becomes clear in the human awareness of creaturehood limited by death. “For when his death comes, he cannot take anything away; his glory cannot go down after him” (Ps. 49:17).

The biblically oriented personality, whether an individual or a collective group, is shaped by a covenantal awareness. It relates to God’s presence out of an attitude of awe and love. This motivates the person to develop a similar attitude of reverence and respect in the realm of human interaction. Furthermore, the person aspires to imitate God in his way of love and pathos. Thus, one elevates the meaning of life by the principle, “You are holy as I am holy, the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:1). “Imitatio dei” (imitation of God’s way) governs the ethical laws of Leviticus including the interpersonal commandment to “love thy neighbor.”

The drama of life in the relationship of marriage and family, in the attitude towards judges or kings provide imagery to describe a transpersonal relationship. In prayer, God is addressed as “father” in his attribute of love and as “king” in his attribute of awesomeness.
Thus, the ethical response demanded in interpersonal relationships also opens the person to the reflection on the meaning of relationship to God. In light of this biblical frame, the traditional Jewish perspective on aging can be evaluated meaningfully as it is reflected in attitude and in practice.

Part II

"Honor thy father and thy mother that your days may be long" (Exod. 20:12). "Each person shall revere his mother and his father" (Lev. 19:3). "Before the hoary head rise up and respect the presence of an old man, so you shall be in awe of your God" (Lev. 19:32).

Awe of God

The pedagogical principle of the Hebrew Bible is that the awe of God is the beginning of human knowledge (Prov. 1:7; Ps. 111:10). It is legislated apodictically in the Deuteronomic tradition: "Be in awe of the Lord your God and Him you shall serve" (Deut. 6:13). This religious attitude of "let there be heavenly awe upon you" guides the Pharisaic theology. The common worshippers and priests in the Temple concluded the daily intercessory prayer with the above Deuteronomic injunction. Early Christianity of the Second Temple period pointed to Jesus repelling the Satanic temptation of world domination. His scriptural response ushers in his own ministry with the same principle (Matt. 4:10 — Luke 4:8). For biblical faith is rooted in the human response of awe in God’s presence and such response is the biblical expression for religion (Gen. 20:11).

To be in awe is not to experience fear from external threats to one’s own existence — feelings that promote superstition and magic. It is a response of creature feeling from within oneself. Through this inner conviction one senses the overwhelming presence of the “mysterium,” which affects the person internally in the tension of “tremendum et fascinans.”

The rabbis (Babylonian Talmud) explain that one does not stand in awe of the Temple or its magnificent buildings but in awe of God for whose presence the structure is commanded. According to the rabbinic code (Mishnah Berakhot and Tosefta), the biblical prescription of awe posture in God’s Temple (Lev. 19:30) signifies in the pilgrim’s life an abstention from monetary items and the
minimization of material goods. For apostolic dedication to
Kingdom of God is to be experienced on the road as a sacred
pilgrimage in God’s presence.

To be in awe of God, therefore, can be translated into a religious
consciousness affecting all aspects of life. All realms of human
relationship are so governed and the verbal response of prayer is so
affected. According to the rabbinic tradition one lives by placing
God’s presence constantly in mind (Ps. 16:8). Such an attitude
governs the rabbinic prescriptions of blessings in all areas of life:
the consumption of food, the performance of daily tasks, the
witnessing of natural events and the pleasure of the senses. One
also relates to God in reverential speech and the careful use of
language. The excessive use of attributions and appellations in
prayer is prohibited. Human designations for a transcendental
reality are not to be applied lightly. Even when they are used, the
qualifier, “as if it is possible,” is introduced in the description.
Speech before God must reflect the genuine thought and intention
of the person. The standing posture assumed in Jewish prayer
reflects attentive and reverent awareness of God. The gestures of
bowing, kneeling and prostrating are clearly added to denote
creature’s humbleness.

