

## *Parashat Vayelech*

### What is the Purpose of the Aging Process?

#### Physical Decline Allows the Soul to Shine

It is hard to come to terms with the fact that people age. Not only people, but also trees, pets, appliances and even my favorite outfit! I wish that whatever I love would remain forever. I can mend and fix, but there is a point when we need to let go and accept the fact that everything in the world is temporary just as this world itself is transient. In Paradise, we were originally supposed to live forever – delighting in the perfect utopic Garden, without a strand of gray hair. Yet, we messed up, became mortal and were charged with accepting physical decline for the sake of perfecting our soul. The goal of the constant warfare between our physical and spiritual drives, is to allow the physical to make way for spiritual illumination. In preparation for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I studied the rabbinic teaching, “A 50-year old for advice...” (*Pirkei Avot* 5:21), and one of the commentaries struck me. It went something like, at the age of 50, a person’s physical faculties are declining but his spirituality is growing. An older person is not only more experienced, but also has more capacity for wisdom, precisely because the reduced physical strength allows his soul to shine. Even so, it is hard to wake up to new wrinkles around the eyes and brown age spots on the hands, not to mention graying hair, and getting out of breath when walking uphill. The entire world revolves around the younger generation. Perhaps, the mitzvah to honor the elders is designed to counteract the natural tendency to relegate them to the fringe of the family, while serving the needs of the younger and stronger. Aging must be so much harder for a secular person. If you don’t believe in the eternity of the soul and life after death, after going ‘over the hill’ what is there to look forward to except the body going downhill?

#### Value What You Have Today for Tomorrow it May be Gone!

The awareness that our lives are not forever, teaches us to appreciate the sweetness of the moment. Sunsets are so beautiful because they are fleeting, and we cannot hold on to the sunrises’ reflections of orange and pink behind the purple clouds. When I look at my brown-bearded 20-year-old baby son, I cannot believe how this large strong grownup man standing before me was once the cute little boy calling “look Ima, look Ima!” as he bounced the ball. What happened to the baby I cradled in my bosom and whose first smile I welcomed? Soon, I will have to completely let him go to another woman, as he will build his own family. So, if your children are still young, don’t forget to enjoy them, even if they are a challenging handful! Before you know it, they will have grown up. The phase of ‘empty nesters’ teaches us to appreciate and enjoy our lifelong partner and spouse. Even for those of us who are not into world-travel-pleasure-trips, spending quality time learning Torah, taking a mountain hike or even caring for grandchildren together is a treasurable privilege. Knowing that someday it will be over, makes us value what we have today. When we designed our home, the architect suggested a covered entryway, since guests taking leave usually hang out together with the host at the doorway for another expanded and prolonged moment, not wanting the visit to pass.

#### The Ego-Breaking Experience of Aging

Witnessing how people often go through a painful aging process makes us wonder, what is the purpose of all of this suffering? Why do some people endure prolonged illnesses at the end of their lives? Why do others – who may have been brilliant highly educated prominent people – end up in a

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home for demented? Without claiming to have a readymade pat answer to these existential questions of how Hashem runs His world, I would like to suggest that the aging process is a preparation for the ultimate life in the hereafter. Our souls have been sent down to this temporary world not only in order to repair the world but first and foremost to repair our essential selves. In the struggle between selfish pride and selfless humble giving, we must overcome the ego's obsession with grabbing honor and material goods . Growing older and weaker and having to depend on the help of others is an ego-breaking experience par excellence. There is likewise no greater humbling experience than losing one's memory and mind. Smaller signs of aging – such as no longer being able to run uphill, or keeping up with the grandchildren in a memory game are humbling as well. It is not for us to judge, for only Hashem knows who and when someone needs a dose of ego-diminution before s/he is ready to transit to the eternal world. In order to endure the intense light of the world of truth, we also need to be clean of transgressions. Thus, the suffering of sickness serves as a spiritual washing machine, which cleans out the stain of sin.

**Humility: The Anti-Aging Agent**

In *Parashat Vayelech* Moshe Rabbeinu takes leave of his beloved people, as he prepares to go the way of all the earth. Although Moshe – the embodiment of humility – was above the natural aging process as “his eyes did not become dim, neither did his flesh lose its moisture” (*Devarim* 34:7), he nevertheless knew it was his time to go.

ספר דברים פרק לא (א)

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם בֶּן מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה אֲנִי הַיּוֹם לֹא אוֹכֵל עוֹד לִצְאֹת וּלְבוֹא וְהָשֵׁם אָמַר אֵלַי לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה:

“Moshe went and spoke these things to all of Israel. He said to them, I am one hundred and twenty years today, I can no longer go out and come in; and Hashem has said to me: You shall not go across this Jordan River” (*Devarim* 31:2).

Why does Moshe go? To where does he go? “Moshe went from the Camp of Levi to the Camp of the Israelites to honor them, as one who wishes to depart from his friend goes to him to receive his permission to leave” (Ramban, *Devarim* 31:1). Ibn Ezra adds, “Moshe went to each tribe individually to inform them of his impending death.” Although Moshe already had all of Israel assembled and could have easily taken leave of them in one shot, he chose to take the time to show each and every tribe love, care and appreciation with his personal farewell. With fatherly reassurance and utmost humility, he told the Israelites, “I have become old and am no longer of any use for you. My student Yehoshua who is younger and stronger will take over my role and lead you in conquering the land.”

May we all learn ultimate humility from Moshe Rabbeinu and accept that everything in the world is temporary just as this world itself is transient. May we be ready – when the time comes – to let go and hand over responsibilities to the next generation, without needing any ailments to remind us of our frailty! May we learn to relinquish our ego and remain healthy and strong, aging with grace like Moshe – the man of G-d!

*G'mar Chatima Tovah!* May you be sealed in the Book of Life!