Honoring the Hoary Head:
Jewish Ritual and Liturgical Responses to Aging

by

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Digest

"You shall rise up before the hoary head and give honor to the face of the aged" (Levit. 19:32). Jewish tradition teaches that elders are to be treated with reverence and respect even as it acknowledges the difficulties of the aging experience. The task of this thesis is to identify areas of change, loss, and transition for aging Jews which can be addressed religiously; explore how tradition has responded to these needs; collect and analyze modern sources which are being used to ritually and liturgically mark the passages of later life; and develop models for assisting those who would want to create new ways of confirming the Jewish meaning and value of aging.

Chapter One addresses the psychosocial developmental stages of aging and the subsequent religious needs of the elderly as seen, particularly, through the lens of psychologist Eric Erikson. Erikson focuses on the balancing of despair and integrity in the final stages of life. The conclusions of this chapter serve as the basis for textual response in Chapter Two and ritual/liturgical development in Chapters Three and Four.

Chapter Two examines biblical and rabbinic sources to see how Judaism has responded to, or at least acknowledged, the psychosocial aging experiences and the needs of Jewish elders. Recognizing that Jewish sources define and describe the aging process according to realistic images but do not reflect ritual experiences, the goal is to learn from the sources meaningful (Jewish) ways to mark life's journey between marriage and death.

Chapter Three consists of a cataloging and analysis of contemporary liturgies and rituals that have been developed in synagogues, nursing homes, healing and hospice centers, and through individual initiative.

Chapter Four contains two creative aging ceremonies: a ritual for people alone on Shabbat and a Sukkot liturgy for honoring elders to be used in a congregational setting. In addition to each ritual and liturgy, I offer a full explanation of the psychosocial background, textual sources, and goals for each ceremony drawn from the lessons and images of the preceding chapters.

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Acknowledgments

"Jewish comes up in you from the roots and it stays with you all your life."
"Rachel," Number Our Days, p. 235

I became interested in the subject of Judaism's understanding of and response to aging when I read Number Our Days by Barbara Myerhoff as a student at Brandeis. The voices of the elders and the analysis of their life experiences touched me deeply as a human being and as a Jew. The inspirational research of Dr. Myerhoff and the encouragement of my teacher, Dr. Maurice Stein, sparked the beginnings of my scholarly exploration of the adult lifecycle.

The thesis itself, however, clearly began with my chaplaincy experiences at the Wellspring/Evergreen Retirement Community in Cincinnati and at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center (PGC). Observing and studying with Rabbi Dayle Friedman, my rabbinic mentor in serving the elderly at PGC, especially moved me to want to learn more about aging and to write a thesis that addressed this topic. Her ongoing counsel, along with the suggestions of Rabbi Richard Address, Rabbi Sam Seicol, and Rabbi Cary Kozberg directed my proposal and writing path. The idea for the creative liturgy sprang from my work with Rabbi Ronne Friedman and the clergy and congregants of Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo, New York. Dr. Linda Goldenhar provided invaluable bibliographical materials and moral support. Dr. Robert Katz served as a trusted and insightful research and writing consultant on the psychological aspects of aging in Chapter One.

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Introduction

In Jewish tradition, there are very mixed messages about aging: on the one hand, elders are to be honored and revered for "the crown of old men is their hoary head" (Proverbs 20:29). And, yet, concurrently, the Psalmist pleads, "God, do not forsake me in hoary old age" (Psalms 71:17-18). The tension between these two biblical approaches reflects real and perceived hopes and fears related to the aging process which are evident in contemporary society as well.

By the year 2000 almost one fifth of the Jewish population will be over 65, with the greatest percentage increase in those over 75. As the Jewish community faces a rapidly aging population, we have the opportunity--and the obligation--to acknowledge and affirm the later stages of life through our faith. However, Jewish tradition does not provide rituals to mark life's passages between marriage and death. Thus, it is increasingly relevant for Jewish leaders to ask: what role can Jewish faith and ritual play in the aging process? How can Judaism help us attain a new and active relation to the changes of aging we face physically, emotionally, intellectually, financially, socially, and spiritually?

This thesis attempts to address these questions. But, first, we must begin with a more basic issue: How does one define "elder" or even "aging"? Jewish sources usually rely on the life stages described in Pirke Avot 5:21, where old age is defined as sixty years. Psalm 90, however, suggests that a life-span is "seventy years, or by reason of strength, eighty years." In the contemporary world, many people live longer lives than our rabbinic and biblical ancestors and yet "aging" is still perceived to begin relatively early,

even as "young" as forty years. New categorizations of aging such as Gail Sheehy's "provisional adulthood," "first adulthood" and "second adulthood" do not soften the fears of "being old." As people begin to see their "youth" diminish in a variety of ways, there is an urgent need to mark their passing years and assess the meaning of their lives.

Clearly, aging is a complex process of change. There are physical, mental, financial, familial, and many other aspects of adjustment and loss. Jewish tradition records these aspects of aging but largely does not "acknowledge" them either publicly or privately. Although the Bible and rabbinic texts teach that aging Jews are to be honored for their wisdom and learning, often their voices are missing both in our ancient sources and in our modern society. This need not be the case. For many older adults today, the way to integrate past life experience and a current sense of life purpose is through a religious context. Jewish rituals and liturgy provide a way for elders to regain their voices through a connection and continuity with their faith as well as with their people and themselves.

Chapter One of this thesis explores the importance of religion and faith from the psychosocial perspective of the aging process. According to stage-theorist and psychologist Erik Erikson, the final developmental task of adulthood is that of dealing with integrity versus despair. Despair arises for the aging person facing losses and changes such as the death of loved ones, chronic or permanent changes in health status, and work stoppage. In addition, social scorn and feelings of undesirability often lead to experiencing a loss of purpose and self-esteem. Each person reacts to individual change and loss in a unique way, but research shows that faith in a Higher Power and the existence of a meaningful religious community are definite assets in

dealing with the inevitable losses and realities of later life. If this is so, a Jewish response to these losses in a meaningful way may be a powerful means of helping the aging maintain their sense of integrity.

Chapter Two is a compendium of biblical and rabbinic texts which correlate with and respond to the wide range of psychosocial aspects of aging defined in Chapter One. Gathering sources which reflect the traditional Jewish attitudes toward aging has been done previously (although not exhaustively) by other writers. I try to draw out examples of aging experiences, dilemmas, struggles, and celebrations which can provide directions for aging in the contemporary world and a foundation for creating authentic, meaningful, Jewish aging rituals and ceremonies.

Although there are a number of published collections of new rituals, there have been, to my knowledge, no specific efforts focused on aging. Thus, in Chapter Three, I have collected, cataloged, and analyzed aging rituals and liturgies from both published and previously unidentified sources including personal prayers and ceremonies that individuals have developed with their rabbis/cantors or on their own (for example: a ritual for removing a wedding ring after the death of a life-time partner). I sought out these primary sources through such means as the CCAR newsletter, the UAHC Commission on Aging, ritual banks, Jewish Hospice, the Jewish Healing Center, and other appropriate contacts in the field of geriatrics. I also spoke at length with Rabbi Dayle Friedman, Rabbi Richard Address, Rabbi Kerry Olitsky and other experts in the field who offered guidance in this endeavor.

The rituals and liturgies that I collected were largely developed in the last twenty years and represent Jewish lifecycle ceremonies and rabbinic services to the elderly (such as in nursing home facilities) that did not exist

previously. Jewish tradition allows for such creativity and, in fact, demands it in order to be reflective of the changing needs and struggles of the community. We can see that as the lifespan is extended, and the number of elders grows, more and more individuals experience a spectrum of aging transitions (including everything from menopause to retirement to adult b'nai mitzvah to anniversaries to chronic illness and to death of loved ones), resulting in a need for new ceremonies to help young and old successfully move through these changes in a creative, meaningful and growth-promoting fashion.