Honor and Reverence

The forms of reverential posture, respectful speech and affective
attitude come to reflect awe of God. The similar corresponding
forms are introduced in the interpersonal realm in relating to older
persons. The younger generation relates to the parents, teachers,
the learned and the elderly. The rabbis have observed that the
biblical commandment regarding children and their parents is
phrased in the same terms as the transpersonal commandment,
namely to honor and to revere. Furthermore, they maintain that
the attitude towards the teachers and the sages must flow from the
same expression of awe before God. The elderly are to be
acknowledged with a standing posture and respectful speech. One
acknowledges the dignity and worth of the aged as he receives
God’s presence.

The apocryphal Ben-Sira, continuing the Jewish wisdom tradi-
tion in early times, commented on the linkage among expressions
of awe for elders and for God: “The fearer of God honors his
father. He honors his parents as masters” (3:6). To honor one’s
parents expresses a sense of awe and results in filial service. The
similarity between service of a son and a servant is clearly reflected
in the rabbinic code. The concrete translation of honor into action begins with maintenance and personal service. "Honor means one must give food and drink, dress and cover him and accompany him in and out." However, the attitude of awe towards a parent as a servant before a master expands personal services to "washing his face, hands and feet . . . anointing him and putting on his shoes."

Stories are told of the rabbis to show how far one must translate the fifth commandment into action.

"The mother of Rabbi Tarfon went walking in the courtyard one Sabbath day and her shoe tore and came off. Rabbi Tarfon came and placed his hands under her feet and she walked in this manner until she reached the couch. Once when he fell ill and the sages came to visit him, his mother said to them: 'Pray for my son Rabbi Tarfon, for he serves me with excessive honor.' They said to her, 'What did he do for you?' She told them what had happened. They responded, 'Were he to do that a thousand times, he has not yet bestowed half the honor demanded by the Bible.'"

This incident is often cited in Jewish literature as a model of Jewish filial piety. The climactic response of the sages indicates that the concrete expression of honor does not exhaust the infinite possibilities inspired by reverential love.

The rabbis focus on reverential love as the attitude motivating filial responsibility. The biblically prescribed responses towards parents are not rooted in loving acts but in the categories of honor and reverence. These categories embrace the feeling of awe. The behavioral attitude towards older parents should not be limited to their mutual feeling of love only. For when love is lacking and the situation produces tension and abuse, the sense of heavenly awe must guide the filial response. Maimonides, the authoritative codifier of Jewish law, explains:

"How far must one accord honor to one's parents? Even if they took his wallet full of gold pieces and threw it into the sea before his very eyes, he must not shame them, show pain before them or display anger to them, but he must accept the decree of Scripture and be silent."

"How far must one show reverence to them? Even if he is dressed in precious clothes and is sitting in an
honored place before many people and his parents come and tear his clothes, hitting him in the head and spitting in his face, he may not shame them but remain silent and be in awe of the King of Kings who commanded him thus.”

Both love and reverence for parents take as their model love and reverence for God. Heartfelt reverence in the presence of God, the internalizing of honor, must fuel the behavioral commitment. One whose filial relationship grows out of reverential love can check the inner anger provoked by his parents’ behavior. Reverential love promotes, on the one hand, patient response and attentive service, the rabbinic formulation for “honoring the parents.” On the other hand, it demands response of reverence, the complimentary biblical prescription. Reverential attitude is cultivated through a respectful awareness of parents’ presence even though they may not be present.

The fundamental expression of honor implies parental support but it must be accorded in view of their dignity and worth. The rabbis illustrate with the case of a rich man feeding his father well but with contempt.

“There was a man who always fed his father fattened hens. Once the father inquired, ‘Son, where do you get these hens?’ The son replied, ‘Old man, grind and be silent, just as dogs eat and are quiet.’”

