

## Graceful Aging

A sermon by Bob Mendelsohn  
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### Introduction

We are all getting older. Aging is one of those realities from the moment of our infancy, when the doctor slaps our tush at birth we vow to get back at men in white robes 'when we get older.' Pre-teens, the target audience of so many stars like Brittany Spears and Hannah Montana, are longing to age into their teens. Teens long to be adults who cannot be told what to do anymore. But the brakes are hard to find, once you hit 21.

For as fast as you went from 10-20, you will find yourself at 30 before you know it. John Lennon of the Beatles cried out with a generation not to "trust anyone over 30." Lennon's birthday next year, 9 October, he would have been 70.

Pardon these non-Jewish references. There are four stages of man.

- 1) When you believe in Santa Claus
- 2) When you do not believe in Santa Claus
- 3) When you are Santa Claus
- 4) When you look like Santa Claus

Let's read Genesis 23 and see what it has to say to us as 21<sup>st</sup> Century people and use its message to instruct us as we continue learning from this historic and classic first book of the Bible.

### We all come to an end

The point of chapter 23 is to show how Abraham first came into legal possession of a parcel of land in Canaan. He paid a ridiculously full price, an extorted price, and he did a just thing. He did not cheat anyone, and legally owns the land. His descendants own that land. The Hittites no longer can lay claim to it. Through what appears to be a hard bargain, Abraham bought not only a cave for the burial of his wife Sarah, but also a large field with many trees. This became an important burial site for all the patriarchs and their wives (Gen 49.30-32, 50.13)

As Abraham would not accept a gift from the king of Sodom, lest it be said that the king had made Abraham wealthy (14.23), similarly here Abraham refused to accept this parcel of land as a gift. And he paid that very hefty price. Abraham wanted to make it clear that the Almighty God, and not a human being, was the source of his blessings and his hope. This is a statement of faith in God who would give Abraham the land, which we today call the land of Israel.

This is no small thing given that he is 137 years old at the time.

Aging is something I want to speak about today.

Let me tell you a story about Babe Ruth. His status as sporting legend is without question. He hit 714 home runs during his career and was playing one of his last full major league games. It was the Braves vs. the Reds in Cincinnati. But the great Ruth was no longer as agile as he had once been. He fumbled the ball and threw badly, and in one inning alone his errors were responsible for most of the five runs score by the Reds.

As the great Babe walked off the field, and headed toward the dugout, a crescendo of booing and yelling reached his ears. Just then a boy jumped over the railing onto the playing field. They could do that in those days. With tears streaming down his face, the little boy threw his arms around the legs of his hero. Ruth didn't hesitate for one second. He picked up the boy, hugged him, and set him down on his feet, patting him gently. The noise from the stands came to an abrupt halt. Suddenly there was no more booing. In fact, a hush fell over the entire park. In those brief moments, the fans saw two heroes: Ruth, who in spite of a dismal day on the field could still care about a little boy; and the small boy, who cared about the feelings of another human being. Both had melted the hearts of the crowd.

So although we all come to an end, like Sarah in our story today, that doesn't mean we have to go in a bad way. In fact, my main message today is that as we age, we ought to age gracefully and carefully, giving full reason for the hope that is in us, being bold to do such things as bring God pleasure.

In fact, the rabbis title this section, this parsha, Chaye Sarah. What does that mean? The life of Sarah. So why is this chapter more about the death and burial of

Sarah? Maybe they thought that her life is to be celebrated more than her death. Maybe even in her dying we learn some lessons on life and living.

Some of you are approaching middle age. Slowly, but approaching Middle age is the time when a man is always thinking that in a week or two he will feel as good as ever.

A word of caution. Age is no cause for veneration. Honor yes, but not veneration. An old crocodile is still a menace and an old crow sings but never will sound like a nightingale. The Bible does say to “stand before the white haired one.” (Lev .19.32) Respect is always due to aging people. Maybe I’m thinking about this more and more as I approach my 59<sup>th</sup> year.

### **Aging: Some traditional perspectives**

Seven stages of man...see where you fit

At 6 weeks...all systems ‘go’

At 2 years...all systems ‘NO!’

At 16 years...all systems ‘know’

At 26 years...all systems glow

At 36 years...all systems owe

At 56 years...all systems ‘status quo’

At 76 years...all systems s-l-o-w (Taken from RM Cornelius in The Rotarian]

Compare the more traditional alliterative series of the 7 stages of man:

Spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, wills

We do go through stages, don’t we? At each one, no matter where you are, you have to do what brings God pleasure. What makes him glad? It’s how we care for others in our age bracket and outside it. Remember what James the apostle said, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit t the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world. “ (James 1.27) It is right for some of you to take this mantle of religion and develop and entire ministry visiting elderly Jewish people here and where they may live.

I’m not sure of the timeliness or authenticity of this one, but Grimm’s Fairy Tales gives us another view of the sectors of our life. Grimm paints this picture.

God originally determined 30 years as the ideal span of life for all animals, including man. The donkey, the dog and the monkey considered it much too long, and begged God to reduce their years by 18, 12 and 10 respectively. Being healthy, vigorous and somewhat greedy, man asked to be given those extra years. God agreed and man's years now total 70. The first 30 are his own and they pass quickly. The next 18 are the 'donkey years' during which he has to carry countless burdens on his back. Then come the 'dog years' when he can do little but growl and drag himself along. This is followed by the 'monkey years,' his closing 10, when he grows rather strange and does things that make children laugh at him.

I like the story of the child who was touring a retirement home. A resident asked her if they had any questions. "Yes," one girl said 'How old are you?' 'I'm 98," she replied proudly.

