

Rabbi Leah Cohen

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### So You Think You Can Tell

Almost exactly thirty five years ago, on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1975 the group, Pink Floyd, released an album called “Wish You Were Here.” The lyrics from the title song of that album are perfect for a Yom Kippur reflection.

So, so you think you can tell Heaven from Hell, blue skies from pain. Can you tell a green field from a cold steel rail? A smile from a veil? Do you think you can tell?

And did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts? Hot ashes for trees? Hot air for a cool breeze? Cold comfort for change?

And did you exchange a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage? How I wish, how I wish you were here.

We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year, running over the same old ground. What have we found? The same old fears. Wish you were here.

Maybe some of you might remember when this song first came out. I was 14. We used to listen to records in our basement, the one with the red shag carpet. Sitting in our vinyl yellow bean bag chairs, we'd watch a brand new show called Saturday Night Live. That year the Vietnam War came to an end, Watergate erupted and Bill Gates founded Microsoft.

Those of us born between 1946 and 1965, the Baby Boomers, grew up during turbulent times – the Cuban missile crisis, the assassinations of JFK, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. the first man on the moon, the civil rights movement, the drug culture, and the cold war. And now we're about to experience something really shocking. This year, the first of the baby boomers will turn 65.

Yom Kippur challenges us to face our own mortality, but somewhere between life and death most of us will confront the reality of aging. While it is true that our temple has a large cohort of young families, witness this year's Rosh Hashanah children's service which was twice the size of previous years, it is also true that more than half of TBC's adult members have reached or passed the half century mark of their lives.

This year, a number of you have shared with me the experience of coming to High Holy day services alone, without loved ones who have passed away, without children who have gone off to college or without friends who have moved to warmer climates.

As we consider the choices we face in this new year, what options do we have around this topic other than to avoid it entirely. We are reluctant to address the issue of aging. We have been busy- raising our kids, developing our careers, volunteering in our community, in short living our lives. When we do stop to think about it, for the most part, our lives have been a fairly straight route that led us from kindergarten through school to college and perhaps advanced studies, to our first jobs and with some twists and turns along our career paths, retirement and our golden years.

But times have changed and the assumptions inherent in this narrative deserve our closer inspection as we reflect on who we are and what we are becoming. We are facing new challenges and opportunities even as we are getting older. For example:

- 1) The length of our retirement is increasing - The years between when we retire and when we die is growing. In America, our life expectancy has increased by 30 years in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the early 1950s life expectancy for men was 66 which made for a very short retirement at age 65. The latest life expectancy figures in the US are 75 for males and 80 for females. If the average person works until 65 they would now have 10-15 years of time to fill, even more if they retired earlier.
- 2) The resources for our retirement are decreasing- The largest population bubble in history is about to start retiring which will draw heavily upon Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare. Community resources and services for this demographic will be heavily utilized as well. In addition, the recession has negatively impacted most individuals' retirement funds decreasing those resources too.

These challenges are counterbalanced by these opportunities:

- 1) We are aging differently than any generation before us. Modern medicine and better education have led not only to longer lives, but healthier ones as well giving us more choices about how we age.
- 2) Just as the baby boomers created a cultural revolution decades ago, we are doing it again today by challenging assumptions and redefining the meaning of aging.

Cicero, the Roman philosopher said:

The course of life is fixed, and nature admits of its being run but in one way; and only once; and to each part of our life there is something specially seasonable; so that the feebleness of children, as well as the high spirit of youth, the soberness of mature years, and the ripe wisdom of old age- all have a certain natural advantage which should be secured in its proper season.

How do we secure this natural advantage that Cicero speaks of in the later seasons of our lives? We cannot change the direction of the aging process, but we can make choices about how we will age. Each of us is a product of our DNA and certain other elements which we have no control over, but there are three key areas where we can exert a strong influence to shape our lives.

The first is the opportunity to change our perceptions about aging. In her fascinating book entitled, "The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk and Adventure in the 25 years after 50." Harvard professor, Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot writes:

We must develop a compelling vision of later life, one that does not assume a trajectory of decline after fifty but recognizes this as a time of potential change, growth and new learning, a time when our courage gives us hope....We're at a key moment in history, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demographers are recognizing the significance of a distinct developmental phase: those years following early adulthood and middle age when we're neither young nor old. This third chapter is a stage in life when the traditional norms,

rules and rituals of our careers seem less encompassing and restrictive; when many women and men are embracing new challenges and searching for greater meaning in life.

This is a new message from what society had previously offered us regarding how we age. Namely, our youth obsessed culture encourages us to deny the reality of aging by hiding its physical signs as much as our purses and pain thresholds can handle. And secondly we are told to work hard from youth till we reach a certain age, then stop and spend whatever time and money we have left in the pursuit of leisure.

What a waste of our time, talent and capital if we should squander our last decades in such a fashion. We need only look at our own congregation to find examples of people who have decided to pursue another way. There are those in our midst who are writing books, starting new careers, conquering new physical feats, finding new romance, taking on new projects, discovering new interests after the age of fifty, sixty, seventy and even into their later years. Some are paid, some volunteer, all who take this path have made a choice to be engaged and productively involved in life. All are seeking on some level to give back, to continue to grow, to stay connected to the world around them.