The older teachers are viewed as parents and served in an attitude of honor and of reverence. So teaches Rabbi Joshua son of Levi, “a disciple must serve his teacher in all the ways that a servant serves his master.” The disciples would, for example, put the sandals on the feet of the master. The master is revered in respectful address (“my master and my teacher”), in conscious posture (“not standing nor sitting in his place”) and in consideration of his position (“not to contradict his words”). A contempt for his teaching through scheming, show of anger and conflict with the master are seen by the rabbis (Babylonian Sanhedrin) as the rejection of God’s presence. The person appears in their view to have suppressed the inner force governing religious life, namely the creature’s feeling of awe. For the teachers’ task in the first place was to instill a reverential attitude toward God in seeking knowledge. The master in the rabbinic code therefore is given preference over the parent, because “one’s father brought him into this world while one’s teacher brought him to the future world.” The teacher
relates to the disciples as his sons in whom he fathered wisdom and love of God. The relationship to God in reverential love is developed through the pedagogical association. The transpersonal realm serves as a ground to deepen the response of honor and reverence towards one’s parents. Thus, the rabbinic law (Mishnah Baba Mesia à) directs the disciples to prefer the needs and honor of his master to those of his own parent, should the two conflict.

The learned and the aged demand likewise from the person a show of reverence. Filial piety is restricted to biological and spiritual parents and therefore it is limited to one’s immediate circle. However, the presence of the sage, may he be younger or older, is acknowledged by the person unbeknown to him. The sage elicits reverential response, for he himself personifies a life in God’s awe. Similarly respect shown to the aged relates to a stage of life embracing all human beings. Therefore, the elderly are to be acknowledged respectfully whether they are Jewish or not. For their presence points to a human being full of life experiences on the road to death, triggering in us creature feeling and the sense of heavenly awe.

Parents, Teachers, the Learned and the Elderly

The presence of the aged in human life evokes an existential response to one’s own physical being, to his intellectual quality and to the experience of living. One relates to parents by the fact of birth, to his teachers and the learned by his reception of wisdom and to the aged by their achievement of experiential knowledge.

Professor Gerald Blidstein in his study of filial responsibility explains that “parents are creators and the recognition of human creators forms a continuum with the recognition of God as the creator.” There is a partnership of God and parents to be acknowledged in the biblically oriented society. The rabbis maintain that the sacramental union of husband and wife invites God’s presence in marriage. Life within the family was charged with near numinous significance. This religious attitude prompts Rabbi Joseph (Bab. Talmud Kiddushin) to say upon hearing his mother’s footsteps, “Let me rise before God’s presence that is approaching.”

Just as filial respect for parents has its model human reverence of God who created him, so does devotion to one’s teacher have its model in devotion to God, the supreme teacher. The rabbinic imagery of God who revealed his Torah on Mount Sinai is that of a sage teaching in the academy.

In a similar way, old persons personify the living tradition and
they are to be honored because of the many changes that they
witnessed in a long life. They transmit to the younger generation
the experiential lessons of the past as a living testimony to God’s
presence. “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many
generations. Ask your father and he will tell you, your old men and
they will inform you” (Deut. 32:7). Thus, the older generation
points to God who acts in history, the fundamental view of biblical
faith. Accordingly, the apocalyptic imagery of God is that of
“ancient of days” (Dan. 7:9), whose presence endures beyond the
existence of the four world empires in history (7:3-8, 17).

Authority and Theodicy

The parent, the teacher, the sage and the aged provide the child
with a sense of authority. As he grows older the person relates in
deepth to the ultimate source of authority. A society that develops a
reverential framework for its family, school and the elderly instills
in its citizens a sense of heavenly awe as the principal deterrent in
interpersonal relationships.