Even the most creative rituals may not seem appropriate for some elders, however. Many of the aging are not in physical or mental condition to want or comprehend rituals or liturgical performances. As we struggle to understand what "spirituality" means for the well-elderly, we must also ask what it means for those who are mentally and physically impaired. This thesis does not specifically address these issues except to say that just as there are many forms of liturgy, there are many means of making spiritual connections. Though a woman with advanced senile dementia cannot communicate verbally, a gentle touch may bring relaxation, peace, and a sense of being cared about--surely as sacred as any form of ritual or liturgy.

Judaism can certainly be an integral part of the aging experience through its values of lifelong learning, communal responsibility for all its members, and observance of lifecycle changes. The challenge in modernity is to provide a Jewish structure for elders to feel they belong and have something to contribute, whatever their physical/mental state.

The theme of Ecclesiastes that "all things have their proper times and seasons" provides the framework for thinking about the interconnectedness

of body and spirit that exists throughout life's journey. My analysis of new aging rituals reveals a wide range of common and unique interpretations of Judaism's response to the gains and losses of age as well as the comfort and strength Jewish tradition can provide.

The ritual for being alone on Shabbat and the liturgy for honoring elders on Sukkot which I propose in Chapter Four reflect the kinds of models I have illustrated in Chapter Three as well as the psychosocial experiences of the elderly defined in Chapter One. The biblical and rabbinic texts describing the aging experience in Chapter Two are the basis for the liturgical construction of the ceremonies. I chose the "settings" of being alone and being in a community because of the need I perceive, implicit if not explicit, for creating a "theology of wholeness" in contemporary Judaism. We tend to assume aging is a lonely, painful, undesirable stage of life. But, instead, for many elders, old age can be a time of new freedom, growth, and faith as well as a time for integrating past experiences and making peace with themselves and others.

In the ritual for a person who is alone on Shabbat, my hope was to create a sense of connection between the individual and loved ones, past or present, the wider Jewish community, and God. The Sukkot liturgy, which honors elders in a congregation, was designed to celebrate wisdom and age and to bind together the generations of the Jewish community. My attempts to create possible modes of spiritual expressions for the aging process are based on real experiences with elders in a variety of settings, but I emphasize that the purpose of my models is, ideally, to create opportunities for elders to share *their own* voices, blessings, and beliefs.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught, "The prosperity of a country can be

seen simply in how it treats its old people."[1] As contemporary Jews, we live in the safest and most prosperous of any time in our people's history. And, yet, we are only beginning to treat our elders in a way that reflects the honor and dignity they deserve. It is my hope that this study of Judaism's faith, values, and traditions as they relate to aging can help us transcend stereotyped images and fears of being old to arrive at more meaningful Jewish visions and experiences of aging, honoring our own developing sense of personal integrity as well as the wisdom and continuity of our people.

[1] Found in Leo Rosten's *Treasury of Jewish Quotations* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), p.381.

Chapter One: Psychological Aspects of Aging

If one believes that the essence of life is change, then an important question of old age, and perhaps of all life, is how one can adapt to, and make peace with, the inevitable changes of aging. Poets, philosophers, and psychologists, among many others, have attempted to describe and explain the changes that occur during the course of a human life. In the field of psychology, stage theories have been developed to help us understand the aging processes. According to the developmental theory of Erik Erikson, psychological well-being in old age is dependent on the progression of continued growth across all stages in the life course. The skills one learns over a lifetime which allow one to adapt to the needs of the body, the community, and the environment in which one lives, can bring a greater appreciation of the wholeness of life. This process of reconciling past stages in order to live better in the present remains the basic challenge of living with the tensions and changes of a lifetime.

One of the encompassing themes of life is loss and how we adapt to the changes that losses bring. This chapter will identify areas of loss, change, and transition for the elderly and begin to examine the role that spirituality and religion might play in adapting to the aging process, as seen through the lens of Erikson's developmental theory of life stages. Although many psychologists have offered other approaches to life-stage development, Erikson's theory is considered a fundamental model in the basic understanding of the field of gerontology. However, whether one follows Erikson's model, Maslow's conception of self-actualization, Rogers' view of the fully functioning person, Jung's formulation of individuation, or

Allport's notion of maturity, the key dimensions of psychosocial and spiritual well-being include autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

And yet, achieving this level of integrity for the elderly is formidable when the hallmark of aging is loss. While facing one's own death is the most dramatic loss, other primary losses (as will be noted in our discussion of Erikson's final life stages) include death of a loved one, chronic or permanent changes in health status, and work stoppage. Secondary losses include loss of memory, loss of mobility (especially the loss of the ability to drive), loss of sensory acuity, loss of independence, loss of ability to function sexually or to experience intimacy, decline in income or earning power, change in appearance, inability to pursue hobbies or leisure activities, loss of civic or community role, loss of family role, loss of social contacts, and loss of home. Also, the loss of a sense of purpose and the resultant loss of self-esteem are over-arching feelings that accompany nearly any other primary or secondary loss.

Nonetheless, each person reacts to individual losses in a unique way. Those who have developed a broad, flexible definition of self and have adopted a realistic view of life as an experience of inevitable loss are better prepared to cope with the realities of later life. Sigmund Freud taught that losses are necessary because we grow by losing and leaving and letting go. In fact, concludes Judith Viorst, "it is only through our losses that we become fully developed human beings."[2] Thus, for the elderly, the response to loss and change over many life-stages may shape the understanding and meaning of their lives.

[2] Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 3.

According to Erikson, faith in a Higher Power and the existence of a meaningful religious community are definite assets in dealing with the inevitable losses and realities of later life. Faith and religious expression also develop throughout the life stages. Hence, this thesis will conclude that a meaningful Jewish response to the inevitable losses and changes of a lifetime, through ritual and liturgy, may be a powerful way of helping the aging maintain their sense of integrity.

Erikson presents eight stages of psychosocial development. Each stage of the lifecycle involves new, age-appropriate reintegration of the psychosocial themes that were dominant in earlier periods. In old age, the individual incorporates, at both a conscious and unconscious level, all of the earlier themes described below in order to bring into balance the tension between a sense of integrity, of enduring comprehensiveness, and an opposing sense of despair, of dread, and hopelessness. I will briefly describe the eight stages as they apply to the aging process.[3]

Stage 1: Infancy: *Trust and Mistrust: Hope*

In old age, hope is often identified as wisdom that has grown from a mature faith. The origins of hope begin in the first stage of life through the successful development of balance between trust and mistrust. Over a lifetime, hopefulness is what allows human beings to successfully manage the disparity between the relative stability in the universe and the realistic unpredictabilities. This tension involves issues of commitment to established religion.

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[3] Erik H. Erikson, Joan Erikson, and Helen Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age: The Experience of Old Age in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1986), pp. 54-55.

Stage 2: Early Childhood: *Autonomy and Shame/Doubt: Will*

The second stage of Erikson's developmental theory focuses on bringing into balance the feelings of autonomy and shame/doubt which he claims are based on very early issues of control over one's own body, one's own behavior, and, in a larger sense, one's own life. This is important over the entire lifecycle as the body changes and develops, but especially connects to feelings of self-determination and of helplessness as the body deteriorates with old age.[4] Because loss of physical capacities is a critical issue in aging, the emotional strength developed in relation to this stage is very significant.

