

CHAYEI SARAH (GENESIS 23:1-25:18)

White Power!

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Old age. A frightening prospect. As we age, we tend to slow down, in action as well as mental capacity. Society celebrates youth, and sometimes barely tolerates the old.

Wouldn't it be great to be eternally young? Imagine advancing chronologically while our hair remains dark and our skin stays smooth. We'd put the hairdressers and plastic surgeons out of business! Wouldn't it be wonderful?

Abraham didn't think so.

...And Abraham became old... (Genesis, 24:1) The Talmud explains that this was a Biblical first; no one had ever become old before.

No one? Did you ever read the ages of some of the early Genesis personalities? Adam lived until the age of 930. (Ibid, 5:5) Noah was 600 years old when he entered the Ark. (Ibid, 7:11) At this time in Abraham's life, he was a "mere" 137 years old. Yet, the Torah tells us that Abraham became old, and that he was the first person to ever reach that stage! And what, pray tell, was Methuselah at 969, a spring chicken?!!

The Yalkut Yehudah, by Rabbi Yehudah Ginsberg of Denver, quotes the Maharsha, with the obvious fact that people before Abraham's generation did, in fact, become old. What was unique about Abraham was that he was the first person who ever LOOKED old. Abraham was the first person in history whose hair turned white. And, the amazing thing is that Abraham had ASKED G-d to make him look older.

"Master of the World," complained Abraham. "When a man and his sons enter a place, people don't know whom to honor. If You will crown him with old age, people will know whom to honor." G-d thought it was such a good idea, that He decided to start with Abraham: *"Abraham became old..."* (Yalkut Shimoni, 105)

Abraham's request is a puzzling one. Abraham taught the world about belief in G-d, and being kind to G-d's children. The pursuit of honor seems to be a character trait that we would not expect to see in such a spiritual giant. Why was it so important to Abraham that he receive honor?

The Yalkut Yehudah again provides an answer, quoting the Ohel Yaakov. To be sure, old age, in and of itself, is no great asset. The older one gets, the slower one gets. That's why baseball players retire in their mid-thirties. There is, however, one area where age is considered an advantage:

Ask your father, and he'll tell you; your grandfather, and he'll speak to you. (Deuteronomy, 32:7) There is no substitute for the WISDOM that comes with life's experiences. The retirement community where I work has no shortage of wise, perceptive, people who have spent many, many decades acquiring insight and understanding.

Until Abraham's time, no one ever appeared to be old and wise because no one NEEDED to appear old and wise. Abraham was the first person to take it upon himself to reprimand his neighbors for their evil ways. Even Noah, for all his goodness and piety, was only righteous for himself. He didn't try to elevate those around him. Abraham desired to look older and more deserving of veneration as a means of positively influencing those around him.

The Talmud (Brachos, 28a) reports that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya was appointed head of the Sanhedrin at the ripe old age of eighteen. His wife was concerned that his obvious youth would compromise his ability to run the court. G-d responded to this dilemma by turning his hair and beard white overnight.

Several years ago, I submitted a resume to a large Shul that was looking for a new rabbi. I was, at the time, in my early forties. The president of the congregation called me and said that they were looking for a younger man, perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties. An elderly rabbi who was a teacher at that Shul told me that the REAL issue was that they wanted a rabbi who was still young enough to be pushed around!

It is the obligation of every responsible member of society to set a positive and mature example for others to follow. We begin to meet that responsibility by acting, at all times, in a fashion that brings respect and dignity to ourselves and our values, regardless of the color of our hair.

Have a great Shabbos.

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