The disturbing concern of human appeal to God is the problem
of theodicy. So was it first posed by Abraham in prayer, “Will the
judge of the entire world commit injustice?” So did the prophets
and the psalmists classically phrase the question, “Why do the
righteous suffer while the wicked prosper?” Its very formulation
reflects how the person projects his questioning of human authority
that avoids justice. One indeed is free to protest the wrong committed
to his person even by his parents, teachers or older people.
Moreover, if their demands conflict with God’s commandments,
the person is instructed to avoid the former. In rabbinic view, the
very answer to theodical inquiry lies in the attempt to project a
sense of justice in human realm upon God. For it falls short in the
face of creation revealing the awesomeness of the creator God.
This awareness becomes the dramatic ending to the agonizing
dialogue on theodicy in the book of Job.

Authority and retributive justice are essential to the structure of
society and as such it is first encountered in the home. The family
unit is the essential basis of social organization and moral system.
These are maintained and developed by its educational institution.
Then, the attitude assumed towards the older parent and teacher
will advance the well being of the society. Such is the biblical link
between honoring the parents and the reward of long life. Correspondingly in biblical thought, “The awe of God prolongs life”
(Prov. 10:27). For a society that allows for the family and educa-
tional structures to disintegrate invites its own demise.

From Awe to Love

The criterion of heavenly awe is singled out as the fundamental demand of the biblical orientation on life. “Now Israel what does the Lord your God require of you but only to stand in awe of the Lord your God” (Deut. 10:12). Rabbi Hanina explains, “all is in the hands of Heaven except heavenly awe.” For the principle of human freedom serves the individual best in choosing to live by the sense of awe. It is a path that one takes first out of fear of heavenly retribution, the case of Job. He offers the model for gentile fearers of God, the semi-proselytes in rabbinic law. However, this religious path must be accompanied by “walking in God’s ways, to love him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul” (the continuation of Deut. 10:12). Climactically it is manifested in total commitment even unto martyrdom. Rabbi Akiba, who faced this ordeal in Roman times, sets the example for Jewish generations of martyrs with the teaching: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 6:5) means even if your soul is taken away.

Abraham demonstrates his loving faith in bringing his beloved son as sacrifice and only then he is acknowledged as “one who fears God” (Gen. 22:12). The rabbis explain (e.g. Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 22:12) that the deeper meaning of the biblical account is not the divine approval of the event but that Abraham’s act of faith caused other people to acknowledge the full dimension of heavenly awe. In the example of Abraham not only was the transpersonal relationship motivated by loving awe, but it was effectively demonstrated and applied in the interpersonal realm. The love of the person is linked with the love of God in a dynamic way, thereby promoting the idea of rehabilitating justice.

The symbiotic attitude of love of God and love of person results in the rabbinic explanation that a show of love for God is actually found in the personal conduct of one’s life. For he sets an example for others to follow.

The Jewish tradition locates the love for parent and teacher in the reverential attitude. Moreover, it is deeply manifested in the way of life of the older parent or teacher. Their lives are continuously valued and emulated by the younger generation. This leads to a loving acknowledgement by the community, which verbalizes its praise for the parent and the teacher as well as accords them proper station in life. Even after their death, their presence is
recalled in loving memory and in praise, the common Jewish practice on the anniversary day of their death. Reverential love towards the older generation dynamically builds a bridge with the younger generation, whose attitudes and actions will be forged by the sense of heavenly awe.

Part III

“A crown of glory is hoary age, in the way of righteousness it can be attained” (Prov. 16:31). “Do not cast me off in the period of aging, forsake me not when my strength is spent” (Prov. 71:9).

The Image of God and Imitation of God

The social attitude towards the older person is determined by the impact of the transpersonal relationship. Likewise the intrapersonal attitude of how one relates to aging himself is reflected in the personal view of God. Finally, theistic consciousness corresponds to the way the society and the individual relate to each other. For the content of meaningful life finds expression in the social setting. The person will be charged with a sense of fulfillment in growing old when the interpersonal realm generates altruistic love and reverential response to his being. These social attitudes evoke inner feelings of human dignity and worth, the force making life meaningful.