Stage 3: Play Age: *Initiative and Guilt: Purpose*

In Erikson's third stage, the individual must face age- and society-related obstacles, by relying on a sense of initiative, moderated by a capacity for self-restraint, to renew the strength of purposefulness that was originally developed in childhood. The elder's participation in the world is made more difficult by the diminution of energy and sensory acuity in old age. Also, limited facilities and transportation restrict the kinds of activity that may be readily available.

> While striving to express initiative through activity, the aged must learn to adapt to new limits on that activity without giving in to incapacitating guilt or overriding inactivation. The elder makes use of current involvement, both to reconcile old-age feelings of initiative and guilt and to integrate a sense of purposefulness that will extend backward and forward, across the whole lifecycle.[5]

The elder must weigh self-interest goals against cooperation and concern for others. These considerations are present in all spheres of life but become an especially important dimension of reintegration and adaptation in old age

[4] Erikson, pp. 188-189.
[5] Erikson, p. 170.

through new kinds of involvement with the world of doing and making such as art, theater, travel, new relationships, and new "homes."

Stage 4: School Age: *Industry and Inferiority: Competence*

As the concluding stage of childhood, the challenge of this psychosocial theme is to balance a tendency toward industriousness and accomplishment with an opposing one toward inferiority and ineptitude. Throughout life, this strength remains grounded in observable behavior as well as in less observable emotions. In later life, it builds on the integration of a lifetime of ability and inability. A sense of competence allows some elders to remain involved in activities which are no longer as effortless or as flawless as they may once have been. It helps others sustain feelings of capability based on recalling earlier involvement in work and, to a lesser extent, in school.[6]

Thus, in old age, the individual continues to renew a sense of competence based on resources from within, demands from outside, and opportunities that arise. As in Stage Two, issues of physical competence in old age are greatly impacted by the physiological and sensory deterioration which diminish longtime skills dependent on physical strength, sensory acuity, and fine motor coordination. A lifelong sense of competence is a critical resource in terms of addressing changes in the technological, social, and political world. Even the capacity to deal with retirement is influenced by one's sense of effectiveness.

Stage 5: Adolescence: *Identity and Identity Confusion: Fidelity*

Old age's reconciling of the tension between identity and identity confusion reinvolves the individual in the psychosocial process that dominated adolescence. The elder's task is to make sense of one's life in the past, present,

[6] Erikson, pp. 147-148.

and indeterminate future. A life review of beliefs and personal characteristics gives the aged individual the opportunity to reevaluate experience (particularly through the examination of belongings, photographs, and values) with the perspective of time. In comparing early hopes and dreams with life actually lived, he or she struggles to come to terms with the realities of personal capacities in the context of uncontrollable life circumstances. The elder also faces a last opportunity to make, and to act on, commitments that best reflect the "I" in the totality of life--what is referred to as existential identity.[7]

In Stage Five, the elder begins to realize that he or she is a member of the "omega generation," the oldest living generation in his or her family. At this stage, there are no other living elders to whom to look for guidance through the next stage.

> Members of the omega generation must be guided by ideological heroes and by their own wisdom and memories, as they themselves serve as guides for the generations that follow. The sense of identity in old age rests not only on recollection and evaluation of the personal past but also on members of younger generations and on their representation of the generational future. In the final stage of the lifecycle, a sense of self is grounded not only in the personal choices and actions of a lifetime but also in the generations that will survive the elder and that will remember him or her into the future.[8]

Stage 6: Young Adulthood: *Intimacy and Isolation: Love*

Throughout the lifecycle, a balance is sought between the need for intimacy and the need for some isolation. In old age, the individual faces these issues in light of long-term relationships and those that are more recent. According to Erikson, love at the end of life must involve a coming to terms with love,

[7] Erikson, pp. 129-130.
[8] Erikson, p. 130.

expressed and not expressed, over the course of the whole lifecycle. But maintaining a sense of loving mutuality in old age is often difficult and painful, as the elder may be forced to confront isolation imposed by the death of a lifelong partner and of longtime friends.[9] In addition, elders must adapt to issues of retirement, sexuality (or, unchosen celibacy), remarrying, new relationships with siblings, friends, and other family members.

Stage 7: Adulthood: *Generativity and Stagnation: Care*

The elder person must balance the feelings of generativity and stagnation developed in the course of middle age's active parenting, working, and creating. Elders face feelings of stagnation when they lose their official positions of responsibility in the family and the community. Diminishing energy and physical capacities may place generative limits on the earlier-life behaviors related to caring for a family, a profession, or an institution. In addition, the elder must come to terms with the caring and the lack of caring experienced as a child, at the hands of his or her own parents, and as an adult, having been responsible for these same parents in their old age.[10] The elder often adapts in this stage by giving advice, grandparenting, and involvement in the community.

Stage 8: Old Age: *Integrity and Despair: Wisdom*

The last stage of Erikson's eight stages, and the most important in terms of this thesis, is old age. Here the individual is challenged to rework the tensions and rebalance the resulting strengths of all the earlier stages. Despair arises for the aging person facing losses and changes of health, of loved ones, of home, of work and status and financial security, of control and choices. In addition, social scorn and feelings of undesirability often lead to

[9] Erikson, p. 105
[10] Erikson, pp. 73-74.

experiencing a loss of purpose and self-esteem. Old age is an attempt to establish an integrity of the self that, while drawing sustenance from the past, remains vitally involved in the present.

> It is through this last stage of life that the lifecycle weaves back on itself in its entirety, ultimately integrating maturing forms of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love and care, into a comprehensive sense of wisdom. Throughout life, the individual has, on some level, anticipated the finality of old age, experiencing an existential dread of "not-being" alongside an ever-present process of integrating those behaviors and restraints, those choices and rejections, those essential strengths and weaknesses over time that constitute what Erikson calls the sense of "I" in the world. In old age this tension reaches its ascendancy. The elder is challenged to draw on a lifecycle that is far more nearly completed than yet to be lived, to consolidate a sense of wisdom with which to live out the future, to place him- or herself in perspective among those generations now living, and to accept his or her place in an infinite historical progression.[11]

Old age requires facing death, looking for guidance from the elders who were models from childhood, contextualizing aging with friends who are aging, and accepting the inalterability of the past. Religion is often a vital framework for putting these difficult concepts into perspective. As an elder contemplates the changes and losses in his or her life, wisdom and meaning are often found through religious values, beliefs, and faith developed over the many stages of the life course.

"Wisdom," according to Erikson, is more likely to be achieved through looking back at life with satisfaction rather than with regret at what was missed and unfinished. Focusing on lost opportunities of the past may lead to despair. So, achieving integrity implies a wisdom which permits living life fully and accepting the here and now for what it is, and feeling one's self as a

[11] Erikson, pp. 55-56.

significant being and part of the continuity of what came before and what will come afterwards. This sense of significance is a reflection of the spirit.[12]

The dynamics of the spirit are an important link from the first stage of life to the last. The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1973) defines spirit as "the vital principle or animating force within living beings."[13] An individual's spirituality is an expression of his or her spirit. Thus, spirituality can be understood as the creative dynamic within the psyche which transcends material form into the mysterious, unexplainable aspects of life; spiritual experience can lead to meaningful insights and judgments, particularly in the last stages of life.

Nonetheless, the term "spiritual" is ambiguous in today's society. In many cases it is a concept that may seem foreign to Judaism because it suggests a separation between that which is physical, bodily, or material and that which is social, psychological, or emotional. Judaism looks at the whole person and recognizes spirituality not as one compartment of life but the deepest dimension of all life.[14] Hence, the spiritual dynamic may not be expressed exclusively in traditional religious language. It may also be expressed through art, philosophy, music, drama, literature, and similar creative products of the psyche. All of life can be seen as religious expression.