This is a more difficult, but also a more rewarding course. It involves embracing a number of contradictions such as: accepting the limitations that come with growing older, but not being defined by them. Acknowledging the wisdom that accumulates with age, but opening our minds to learning, especially from younger people. Finding meaningful ways to contribute, even when we feel that we have already done our share. Confronting our vulnerabilities, from old wounds and new assaults on our self image, and still find the strength, humor and courage to live full of gratitude and awe. In short, aging in this way means being a dreamer and a realist at the same time.

This is a liberating alternative to either fighting the advancing years in vain or using them as an excuse to stop living while we are still breathing. But it is also a risky one. Rabbi Alan Lew wrote:

How frightening to consider that the ideas and feelings that used to motivate us – the very ones we based our lives on- are dead, no longer living ideas and feelings but dead ones that are cluttering up our lives, clouding our consciousness. After all, we have based our lives on these ideas and feelings, and if we have to give them up- if we have to let go of them-what do we do with our lives after that?

On Yom Kippur when we deal with the subject of what it means to choose life, we can begin by asking ourselves these questions.

A second area to consider as we look at our advancing years is the state of our human relationships. As a byproduct of having been preoccupied with raising families, or working jobs, of moving homes or getting divorced, or for many other reasons, we may find ourselves growing old without real friends. That is a horrible mistake.

As we get older it becomes more difficult to make friends. Gone are the days of finding friends in our classes or dorms, nor can we simply rely on connecting to our kids' soccer parents. We might be less willing to put ourselves in new social settings. Maybe we can't be bothered to

keep up with old friends any more either. There is a natural tendency to become less mobile, and more secluded that creeps up on us as the years advance.

But at this season when we consider the direction of our lives, we have to ask is this what we really want for ourselves? To be known by another, truly and mutually accepted by someone is a wonderful, nurturing gift. To have friends who care about us, who are willing to set us straight when that is what is needed, to comfort us when that is what is called for and to share our joys and sorrows with makes life worth living. We feel more whole, and our existence seems to matter more when we have someone who wants to listen to our stories and whose stories we want to hear as well.

The Mishna warns, *al tifros min ha tzibur*, do not separate yourself from the community. It is not only for the good of the community, but for our benefit as well. Contrary to the staunch individualism and radical independence that Americans believe in, the truth is that we need others and this becomes even more so as we grow older. If we don't want to walk this path alone, we would do well to invest the time and energy in those who we can call our friends.

The third, and last area that we might want to reflect on is one of the most obvious, namely the wear and tear on our bodies after decades of use. How we take care of ourselves and how we perceive the changes in our bodies are two critical aspects of how we age.

There is so much information circulating on the benefits of a lifestyle that includes a healthy diet, physical exercise, adequate sleep and manageable stress that you do not need your rabbi to remind you of these clichés on this most sacred day. But maybe you do. If we see taking care of our physical selves as an act of narcissism, we may experience a false sense of piety by neglecting to do so. The Jewish martyr, the person who is always too busy taking care of others to care for themselves is a stereotype that has some stature in our tradition.

Yet, Judaism teaches us that we have an obligation to care for our physical health as our bodies are not only a gift from our Creator but also the vessel that carry our souls, and the means by which we can carry out mitzvot in the world. If we want to better help others and demonstrate our commitment to those we love, we can start by loving ourselves enough to care for our physical being so we can stay healthy and alive as long as we are given.

But perhaps as significant as how our bodies age is how our minds do. Too often we allow ourselves to believe certain things about what it means to grow older and where our minds lead our bodies follow. In this regards, one particular trap that is easy to fall into is how we handle disappointments. How often do you hear someone, or maybe even yourself say, this is not what I had expected from my life? The truth is life is full of unexpected frustrations, failures and regrets; the longer we are around the more of them we get to see. But it is how we handle them that determines whether a particular distress is a discrete event that has a unique beginning and end or if we begin to string them together like pearls on a strand creating a downward spiraling narrative about our lives. Telling ourselves this kind of negative story often leads to negative results.

This summer, I learned from one of my teachers, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg that “falldowngetup” is one word. Just like that “falldowngetup.” One motion. When we think of it that way, we avoid the mindset that happens to so many people of fall down, stay down. We can

learn as much or more from our setbacks as from our successes. From this awareness we can cultivate the physical discipline to care for our bodies and the mental discipline to “falldowngetup” at every stage of our lives. And when we forget to do so, we can practice compassion with ourselves to just “falldowngetup” again.

But some may still be asking why? As we grow older why seek out creative ways to stay engaged with the world, why stay connected to friends and family, why work on developing a healthy mind in a healthy body, when we all know how this story is going to end? On Yom Kippur, when we contemplate our own mortality and consider how many days we have, and how we are spending them, we might arrive at the same place that the psalmist did in Ps 90:12: “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

So it is a wise heart that we are after, one that can tell heaven from hell, and blue skies from pain. A wise heart that understands that our choices are rarely made in isolation; they are trade-offs reached with imperfect knowledge and often less than perfect results. A wise heart that accepts the world as it really is, not creating illusions or succumbing to despair. A wise heart that knows that the highest form of wisdom is kindness, the ability to care.

So teach of us O Lord, teach us to number our days that we too may get a heart of wisdom.

THE END

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