Life itself in the biblical tradition is perceived as something that transcends purely biological and material existence. It flows from the loving God and His numinous spirit, “who has crowned (the person) with ‘kabod’ and ‘hadr’” (Ps. 8:6). (glory and honor) However, these attributes convey phenomenologically dignified presence (weightiness) and manifested worth (splendor) respectively. Thus, the society that is guided by the biblical responses of “kabod” to older parents and teacher as well as of “hadr” to older persons, promote a numinous view of life for the individual.

The focus of the above Psalm is on the biblical notion of person created in the image of God, namely, a being bestowed with dignity and worth. As such, the concern is with the development of the human personality that achieves purposeful living. To be conscious of life is integral to human existence. Consciousness is deepened by the numinous quality placed on the content of life. The biblically oriented rabbinic tradition speaks of a human con-
sciousness that strives to imitate God’s way in the world of man and nature. In order to achieve dignity and worth, the person must elevate himself through “imitatio dei” and thereby he transcends a merely biological existence.

The person is not perceived dualistically in the biblical tradition. In contrast to Greek thought, he is not a living composition of an alien immortal soul residing in an earthly body. The rabinic system is grounded in a monistic view of the person, whose personality is affected by different drives, qualities and faculties. There is an heavenly aspect of his existence which can develop an earthbound personality into a divine image. Yet the preservation of the body affected by a biological process is highly valued when it conflicts with the lofty transpersonal demands. For “to save life or to do good” are governed by the same ethical demand of “imitatio dei.” What motivates the respect and care of the physical body is not simply the esthetic or hygienic outlook on the human body but the reverence for the dignity and worth of life.

The shedding of blood was reckoned as if one destroyed God’s image. The great potential in human life to reproduce physically and to affect creatively or destructively successive generations of people is captured by the biblical archetype Adam in rabinic thought. This conception was formulated as an admonition to witnesses in Jewish courts dealing with capital cases, for the alleged criminal was facing the sentence of death. The theocratic court of the Second Temple period would address them thusly:

Know that capital cases are not like civil cases, when money is paid and the person is forgiven. However, in capital cases, his blood and the blood of his offspring depend upon us until the end of time... Therefore, Adam was created singularly to demonstrate that anyone who destroys one life is considered in the Scriptures as if he destroyed an entire world.

(Mishna Sanhedrin)

Rabbi Akiba, the pillar of rabinic code, teaches that the person assumes special significance because he was created in the image of God and lives by that sense. Such a view promotes essentially an attitude of respect and concern for the living to be translated by the imperative of altruistic love. The same Rabbi Akiba maintains that the commandment “to love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:19) is the main principle of the biblical law.
The Jewish tradition, therefore, stresses a show of love especially to those who live in the face of suffering and death, namely, the infirm and the elderly. For the rabbis (Sifra to Lev. 19:19) extend the show of love to the other, even to the one who is condemned to death. One should not abuse him or cause him humiliating pain. Life is precious because it flows from the Giver of life and all moments or stages of life are equally sacred. Thus, the period of deterioration in aging deserves special concern. To be cut off (karet) while still young is the gravest divine punishment. It is therefore a crime to take one’s life and the high court (Mishnah Makkot 1:10) must refrain from administering death penalties. How much more is the concern for those who live into old age or are facing death. Every step must be taken to preserve their life but surely to preserve it with dignity and worth. This legal and social understanding, as well as the historical practice of personal and medical care in Judaism, has been adopted by the modern state of Israel. This development from rabbinic times until now seems to be rooted in a constant biblical image of life as a divine gift.

_The Gift of Life and Eternal Life_

Aging is a process of life beginning in the womb and ending in the tomb. One can view life towards death as the candle burning out or as the dry withered leaf. The recent concept of aging is a reflection on biological time as deterioration sets in. The symbols become the emptying hourglass, sunset or the winter season. Two opposite images of aging emerge. On the one hand, there is the image of a conflict between inner forces of health and decay ending in damaging defeat. On the other hand, there is the image of the renewal of life symbolized by the seed growing from a dry decaying shell or the reptile shedding its outer skin. These images are reflected and dramatized in myth and ritual. The former points to a constant war between good and evil powers and the latter points to the idea of resurrection.