The concept of spirituality has many interpretations, shadings, and meanings, but for our purposes, spirituality is defined as a transcendent force that goes beyond the corporeal into the realm of pure essence. It is the

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[12] Celia Weisman, D.S.W. and Paula Schwartz, M.S.W. "Spirituality: An Integral Part of Aging," in *The Journal of Aging and Judaism*, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1989), p. 114.

[13] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), p. 1245.

[14] Camille Shira Angel, *These Are Our Lives and the Length of Our Days: Images and Concerns of Aging Women in Hebrew Literature* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York,1995), p. 97.

dimension of what Heschel calls the "ineffable"--that aspect which lies beyond one's comprehension. This is a recognition that there is a mystery in all things and in life--so that the meaning of existence is greater than ourselves.[15]

The search for, and assertion of, a transcendent meaning in one's life provides a link between the various developmental stages in life and the orientation in later life from which to integrate life's experiences into a meaningful whole. As suggested above, Erikson maintains that this process of integration through faith in a Higher Power, individual spiritual expression, and access to a healthy religious community are critical and effective means of adapting and responding to life's spectrum of experiences, particularly aging.

In early stages of life, the human spirit may be intimately bound up with outward physical growth and ego development. In later years physical decline may limit productivity, but the activity of the spirit continues through shifting the focus of personal identity from doing-in-the-world--a shift from what one does--to who one is. As physical activity diminishes, the spirit begins to move toward an emphasis upon the nonphysical aspects of life.[16]

For the elderly, the big (nonphysical) questions which arise within one's inner thoughts and feelings pertain to one's value and worth. Who am I? What have I accomplished in my life? Of what use am I now that I am old? These questions are often heard from those who are searching for spirituality. The subsequent answers which reflect one's attitude toward the

[15] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 110.

[16] Ernest Hall, S.T.M., D. Min. "Spirituality During Aging," in *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 24 (Winter, 1985), p. 113.

self affect the function of religion and spirituality during aging. The very essence of spirituality is the concept of self, which can help answer what is the meaning of life.[17]

We can draw from Erikson's life-stage model to see that the normal process of psychosocial development leads to a fuller religious understanding of life. In his article "Erikson's Lifecycle Theory and Images of God," Methodist Pastor Richard A. Phillips goes so far as to suggest that Erikson's ground plan for psychosocial development is, at its core, religious. "Humanity," he says, "is on a quest towards a more perfect expression of the divine image." Thus, the purpose of Erikson's stages of the lifecycle, in Phillip's perspective, is to grow into the image of God.[18]

In Judaism, a religious approach to aging implies turning one's thoughts and feelings to God through prayer, study and action. Rabbi Neil Gillman has identified three models of Jewish spiritual expression: intellectual, pietistic, and behavioral. Elderly Jews may incorporate one or more of these models in their search for meaning. Spiritual expression is not limited to one form, and many variables shape the direction of this expression.[19]

Gillman's intellectual model, implicit in the words of the Torah, claims that what God wants above all is knowledge, understanding, the mind. The Torah is read to the community as part of the covenantal experience. Jews are commanded to study the Torah and teach it diligently to their children. When the Torah is believed to be God's revelation, studying becomes the primary means to knowing God's will. "Study," according to

[17] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 111.

[18] Richard A. Phillips, "Erikson's Lifecycle Theory and Images of God," in *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 40 (1992), pp. 170-172.

[19] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 111.

Gillman, "becomes a model of spirituality when it is no longer a means to authenticity but rather an end in itself."[20]

The second model, the pietistic, is commonly identified with Hassidism. This union with God is based on faith and mystical experience, and is commonly thought of as nonintellectual and nonrational and is manifested through intense emotional expression and religious ecstasy. Gillman further states that "pietism becomes a model of spirituality when it is emphasized as supremely important . . . and even leads to the disregard of other authentic Jewish values." He notes "pietism is also the operative mode of all forms of Jewish mysticism."[21]

> The blind faith that is expressed by those elderly adhering to a pietistic model of spirituality is often illustrated by such comments as "Don't worry, God will take care of everything." For the elderly, this model can be functional in reducing stress. "When God decides my time is up, I'll be ready to join Him." Other expressions of faith serve to further underlie the intense emotional bond and identification with the Almighty.[22]

In some descriptions of pietistic behavior, the ancient rabbis go so far as to suggest that humanity should separate from the material world entirely, so as to "repair one's soul" before it is too late. This can be a difficult task for the elderly, especially at times when they suffer grief, loneliness and despair. But it is precisely at these times that faith can be a source of strength and comfort as the necessary losses that shape life are confronted.[23]

The behavioral model is rooted in the rabbinic interpretation of the Bible which is manifested in Jewish Law and asserts prescribed patterns of

[20] Weisman and Schwartz, pp. 112-113.
[21] Neil Gillman, in Weisman and Schwartz, p. 112.
[22] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 112.
[23] Angel, p. 98.

behavior. The implications of this behavioral model for the aging Jew are to provide structure and meaning at a time of life when basic social roles have diminished. Some behaviors of the observant Jewish older person might include: attending the synagogue daily and helping comprise a minyan; ushering in the Sabbath by lighting candles; reciting *berachot* over wine, bread, and after meals. For some elderly who have survived a spouse and live alone, the behavioral model is still carried out regardless of gender role assignment. For example, older women living alone will recite the *kiddush* or a *beracha* which is traditionally said by the male member of the family.[24] These behaviors reflect ways Judaism has attempted to meet the spiritual needs of the elderly. In other words, basic to the behavioral model is the observance of *mitzvot*.

Rabbi Dayle Friedman has further developed the "mitzvah model"[25] as a therapeutic resource for the institutionalized aged. In Rabbi Friedman's vision, the "mitzvah model" is accessible even to the frail, impaired older person. The Jewish laws of religious obligation allow for adaptation to the capacities of the individual Jew; thus participating in "mitzvot" can provide the aging with a means of living with a sense of worth, dignity, and self-esteem. This concept will be further developed later in the thesis as I explore how the models of ritual and liturgy, both traditional and creative, can provide sources of support and meaning for the older Jew.

In each of Gillman's models, the major task of the older person in relation to spiritual needs is similar: "acceptance of one's age . . . coming to terms with it . . . making peace with some of life's changes and losses . . . and

[24] Weisman and Schwartz, pp. 111-112.

[25] Rabbi Dayle Friedman, "The Mitzvah Model," in The *Journal of Aging and Judaism*, Vol. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987).

counteracting feelings of boredom, emptiness, rejection, loneliness and fear of time."[26] Celia Weisman notes that: "spirituality in the elderly draws on inner resources, and is primarily concerned with inner thoughts and feelings--one's private life so to speak--which transcends the ordinary limits of aging. It is a feeling which goes beyond the meaning of existence--of being. It provides a sense of continuity within the past, present and future by identifying a higher order of things in the process of life over time."[27]

Spirituality becomes the organizing force that orders and gives meaning to disparate and conflicting emotional pulls in this last stage of life.[28] As noted above, Erikson calls this phase the struggle for integrity and wisdom. "In other words, one must come to grips with the personal meaning of one's life in order to transcend the threats of despair and disgust." However, if the examination of one's past is not to lead to disgust and despair but to "integrity and wisdom," the elder must accept his or her "one and only lifecycle," imperfections and all, and find meaning and value in it. One must accept, says Erikson, "the fact that one's life is one's own responsibility."[29]