Clearly impressed, the child's eyes grew wide with wonder. "Did you start at one?" (From Reader's Digest, Ruth Naylor)

### **Aging: The problem**

45 years ago at a synagogue in Kansas City, I was Bar Mitzvah. I read this sedra. From the Torah. I was a bit frightened, sweat in my palms. Aging King David (in the Haftarah) and again Sarah both seemed so far away at the time for this 13 year old. But now I'm an adult, and all three of my children have had their Bar and Bat Mitzvah. I guess the problem with aging is that we cannot do what we used to. At least that's what the aches and pains say.

But think about what we ARE able to do, now that we couldn't do at our Bar Mitzvah or as youngsters. We can drive ourselves... to our own medical appointments. We can read whatever we want and stay up as late as we want. We can go to happy hour, although lately it's not always at the pub, perhaps for some the happy hours is a nap in the afternoon.

Sure our eyes are weakening and our outer man is decaying as the Apostle says (2 Corinthians 4.16) yet he also tells us that our inner man is being renewed day by day. Do you believe this? Consider what else Paul said in this section.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; (4.7)

Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (4.10)

So death works in us, but life in you. (4.12)

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. (4.16)

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (5.1-4)

We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, **TO BE PLEASING TO HIM. (5.8-9)**

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. (5.14-15)

The imagery is clear. We are dying. We also have a chance to carry in our lives the ministry of death or the ministry of life. To give God pleasure is life and it is to remember the Messiah who died for us and let his love control us. Our end is not really our end either, is it? We have an eternal nature that twill be unleashed at the resurrection. Praise God!

Aging gives us a better perspective on life. It means we can launch into project with abandon. We can mobilize more resources than a youth. We can gather much from our life experiences and use more sachel and chochmah than a young person.

It's what you do, not when you do it that matters. You're never too young or too old if you've got talent, and if you use it to serve the Almighty.

Let's recognize that age has little to do with ability.

Golda Meir was 71 when she became Prime Minister of Israel.

William Pitt was 24 when he became Prime Minister of Great Britain.

George Bernard Shaw was 94 when one of his plays was produced.

Mozart was seven when his first composition was published.

Ben Franklin was a newspaper columnist at 16 and a framer of the US Constitution when he was 81.

The Earl of Halsburg was 90 when he began preparing a 20-volume revision of English law. Goethe was 82 when he wrote Faust. Galileo made his greatest discovery when he was 73. At 69 Hudson Taylor was still vigorously working on the mission field, opening up new territories in Indochina. And when Bible character Caleb was 85, he took the stronghold of the giants. (Joshua 14.10-15)

Caleb was given a land later at the apportionment under Joshua. Remember what section of land he wanted?

We read, "Now he gave to Caleb the son of Jephunnah, a portion among the sons of Judah, according to the command of the Lord to Joshua, namely, Kiriath-arba. Arba being the father of Ana (that is, Hebron)." Joshua 15.13. The very place that Abraham had purchased in this story today for a burial ground was the place that Caleb desired for his family 500 years later. One old man could well understand the passion another old man had for his family and for the honor of God.

### **Aging gracefully**

Friends, I mentioned that we should bring God pleasure. And when I say that some of you will immediately think about those items on a checklist. What to do and what not to do. Yes, that will make God happy or sad.

Listen there's nothing you can do which will make God love you more. There's nothing you don't do which will make him love you less. This is the essence of grace. There are many definitions of grace, to be sure, but grace is really all about what God did and not what you do in performance.

If you think you can please God by your actions, and thus gain his favor and acceptance, you miss the mark. Yes, we obey and that brings a smile to his face, but we cannot earn righteousness. If you live in a checklist religion, you will either be smug if you keep your checklist, or condemned if you fail. Neither of

those are right reactions to the Almighty. God extended his favor to us and we receive it. End of story.

Have you stood at the checkout line at the grocery store? Full trolley of groceries and then the checker swipes your credit card. You wait. You wait a bit more while the computer is checking you out. Finally you see the word 'approved' pop onto the screen and life is good. That sensation of approval is what God extends to us in Jesus. Not in our good works. Not in our checklists of doing and/or not doing. Grace is approval, 'accepted in the Beloved.'" (Ephesians 4)

## Summary

I hope you had fun with the many stories and thoughts on aging today.

Here are some things I see as we conclude and you can add your thoughts to your own list.

- 1) All of us will die; what we do with our life is what matters
- 2) God wants to be our provider and for us to trust Him to do this
- 3) Abraham was an honorable man and owns the Promised Land
- 4) Care for others beyond ourselves is right and proper thing to do

Thank you Bron for letting me speak to the people today. Friends, let's live in grace and extend God's grace to everyone we meet.

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Actual Bible text read:

Gen. 23.1 ¶ Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.

Gen. 23.2 And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

Gen. 23.3 Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Hath, saying,

Gen. 23.4 "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

Gen. 23.5 And the sons of Hath answered Abraham, saying to him,

Gen. 23.6 "Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead."

Gen. 23.7 So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth.

Gen. 23.8 And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me,

Gen. 23.9 that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site."

Gen. 23.10 Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying,

Gen. 23.11 "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead."

Gen. 23.12 And Abraham bowed before the people of the land.

Gen. 23.13 And he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there."

Gen. 23.14 Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him,

Gen. 23.15 "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead."

Gen. 23.16 And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard.

Gen. 23.17 ¶ So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over

Gen. 23.18 to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city.

Gen. 23.19 And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mare (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.

Gen. 23.20 So the field, and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth.