

Aging-Kol Nidrey 2011

Tonight is my 65th birthday! When I realized that it fell on Kol Nidrey I was not happy—but I am making do, I am adjusting, as we old folks must. To begin with, I said to myself, at least I don't have to worry about a sermon topic_ I am going to talk about getting older, whether you like it or not.

I also realized, as often happens, that the liturgy speaks directly to me. Anya- young and beautiful, just read for us *Shema Koleynu*, with the poignant line *Al tashlikeyni l'eyt zikna*: Do not cast me aside in my old age.

This phrase now reminds me of Lou Witkin, may his memory be a blessing, a yeshiva educated resident of Granite Hill, who was 96 when I visited him two years ago. He was feeling uprooted from his long life in New York City, and not sure he wanted to go on living- I asked him how he was and he replied in Hebrew, *Al tashlikeyni l'eyt zikna*.

I told Rich Goldman about my birthday this evening and he responded by giving me a copy of the latest book Life Gets Better by his good

friend Wendy Lustbader, a social worker in Seattle who specializes in aging. As I read the title my immediate reaction was "Yeah right!" but I read the book because Rich gave it to me and it was by Big Wendy who has attended all the Goldman Bar/ Bat mitzvah services.

Although Big Wendy is Jewish, Life Gets Better is not written from a specifically Jewish point of view, and I thought to myself, but I need to talk about what Judaism teaches about aging.

Immediately I started collecting all my familiar texts: Honor your father and mother(Lev 19:3), Rise before white hair(Lev 19:32). Then I realized that this sermon is different than my earlier sermons about how we must treat our aged parents and fellow congregants.

This year I am the old one, the white haired grandmother. I shared my October 7 birthday with a number of special people, all gone- my mother Jean Dietz, her twin sister Joan Morse, Bennett Katz, and my dear friend and counselor Mitch Cohen, all gone now. I look around the room at the people who have lost parents and partners this year, and I realize that we are the old ones, the *avot* and *imahot*, the patriarchs and matriarchs.

The texts about honoring parents and deferring to the old are for others now. But after reading Life Gets Better, I realized that there is a Jewish text which gives me, gives all of us who are aging, realistic perspective and even some wry comfort. That text is the Book of Ecclesiastes, or Kohelet, which we are asked to study on Sukkot, the holiday of the fall harvest which begins Wednesday night. Some of us will study it in depth at Torah study next Saturday.

Kohelet is ascribed to King Solomon, the work of his old age. He had seen it all, read it all, done it all, and reached the conclusion, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." At first glance, Kohelet, literally, the one who calls the community together, seems to be in a depression. The subtitle of Kohelet's work is not, Life Gets Better.

But if you read on, Kohelet's message is not so far off from Big Wendy's message. Kohelet begins by saying he has tried out the path of intellectual accomplishment, the path of accumulating wealth and the path of sensuality, and that none of these paths yield deep meaning and contentment.

Kohelet goes on with his most famous statement:

To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven."

As we live longer, we begin to see our lives' experiences in perspective. We no longer see each disappointment as the end of the world. We no longer worry so much about the opinions of others. We tend to appreciate life's small daily pleasures

This summer I visited my dear friend Len Bolonsky on his 90th birthday. His wife had had a stroke and was in a nursing home. Len himself was fragile, using oxygen, a shadow of his former athletic self. Len was in World War II skiing through the Alps to track down Nazis. He was an avid sailor who took me out on his boat often in the summers, but now he has sold his boat, and he can't walk more than a few feet.

I asked him how his day was. He responded that he had driven down to the Boulevard to see the parade of schooners go by that morning, a beautiful sunny day. "It is good to be alive," he said.

As Kohelet says(11:7),

Truly the light is sweet, and it is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the sun. But if a man lives many years and rejoices in all of them, still let him remember the days of darkness; for they will be many.