The biblical tradition has drawn on similar images but its meaning is captured by the idea of “gift” (Pss. 36:10; 66:9; 139:13). “God gives and God takes; let the name of the Lord be blessed” (Job 1:21). This becomes the classical Jewish response to the event of death. The human community acknowledges gratefully the gift of their life in the proclamation of “God’s righteousness”. Each morning in thankful acknowledgement a person recites upon awaking the blessing of “God who restores the souls to dead bodies.” The person is a recipient of a gift, which makes him
responsible for his life throughout the time he is in conscious control. Each day is perceived as it may be the last as well as all periods of life are equally significant. One relates therefore to aging in Judaism as Rabbi Abraham Heschel so eloquently addressed the White House Conference on Aging in 1961. He spoke of contemporary criticism and of a constructive religious vision. Old age need not be “defeat,” “punishment,” “a disease,” “irreversible decline.” Growing older is an opportunity for achieving significant being. Aging can mean growth, a celebration, the sanctification of time, an opportunity once again for experiencing the presence which makes us truly human.

Most important for a constructive understanding of life is the parallelism developed in biblical thought between life on earth and life beyond. Life on earth is bound by the grave, “to earth you will return” (Gen. 3:19). Yet, “many of those who sleep in the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to denigration and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2). In rabbinic thought, therefore, life on earth assumes cosmic significance for it holds the promise of renewal beyond the grave. The period of one’s life offers the opportunity for eternal life. This is a central concern for fulfilling on earth the teachings of God. The Jews acknowledge upon being called to a Sabbath reading of Scriptures, an old and continuous custom for the collective reception of and commitment to the biblical tradition. “God gave us a Torah of truth and has planted in us eternal life.” To gain eternal life is to fill the content of earthly life with Torah consciousness and righteous deeds in imitation of God.

_The Glory of Aging, Elders and the Sages_

Old age becomes a crown of glory when one pursues the path of righteousness in imitation of God. The biblical model is Abraham who pursued and taught “the way of justice and righteousness” in an altruistic concern for others. In light of this understanding, the rabbis claim (Gen. Rabba 65.4 to 27:1) that it was Abraham who achieved the glory of old age and God himself accorded him honor. The manifestations of turning old were given as desired gift to Abraham to be the indicators of increased worth and status. Gray hair became a crown of glory and the disappearance of youthful visage marks growth and maturity. Of particular importance in this respect was Israel’s institution of the elders. It is true that old men were not necessarily equated with elders. The focus was upon a person who has acquired wisdom, namely, the sage.
However, the ideal leadership in biblical and rabbinic times was entrusted to the elderly sage, as exemplified by Moses and Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai respectively. They attained inspired leadership with four scores of years. Psychologist Harvey Lehman in his classical study of *Age and Achievement* describes the accomplishments of older thinkers who did notable creative work late in life.

Wisdom and experiential knowledge were highly respected in Israelite society. The periodization of life in rabbinic thought points to the biblical association of forty years with creative understanding and fifty years with projective advice. This span of life corresponds to late adulthood, which is characteristic of reflective awareness. The optimum constructive age in antiquity was seventy years. Such achievement in the circle of the sages was acclaimed with inspired reverence. For the rabbinic community views the older teachers with dignity and worth in seeking their mature knowledge and testimony to life. Moreover, it is a biblically oriented society that promotes the way of righteousness to fill life with meaning. As such it seeks the elders and the sages who pursue the way of righteousness in actual living to exercise a central creative role in the life of Israel. For beyond the principle of strict justice one must prove his worth by doing "that which is right and good" (Deut. 6:18). This guided the rabbinic academy and its decisions. The sages would renounce title even to that which they could legally claim as their own for the sake of other's needs.

This is illustrated by the example of Rabbah son of Rabbi Hana, who was asked by his rabbinic colleagues to return the garments he seized for the damage done to his property by some poor porters. After he had returned their garments, the porters said, "We are poor men and have worked all day and are in need. Are we to get nothing?" "Go and pay them," was the reply of the court, "for it is written, 'keep to the path of righteousness.'"

The sages remained the pillars of the Jewish community throughout the ages as the lawmakers and models of piety. The institution of the sages in the academy came to replace the biblical movement of the prophets. The older person either opted for a life of good deeds engaging in public affairs or for a life of Torah study promoting ethical values. The test of the sage was whether and to what extent his actions and conduct led to the sanctification of God's presence or to its profanation. All consideration of honor and station had to be disregarded where there was any fear of
desecration or rejection of God. The lives of the sages were, therefore, marked by constant preoccupation with the Bible and the Way of God. The sages became the reprovers, guides and teachers of the people for they demonstrated altruistic love and piety while living in awe of God.

**Aging and Deterioration**

The older person is afflicted with the disabilities of age. The author of Ecclesiastes (12:3-7) draws a dramatic picture of those anguished days. "When the keepers of the house (the feet) tremble and the soldiers (the hands) are bent and the grinders (the teeth) cease because they are few and the windows of the chimneys (eyes) become dim . . . For the person departs to his eternal abode (the cemetery) . . . Then the dust (body) returns to the earth as it was and the spirit to God who gave it." These conditions are painful as well as distressing in light of impending death.

The process of letting go has been described as the stages of dying - from shock and denial to acceptance and fulfillment. Accepting the fact that one is going to die can liberate a person so that he can really be free to live, to see each moment as a possibility for concern, for care and for love. It is most important to offer older people, even the terminally ill, the opportunity to translate their time into righteous acts. Food and medicine may keep the aged alive, but only respect for their usefulness and experiential knowledge will make their lives worth living.

Louis J. Novick recently described the specific practices of traditional Judaism in filling important psychological and social needs in later years. It is the diasporic community today that answers the needs of the aged to play socially significant roles, to experience warm relationship with others and to utilize time in a socially fulfilling manner. The person hallows life by performing ordinary activities of daily life and thus is occupied with the fulfillment of God's commandments during all of his waking hours. The traditional community draws together older people in the fellowship of Torah study and the practice of righteous deeds. Thus the older Jew with a biblical orientation feels himself to be surrounded by God's love and human fellowship.

In contrast, Yonina Talman has analyzed the influence of ideological factors on aging in collective settlements (kibbutz) in Israel. The older people on the secular kibbutz generally maintained productive roles in the economy as long as possible but retire gradually as full members of a cohesive community. Nevertheless,
many experience aging as a difficult and painful process of re-orientation. The deceased professor of sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem pointed out that the kibbutz is a future oriented and youth centered society in which the major rewards are given for hard physical labor and productivity. These values make it difficult for older persons to maintain feelings of worth.

This contrast with traditional Judaism is also apparent in modern nations of “youth worshippers,” whose “Peter Pan syndrome” contributes to the rejection of the aged. This youth orientation in contemporary American society was correctly pointed out by Rabbi Benjamin Blech in his article on “Judaism and Gerontology.” It is apparent that the religious response to the phenomenon of aging is affected also by the cultural attitude of modern society. The need is to increase sensitivity to the issues of care and justice, reverence and human dignity, which in the Western world are derived from the biblically oriented tradition. The case of traditional Judaism speaks for a continued orientation, for those in diaspora and those in Israel to develop and to deepen their responses to the older generation.

Such is the poetic appeal of Rabbi Heschel to the modern society:

Old men need a vision, not only recreation.
Old men need a dream, not only a memory.
It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being.
God, a soul and a moment.
The three are always here.
Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy.

Bibliography

The editors have selected materials in English suggested by the author. Translations within the text have been made by the author.