But achieving integrity is not only about taking responsibility for one's life; there are also the real day-to-day problems for the elderly of material, physical, psychological, and spiritual security. And, there is the prevalent negative societal view of aging. Although gerontologist Robert Butler notes that the elderly are paid lip service as idealized images of beloved and tranquil grandparents, wise elders, white-haired patriarchs and matriarchs, what prevails are the opposite images which disparage the elderly, seeing age

[26] Weisman and Schwartz, p.113.
[27] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 111.
[28] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 111.
[29] Viorst, p. 333.

as decay, decrepitude, a disgusting and undignified dependency.[30]

If one of the ways society is judged is on the basis of how it treats its elderly, we must seek ways to change the images which cause traumatic fear of being old, and fight the prejudice and discrimination against those advanced in years. We must come to grips with the reality that today a 40-year-old white woman's life expectancy is 92 years; and perhaps, in the not-so-distant-future, it may become commonplace to live to 120 years, "the fullness of age," as did our ancestor Moses. After years of human attempts to find the secret to eternal youth, how do we save the old from despondency and despair? How do we lend beauty to being old? How do we regain the authenticity of old age? Old age is a major challenge to the inner life; it takes both wisdom and strength not to succumb to it. It is our attitude toward our losses as much as the nature of our losses which will determine the quality of our old age.

We have learned that preparing for these final losses begins in infancy with learning to love and let go. But, while early life history is important in determining the capacity to change and grow, old age itself may also call forth new strengths and new capabilities that were not available at previous stages. Through each stage there is development--even into the seventh, eighth, ninth decades and beyond. The continuing ability to grow and express oneself spiritually can profoundly help one deal with the accumulating changes and losses of old age.

There are those who offer a hopeful point of view; amidst losses, limits, and multiplying infirmities, some elderly people embody powerful spiritual models which affirm that existence in old age is good. One eighty-

[30] Viorst, p. 323.

eight-year-old woman comments: "Don't ever let anyone tell you that age is all loss. It's damn lonely at times, a bit loveless, too. But the perspective upon a long personal past with experience to season and focus that perspective--that is a positive and unique gift of being *old.*"[31]

Clearly, the tensions of aging test the vital strength of the human spirit.[32] But, as time progresses and life's closure becomes more imminent, the significance of the spiritual questions of meaning takes on an even greater urgency. For the elder, religious activity and experience offer opportunities for inner growth and creativity, nourish identity, and develop wisdom.

The virtue of wisdom in Erikson's last stage of life development is the accepting of one's self as significant with a sense of continuity to the past and the importance of transcending temporal difficulties to achieve spiritual fulfillment. For the Jewish elderly, the wisdom attained through membership in the covenantal community, acceptance of Jewish values, and expression of faith may become the cornerstone of both identity and spirituality.[33]

For rabbis and others who serve the Jewish community, the effort to restore the dignity of old age will depend upon our ability to assist in the continued growth of our elders by acknowledging the losses and changes of aging through traditional and creative Jewish expressions of religiosity such as liturgy and ritual. If the losses and changes of aging are acknowledged, marked through mourning or celebration, there is the potential of spirituality and faith leading to "creative freedoms, further development, joy and the ability to embrace life."[34] Whether a person comes from an observant background or not, Judaism can provide meaning and value for every stage of

[31] Viorst, p. 328.
[32] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 113.
[33] Weisman and Schwartz, p. 110.
[34] Viorst, p. 318.

the life course. The sanctification of time is Judaism's greatest obligation and privilege. Thus, Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel sums up aging and spirituality as follows:

> One of the major ills of old age as well as one of the roots of the general fear of old age is the fear of time.[35] . . . Time is perpetual presence, perpetual novelty. Every moment is a new arrival, a new bestowal. Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy. The moment is the marvel; it is in evading the marvel of the moment that boredom begins which ends in despair.
>
> Old age has the vicious tendency of depriving a person of the present. The aged thinks of himself as belonging to the past. But it is precisely the openness to the present that he must strive for. The marvel is discovered in celebration.
>
> *All it takes to sanctify time is God, a soul, and a moment. And the three are always here.*[36]

[35] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York:Schocken, 1972), p. 79.
[36] Heschel, p. 82.

Chapter Two: Biblical and Rabbinic Images of Aging

There is no single approach or response to aging in Jewish tradition. The representations of aging and old age in the Bible and rabbinic literature typify the range of cultural attitudes of the writers and societies of those times. Some of the images projected are clearly idealized; some of the descriptions are startling familiar and realistic even today. The basic approaches of Jewish culture, law, and tradition regarding aging and the aged can be traced through the ancient literature which was collected and redacted over long periods of time. And yet, there is a common background for all of the writers which reflects certain essential cultural patterns and beliefs.

This chapter will explore the mosaic of poetic and pragmatic opinions on aging which are presented in the biblical and classical rabbinic sources. I will examine the phenomenological aspects of aging as they are depicted in the literature and analyze how the blessings of old age and the veneration of wisdom and experience are woven together with realistic (and ambivalent) observations about physical deterioration, emotional frustration resulting from weakness and loneliness, and the ways society often took advantage of its older members. Although there is not one unified Jewish view on aging, we will see that the biblical and rabbinic voices concerning the aged are in many ways universal and focus on three fundamental dimensions of the aging process: the physical, the psychological and the "spiritual."

The Bible describes the "experience of aging" as a sequence of the seasons or stages of life. Each phase of life is marked by physical and psychological changes as maturity sets in and old age approaches. Biblical life stages indicate common transitions: childhood, youth, maturity (young

married) and elderly (Ezekiel 9:6; Ps. 148:12; Jer. 6:11, 51:22). The ancient Israelite writers viewed aging as the last part of an ongoing developmental process.

In later rabbinic literature, the lifecycle was divided by Yehudah ben Teima into fourteen phases, from the age of five to one hundred years. What begins with some pedagogical instruction--five years is the age for learning Scripture, ten years for Mishnah, etc.--concludes with sixty as the age for "zikna," ("old age"), seventy the age for "sayva" ("white hair"), eighty as the age of "g'vurah," ("strong old age"--i.e. in terms of endurance), ninety as the age of "lashuach" ("bent over"), and one hundred is as "if a person is dead and has passed away from the world" (M. Avot 5:21). Even though ninety and one hundred years reflect the limits of infirmity and are treated with some ambivalence, it seems there is value in aging and that the physical and psychological burdens of the elderly need not be the sole determining characteristics of age.

Indeed, the Bible and rabbinic sources often describe old age as a creative and reflective time of life. We will see in the texts examined below the concerns and insights of the aging and the viewpoints of those who look back on life and evaluate the past. These materials will also reflect upon the work of elderly people, their sexuality, their wisdom, their leadership.

For the contemporary reader, these ancient texts suggest that elders may accept the challenges of an aging body and even the awareness that death is arriving and still value time, health, and relationships as well as teach others to do so. While some sources may interpret bodily limitations as a sign of unfaithfulness or divine disfavor, Jewish tradition can shift an elder's sense of worth away from unrealistic expectations for their health to a more

balanced, more "spiritual" understanding of the aging process.

Thus, I will conclude that the Bible and its related literature, in spite of the ambivalent images and descriptions of the aging process, teach that aging may increase one's potential contribution to others and to God's work. This recognition of the blessing of age can restore hope and dignity in aging and provide the elderly with a new sense of worth and propensity towards growth. Fears associated with the mystery and unknowns of aging and death are calmed through the belief that all are created in the divine image. Ultimately, the greatest measure of spiritual comfort and support for the aging is given by God who protects the status of the aging and promises not to abandon those who grow old.

