

VAEIRA (EXODUS 6:2-9:35)

Life Begins ... Today!

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Moses and Aaron were given a tough assignment. G-d commissioned them to demand the release of the Israelite slaves from Egypt. They were to approach the king and warn him that G-d commanded that the slaves be freed. The Pharaoh, of course, was not cooperative.

Moses and Aaron were required to go back and forth to the king with new warnings of new plagues as consequences of his repeated refusals to comply. They also had to deal with their own People, an overwhelming majority (80%!) of whom preferred not to leave Egypt.

In the middle of a discussion of Moses' "marching orders," the Torah makes a statement that seems a bit out of place:

Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron was eighty-three years old, when they spoke with the Pharaoh.
(Exodus, 7:7)

What is the point of that statement? Who cares how old they were?

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin pointed out that there is a great lesson we can learn from this statement about their ages. These men were in their eighties. They were old! What were they doing running around back and forth to the palace? Couldn't G-d find some younger men to take on this demanding task?

(In spite of the advanced ages we often see in the Torah, Rabbi Sorotzkin writes that it was no longer the norm in Moses' time. Moses' lifespan of 120 was unusual. In fact, Moses himself writes in the Book of Psalms: (90:10) *The days of our years ... are seventy years, and if with strength, eighty years...*)

The Talmud goes into great detail describing Moses' life in the decades between his departure from Egypt as a teenager and returning as an octogenarian. (He served, among other things, as king of an African nation!) Yet the Torah ignores all that and focuses on what he did in his "retirement years."

The way of the world is that as soon as people reach a certain age or financial level, they decide to take it easy. Somehow, the feeling is that after a "lifetime" of working, it is now okay to take it easy.

Jacob wanted to take it easy in his waning years. G-d said that it was not to be the case. Life gets easy only when life is over! We are supposed to use every moment that G-d gives us to be productive.

I am in a unique situation to see this concept in practice. I am privileged to serve as the chaplain of a retirement community. I am not sure what the average age of residents is, but it is up there. And they never cease to amaze me.

There's "Sarah," (not her real name) who, at 93 years young, walks on a treadmill every day. One of the ways she keeps sharp (and I do mean sharp!) is by writing poetry. She composes it in her head while on the treadmill and writes it down later. She has received awards for being a dedicated volunteer in a hospital and elsewhere. [Follow-up, written in 2013. "Sarah" lived till 101, vibrant almost to the end. She and I drank "L'chaim" with some Scotch a few days before she died!]

Then there's "Miriam," who, until she got sick several months ago, took a car service from Monsey to a bank in New Jersey, an hour away! Transportation ate up half her income, but it was worth it. Every day she reported for work, keeping herself engaged and vibrant.

And I can't forget good old "Mike," who passed away about a month ago at 92. Mike was known all over town as "the guy from the retirement home who walks all over the place." Mike maintained a vegetable garden and walked 10 PLUS miles a day.

Did Moses ever get around to retiring? Actually, he did. Shortly before his death, at the age of 120, he turned over the reigns of leadership to his student, Joshua. It's not that he WANTED to retire:

*"I am 120 years old today; I am no longer **permitted** (by G-d; healthwise he was fine – Rashi) to go out and come in...G-d has said to me, 'you will not cross this Jordan.' "* (Ibid. 31:2) (See ""Decisions, Decisions".)

Moses and Aaron were not sent to Pharaoh IN SPITE of their ages. They were sent to him because they were the best men for the job. Perhaps their age and wisdom was part of the reason that they were so qualified.

It is up to G-d to decide when we are no longer capable of being productive. But until that time comes, we should view life as a precious bottle of wine:

It doesn't get older; it gets better!

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