There is no question that physical disintegration is a challenge to all of us who are aging. Kohelet's description of the pains of aging is powerful(12:3 ff):

*On the day when the keepers of the house shall totter,
And the strong men shall bow themselves,
And the grinders cease because they are few, And they that
look through the windows are darkened;
And the double doors shall be shut in the markets,
When the sound of the grinding is low...
And one shall start up at the voice of a bird,
And all the daughters of song shall be brought low;
And also when they shall be afraid of that which is steep and
the street is full of terrors;
When the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper
shall lie heavy,
And the caperberry shall fail.
Because man goes to his long home,
And the mourners go about in the streets,
Before the silver cord is snapped asunder,
And the golden bowl is shattered,
The pitcher broken at the fountain,
The wheel shattered at the cistern.
And the dust returns to the earth as it was,
And the spirit returns
To God who gave it.*

The rabbis argued about exactly how these metaphors were intended. The Targum (the Aramaic translation) says the guardians of the house are the legs, Rashi says they are the ribs, and Ibn Ezra says they are the arms. All agree that the grinders are the teeth, and those who look out are the eyes. Rashi says the doors of the house which are closed refers to constipation, whereas the Targum says the passage just means that the old have trouble walking in the streets. (Olitsky & Kravitz, *Kohelet a Modern Commentary* pp. 120-122)

Rashi and Ibn Ezra both suggest that the blossoming almond refers to the persistence of sexual desire, while the "grasshopper shall lie heavy" refers to the impotence of old age, even in the face of desire.

Ibn Ezra interprets the silver cord and the golden bowl as a description of the process of drawing water from a well, here the water of life. He says that the silver cord is the spinal column, the golden bowl is the brain, the pitcher which is shattered is the gall bladder and the wheel at the well is the head.

Big Wendy is more sanguine than Kohelet about the challenges of physical disintegration.

She talks about an old lady who never went out without high heels finally getting sneakers and going out walking, and quotes another as saying she finally was accepting of the body she has. A woman going blind gets her friends to come and read to her.

The challenge which Big Wendy does not really confront is that of mental deterioration. The shattering of the golden bowl is a far greater challenge to us today than it was to Kohelet. We are far more likely than Kohelet was to outlive our mental capacities, becoming tragic figures for our loved ones to witness and care for.

Kohelet, the wise King Solomon, claims to be tired of all of his learning and sighs,

In much wisdom is much grief, and the fool and the wise man come to the same end.

But eventually he comes to a conclusion that is not far off from Big Wendy's. It sounds a bit like hedonism and a bit Epicurean: certainly it reveals the influence of Greek philosophers, which suggests it was written long after King Solomon.

Kohelet says (9:7-10)

Go your way; eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago accepted your work. Let your garments always be white, and let your head lack no ointments. Live joyfully with the woman you love all the days of your life of your vanity which he has given you under the sun—all the days of your vanity. For that is your portion in life and in your work which you do under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For there is no work, nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave where you are going.”

How does this rather cynical message fit in with Yom Kippur? I think that it does. The Reform movement decided to replace the traditional Leviticus Torah reading, in which we atone for our sins by placing on the head of a scapegoat, with a passage from Deuteronomy which urges us above all to choose life.

As my friend once embroidered on a sampler, old age is not for sissies. Those of us who are lucky enough to reach the golden years may have to reinvent ourselves and our priorities. We have to work incredibly hard to maintain the physical powers that remain for us. We have to like Solomon, understand that the outward trappings of beauty, political power, and wealth may disappear or may seem to be vanity. We are bereaved of some of our

dearest friends and family, and may feel that others have cast us aside.

So I thank you all for joining me on this my 65th birthday. I have decided that Kol Nidrey is not the best time for a celebration, but Sukkot is. So I invite everyone to join our community in a potluck Sukkot supper next Friday night, October 14, when I will have cake and the Casco Bay Tumblers will help us to make music, rejoice and dance.

Let us enjoy the happiest of Jewish holidays, and the comfort of community. I hope that many children and young parents will come with their instruments and their smiles. *Al tashlikheyeni l'eyt zikna*: Do not cast me aside in my old age, but grant me my dearest wish, that our community will come together as one, from babies and children to young adults to old folks like me, appreciating each others' gifts and forgiving each others' foibles.