Defining Old Age

What defines old age in the Bible? Chronology? Physical characteristics? State of mind? Looking at the early history of humanity as it is imagined in the Bible, one sees the world peopled by individuals who lived to extraordinary ages. Adam lived 930 years (Gen. 5:5), his son Seth lived to 912 years (Gen. 5:8) and Methuselah lived to 969 years (Gen. 5:27). Even Noah, in spite of the flood, lived to the ripe old age of 950 years (Gen. 9:29). But the Biblical writers were well aware of the finitude and brevity of life. The writer of Genesis declared: "Then the Lord said, 'My spirit shall not shield man forever, since he is but flesh; let the day allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.'" (Gen. 6:3) The Psalmist was even more realistic: "The span of our life is seventy, or given strength, eighty years" (Ps. 90:10). Indeed, few people lived to the idealized age of one hundred and twenty: the patriarchs, the matriarch Sarah, Moses, the mythical hero Job, the priests

Aaron and Jehoida. But Joseph, Joshua, Caleb, Eli, and Barzillai merely exceeded the age of seventy.[37]

Only one of these ancestors of antiquity is ever referred to by Scripture as having been chronologically "old." It is not until the story of Abraham that the words referring to "old age" are used. Sarah says, "V'adoni zaken," "my husband is old" (Gen. 18:12). (Note that Sarah's description refers not only to Abraham's chronological age but also to his physical/sexual capacity which, as a result of age, would seem to preclude him from fathering a child.) Then, in Genesis 24:1, Abraham is described as "zaken ba b'yamim," as "old, advanced in years." In Bereshit Rabbah[38], Rabbi Yehudah, son of R. Shimon asks if there is a difference between these two descriptions: being "old" and being "advanced in years." According to R. Yehudah, Abraham prayed for a sign of "old age" because people could not distinguish between him and Isaac. No one knew whom to honor, for both the father and son looked alike. According to this midrash, it was the physical signs of aging that were needed to help each individual clarify his identity in public and to enable the elder to receive the respect he deserved.

What are the physical signs which Abraham sought and received? According to Rabbi Aha in Bereshit Rabbah,[39] the white hair of the old is the eternal sign of old age. In a similar vein, the later Pirke de R. Eliezer[40] describes seven wonders which were part of the creation of the world, the likes of which have not been seen since. The third wonder concerns the old: until the time of Abraham no one possessed white hair as a sign of old age.

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[37] Rachel Dulin, *A Crown of Glory: A Biblical View of Aging* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 50-51.

[38] Bereshit Rabbah, Parashah 65, ed. J. Theodor and H. Albeck, (Jerusalem: 1965), p.717.

[39] Bereshit Rabbah, Parashah 59, p. 717.

[40] Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Parasha 52, ed. Friedlander, pp. 421-422.

White hair is, therefore, the archetypal symbol of age.

The term "sayva," white or gray hair, is in fact used as an analogue to the word "zaken." In the Bible, both words appear in parallel stichs. In the classic verse which mandates respect for the old, Leviticus 19:32, "mipnei sayva takum" is a parallel to "v'hadarta p'nai zaken." Similarly, in Isaiah 46:4 the two words are again used together: "V'ad zikna ani hu v'ad sayva ani esbol" (also compare 1 Sam 12:2 and Psalms 71:18)--these two similar constructions reflect that of Gen. 24:1 which R. Yehudah read as a redundancy, as we have seen. Could it be that here "zikna" refers to age in years, and "sayva" to its physical signs? In the Talmud, the Aramaic forms of "sav" are often interchangeable with the Hebrew word "zaken."[41]

The first use of the term "sayva" is in Genesis 15:15 where God tells Abraham that even in his "old age," he will father a child. "You will go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age." Here the "sayva" is linked with "tova," "good." Thus it seems that from the very outset of the biblical narrative, the intrinsic value of old age (i.e. long-life) is proclaimed. The connecting of "sayva" and "tova" occurs four times in the Bible, twice in reference to Abraham (Gen. 15:15 and 25:8), once in reference to Gideon (Judges 8:32), and once in reference to King David (I. Chron. 29:28). While it is not clear that in the expression of "sayva tova," "tova" necessarily conveys a value judgment that old age is good, nevertheless, it does seem certain that the attainment of old age (particularly with one's health intact) is valued positively.

But, more typically, old age, as defined by society, is often viewed as negative. Social and psychological pressures are strong even when an

[41] Harlan J. Wechsler, *Broken Tablets in the Ark: A Study of the Ideas of Aging in Rabbinic Literature* (PhD. Dissertation,Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982), pp.18-19.

individual's self-image may not agree with what others are saying. There are two psychologically astute traditions by which old age is defined for a woman: according to R. Shimon (b. Niddah 9b) old age is determined when a woman is called "Ima, Ima" ("mother, mother") and is not embarrassed by it; R. Zeira understands the definition of a woman's old age to be that she does not mind when she is called "ima."

There is a practical difference between the two definitions. There are those who, when treated with the special deference reserved for the aged, are embarrassed by this deference, though they do not mind it. And, there are others who do indeed mind when they see others are reacting to them as if they are old. In both cases, however, it is the individual's self-image which determines when a person is old, a self-image which reacts to the general perceptions of society about whether an individual is old. Here, there is no objective physical standard or numerical age which determines old age. To the contrary, this perception is determined by the individual herself.[42]

The Jerusalem Talmud (as quoted by the Tosafot, b. Niddah 9 b) takes issue with this subjective approach and asks: "Is the matter therefore dependent on her opinion?" No. The Talmud emends the original statement of R. Shimon changing its impact completely: an old woman is she whom it is appropriate to call "ima." Thus, the definition of old age goes back to a view which allows society to decide.[43]

The Hebrew terms for aging indicate that while chronology is one measure of age, certain physical, psychological and social characteristics always are associated with and directly mold the definition of old age. But, like the idea of aging itself, the Hebrew terms for "age" can have many shades

[42] Wechsler, p. 26.
[43] Wechsler, p. 27.

of meaning. For example, a "zaken" is not only someone who goes through a natural process of aging, but a "zaken" can also be a community elder who is respected for his mature judgment, someone with an important judicial office implying authority and wisdom. Furthermore, the Rabbis reinterpreted "zaken" midrashically (Gen. Rabbah 59:6) by playing with the phrase "And Abraham was old". "Zaken" is taken as "zeh kanah," meaning "This man has acquired" or "This man has acquired two worlds: This world and the world to come." Although the context of this interpretation applies strictly to Abraham and does not generally refer to all elderly persons, I would nonetheless suggest that it reflects the strongly held traditional belief that old age (i.e. long life) is a reward from God.

Old Age is A Reward from God

Advanced years are seen as a special indication of a person's importance and as a sign of divine favor (Gen. 5:1-33). Exceptions to this rule do appear, but the Bible generally glorifies its heroes by reciting their exceptional longevity. (As noted above, most people in the Bible seemed to live seventy or eighty years.) The concept that old age is granted to an individual by God as a reward for the proper fulfillment of *mitzvot*, God's commandments, is prevalent throughout biblical literature.[44] Proverbs describes it best: "The sayva is a crown of glory, it shall be found in the ways of righteousness." (Prov. 16:31; also: Prov. 3:2,16; 4:4,10; 9: 10-11; 28:10). Old age is attained as a result of righteousness and following the commandments.

Rabbi Steven Reuben finds that this thought is echoed in the Bible no

[44] Harris, p. 37.

less than six other times.[45] Even in the midst of the Ten Commandments, God tells the people, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God has given you" (Exod. 20:12). The Rabbis also teach that old age comes as a reward for the righteous. "Beauty and strength and riches and honor and wisdom and old age and gray hairs and children are comely to the world" (M. Avot 6:8). In this way, the Mishnah exalts old age as an additional sign of divine favor earned by the righteous. Certainly this passage confirms the belief that old age indicates God's blessings as a fitting reward for a life well lived. (See also Gen. Rabbah 58:9 and 62:2; Deut. Rabbah 6:2; Avot 2:1; Ta'anit 2b; Baba Batra 121b; Berakhot 8a and 8b; Eccles. Rabbah 2:20; Mo'ed Katan 28a; Shabb. 156a; Mishnah Kinnim 3:15; Yalkut Shimoni to Isaiah 5:26; Exod. Rabbah 15 and 16; Sukkah 53a.)

Biblical and Rabbinic Attributes of the Aged

Honor and Respect:

The primary social concept relating to the aged is that they are due honor and respect. (See Sanh. 96a and 107b, Baba Metzia 87a; Kidd. 32b and 33a; Yer. T. Bikkurim 3:3; Numb. Rabbah 15:17 and 16; Ruth Rabbah 9:6; Sotah 49b; Rashi commentary on Kidd. 31b; Baba Metzia commentary on Exod. 18:20; Bekorot 30b; Yer. T. Pe'ah 1:3; Baba Metzia 60b; Berahot 8b; Mo'ed Katan 3; Exod. Rabbah 5; Levit. Rabbah 2; Mekhilta to Yitro 19; Gen. Rabbah 63:6; Prov. 20:29 and 23:22.) In the Torah there is an injunction which is specifically directed at inculcating the value of respecting the old. The Torah says: "You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old, and you shall fear God: I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:32). On the surface, this is a

[45] Rabbi Steven Reuben, *Old Age: Appearance and Reality* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1976), p. 7.

clear command to honor and respect the old in the serious context of fearing God. But this "honoring" and "respecting" of the old in Leviticus is not as clearly defined as the command of filial obligation in the Decalogue (Exod. 10:12 and Deut. 5:16). According to the rabbinic elaboration of the commandment, honoring a parent involves positive actions such as giving a parent food and drink, clothing him, as well as leading him in and out. But, these kinds of positive actions are NOT spelled out as part of the law pertaining to "zaken," the aged generally (i.e. in addition to one's own parents).

In many cases, however, the requirements of filial piety correspond to the treatment of the old mandated through the laws of caring for the poor and healing the sick. Since old age may bring physical disability and thus loss of income, protection for frail elderly may hinge on obedience to guidelines for treatment of the impoverished or handicapped--i.e. providing food, clothing, shelter, etc. (Exod. 22:22-26, 23:9-11; Lev. 19:9-13; Lev. 19:14). So, even though the Bible does not record legislation directed exclusively to old people, a framework of just and ethical rules was established by God to shelter all potentially marginalized people, including the elderly.

God, inherently, was thought to protect the vulnerable. When conflict and self-interest undermined the balance of respect and stability for the elderly, God's contractual agreements with the whole society were threatened. "Fear of the Lord adds days; wickedness shortens the years" (Prov. 10:17). When people failed to fulfill their responsibilities to vulnerable members of society, God responded with anger, punishment and even death. Thus, respecting and honoring elders goes beyond fear of the elder's authority; society was to honor the very signs of aging out of respect for, and fear of,

God. A passage from Baba Batra 10b elaborates: "They asked Solomon: 'Who will merit the world to come?' He said to them 'All who show honor to the aged.'"

It would seem that the elders were considered an important part of society, and, thus, one way or another, rules that applied to the very young applied equally to the old--perhaps because of their shared vulnerability. As members of families they were protected by family customs. Children were required to respect and obey their parents (Exod. 20:12; 21:15, 17; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 5:16. 21:18-20; Ruth 4; Prov. 23:22, and others). There are virtually no circumstances which negate the command for filial support of parents. In the Wisdom of Ben Sirach it is taught that children must support and continue to respect parents even when they reach old age, for "the glory of a person comes out of unconditionally honoring and respecting parents." (Wisd. of Ben Sirach, 3:11).[46]

And, yet, even patriarchal families encountered intergenerational conflict. While it is clear that there were instances of interdependence and mutual responsibility where old people took an active part in Israelite society and were counted as members of the community as well as members of a family, there are also many examples of old people who were not respected or supported by their families.

Thus, on the one hand, the story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz reflects a situation where the feelings, fears and needs of the aged are recognized. Each individual fulfills the role that was recognized by their society to protect the family unit from collapse. Naomi was guaranteed support in her old age but other biblical heroes such as Eli, Samuel, and even David stand in sharp

[48] J. Gordon Harris, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging: God and the Elderly* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 68.

contradistinction to Naomi's story. All three men experienced loss of dignity in their old fragile years. Their sons bullied them (I Sam. 2:23-25, 8:2). and they were left lonely, frustrated and in despair. It is quite possible that their situation, and not Naomi's (which is clearly a fictional story representing certain social ideals), represented the actual condition of the elderly in mainstream Israelite life and that it was against this predicament that the psalmist directed his words: "Do not cast me off in old age; when strength fails me, do not forsake me" (Ps. 71:9).

Wisdom:

Just as honor and respect were regarded as requisite treatment for the aged, so, too was wisdom considered a fundamental characteristic of one who had achieved great longevity. But, just as honor was not guaranteed to those who were advanced in years, neither was wisdom. Wisdom generally resulted only after a commitment to a lifelong pursuit of knowledge: "A man who has studied Torah, at the time that he becomes old, all of the people come and gather round him and ask him words of Torah" (Deut. Rabbah 6:3). And, like longevity, according to Proverbs, wisdom is earned through respect for God: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For with me (wisdom) your days will be multiplied and years will be added to your life" (Prov. 9:10-11). Respect for and commitment to God brings both wisdom and long life. (See also Berakhot 39a; Ben Sira 25:6; Yer. Shabb. 1:3; Prov. 8:22, 13:14, 16:31; Kidd. 32b; Exod. Rabbah 3; Avot 4:26; Hagigah 14a; Sanh. 17a; Berakhot 28a; Gen. Rabbah 59:3; Rosh Hashanah 25a; Shabbat 152a; Mishnah Kinnim 3:6; Megillah 31b; Nedarim 40a.) Thus, the passages that support automatic societal honoring

and respecting of the elders as bearers of wisdom are balanced with those which place responsibility on the individual to earn a good, honorable life through learning and piety. In the end, though, it seems that the elderly often depend on God's justice for deciding whether they merited the rewards of wisdom, honor, and long life.

Dignity, Authority and Leadership:

In general, elders are viewed as de facto leaders in the Bible. Narratives in Genesis show positive expectations for elders, portraying them as heads of the clan and advisers for the children. They deliver blessings that determine inheritance rights and future status. Elderly Abraham secures a wife for Isaac by sending a servant bonded to him by an oath (Gen. 24). Blind, aging Isaac in turn blesses Jacob with such finality that no one could counteract or adjust it. Even after aging parents turn over most of their work to children, their offspring continue to seek and cherish their advice as Jacob's sons seek his guidance in dealing with the famine.

In addition, there are numerous examples in later books of the Bible of how the triumph of a monarch was affected by the leadership (or lack) of elders (II Sam. 24). The apocryphal Book of Judith tells a story describing a community organization that utilizes elders as leaders. They hear complaints and judge at the gates. In the period of the Maccabees, there are descriptions of persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes who forced old men, covered with gray hair, stiff and stooped with age, to march at rapid paces. The horror expressed over this action demonstrated the high respect that society had for older citizens. For them, elderly persons represented the gentle spirit of peace and wisdom of the ages. The people's dependence on elderly leadership was

clear; without their guidance, the people could not survive.[47]

But, while some of the biblical figures examined thus far are portrayed with characteristic wisdom, piety, honor, respect, dignity, and authority, they do not necessarily provide a complete description of old age. The impressions of these stories which portray social ideals require additional evidence to broaden the range of possibilities for the aging process. Biblical interpreters need to balance the positive images of glorified, aging ancestors with those of bitter, declining, and dependent elders. This methodology defines aging in its widest range of experiences and avoids simplistic generalizations about old age. The next two sections will examine both sides of the physical and psychological aspects of aging in Jewish tradition.[48]

Physical Change:

What physical changes of old age were typified by the authors of the Bible in light of their experience? As noted above, the word "sayva," indicating "white hair," is the most common characteristic of old age (Gen. 15:15; 25:8; Lev. 19:32; Jud. 8:32; I Sam. 12:2; Ps.. 71:18; Prov. 16:31, I Chron. 28:28) but other changes in the human body described in the Bible represent images of old age as well. Some of these physical characteristics are:[49]

1. Loss of eyesight (from dimming of eyes to total blindness as indicated in the usage of the verbs, *khh*, *kbd*, and *qwm*): Gen. 27:1; 48:10; Deut. 34:7; I Sam. 3:2; 4:15; I Kings 14:4; Isa. 42:4; Qoh. 12:1-2.
2. Loss of hearing: 2 Sam. 19:36; Qoh. 12:4.
3. Loss of potency (the inability to enjoy the sex act and to procreate): Gen. 18:12; 21: 6-7; I Kgs. 4:14; Ruth 1:11-12; Qoh. 12:5.
4. Loss of strength: Josh 14:11; I Sam. 4:15, 18; I Kgs. 1:1; Prov. 20:29; Qoh. 12:30; I Chron.. 16:12.
5. Loss of taste: 2 Sam. 19:31.

[47] Harris, p. 53.
[48] Harris, p. 49.
[49] Dulin, p. 51.

In addition, there are descriptions of the loss of beauty, inability to sleep, difficulty in controlling bladder and bowel functions, stomach problems, missing teeth, and voices which can only whisper. Tears seem to well up in a person's eyes, whether for psychological or physical reasons, and are nearly beyond control.

Overall, Hebrew Scriptures seem to typify social attitudes towards aging. Anecdotes and stories present evidence that older generations not only experienced loss of health and severe infirmities, they also felt the sting of negative attitudes and maltreatment. Simultaneously, there are elderly leaders in Scriptures whose descriptions indicate that living to a ripe, old age did not necessarily mean that one became socially diminished, physically useless or mentally incapacitated.

The Bible depicts a number of less than healthy and well-adjusted heroes. Abraham and Sarah suffer depressions in their old age as they grieve over having no son and being past the normal age of having children (Gen. 15-18). Isaac and Jacob become blind in their old age (Gen. 27:1-2, 48:10). Isaac trembles when angry as if suffering some neurological disability (Gen. 27:33). Eli, the priest in Shiloh during Samuel's early years, becomes blind and overweight. Due to his shock upon hearing about the deaths of his sons and especially the capture of the ark of the covenant, he falls off his seat and dies of a broken neck (I Sam. 4:12-18). A narrator blames this accident on his old age and overweight condition (I Sam. 4:18). These examples seem to support the stereotype that old age is a time of physical degeneration and disability.[50]

On the other hand, the Bible also extols certain of its heroes by describing them as models of good health and vigor in their old age. Moses is

[50] Harris, p. 43.

said to be the ideal physical specimen as an aged leader. Upon his death a tribute is recorded saying: "His eye was not dim nor was his natural force (fertility) lessened" (Deut. 34:7). Later, Caleb brags about his excellent health when he says: "I am as strong today (age 85) as in the day when Moses sent me; as my strength was then, so my strength is now, forever and for going out and coming in" (Jos. 14:10-11). (Nonetheless, he conquers the fortress of Kiriath-sepher by offering his daughter Achsah as a bride to the one who led the battle rather than assaulting it himself.) In these passages, Israel memorializes both Moses and Caleb for having excellent health in their old age.[51]

Though biblical narratives often typify elderly as enfeebled and sometimes disabled, it must be clear from other passages that a wider range of possibilities does exist for the aging. No generalization about the aging experience should be drawn from either the negative images or the glorified health of clan heroes. Rather, one can recognize that while some abilities may decline with old age, the deterioration of old age, the degeneration of health with its resulting disabilities, may not occur in all elders. Healthy aging adults mentioned in biblical narratives remain substantially self-sufficient, happy, and productive.[52]

Rabbinic literature also presents multiple perspectives on the physical aspects of aging. The Mishnah specifies the disadvantages of growing old. As seen above in the detailing of the stages of life in Avot 5:21, the descriptions of the last decades of life were of misery and incapacitation.

Rabbi Abba interprets the verse: "For this let everyone that is godly pray unto You in a time when You may be found" (Ps. 32:6) in the following

[51] Harris, pp. 43-44.
[52] Harris, p. 44.

manner: "When is this time?" Said Rabbi Abba: "Old age. A man should pray that he will still have his faculties in old age; eyes which can still see, a mouth that can chew, and legs that can still support him. For in old age, all powers fail!"[53] See also: Hullin 24b; Eccles. Rabbah 1:3, 12:1. 12:4, 12:5; Shabbat 151b, 152a; Avodah Zarah 17b; Eruvin 56a; Yer. Baitzah 1; Levit. Rabbah 18:1; Nazir 39b, 59a; Yoma 75a; Ketubot 111b; Gittin 28a; Baba Kamma 117a; Baba Metzia 87a; Yalkut Shimoni, Beha'alotechah, 736.

In the Talmud (b. Hullin 24b), R. Ila'ah said in the name of R. Haninah, old age is when a person "trembles." Rashi adds: his hands and feet tremble from lack of strength. Whatever the specific cause of the trembling, this definition of old age is based on a practical physical concern of aging: trembling could interfere with the priest's sacrificial function and therefore becomes a legal requirement of retirement.[54]

One sees a similar physical definition of old age in the laws regarding menstruant women (although, interestingly, older women are considered more valuable in terms of practical labor than old men--see section "Psychological Change" below). According to M. Niddah 1:3-5, a "z'kayna" ("old woman") includes any woman who "has passed three periods"--without the appearance of menstrual blood. An old woman, therefore, is defined in terms of a physical event--the cessation of menstruation. Since such physical characteristics might happen at other times in the lifecycle, the exact time of "old age" is left unstated by the Mishnah.

However, the Talmud proclaims, a virtuous woman can lose the signs of her old age (menopause) and have children--Yocheved had a daughter at 130 and was still referred to as a "daughter" at this advanced age. Why then

[53] Tanhuma, Miketz 10.
[54] Wechsler, pp. 21-22.

was she called "daughter?" Rabbi Judah b. Zebida said: "This teaches that marks of youth reappeared on her. The flesh of her body was again smooth, the wrinkles of old age were straightened out and her beauty returned."[55] When a woman could menstruate and bear children, she was considered young and beautiful, but once she could no longer conceive, she was "old."

Issues of loss of sexual function and potency in aging go beyond the ability of women to conceive; impotence is also an important concern for men in rabbinic culture. Rabbi Kahana was expounding a portion of Scripture before Rav. When he came to the words "And the caperberry shall fail," Rav uttered a long sigh. Observed Rabbi Kahana: "This shows that Rav's desires have ceased." This was interpreted to mean that Rav was impotent.[56]

Lest there be concern that sexuality--both its potency and enjoyability--were futile for the elderly, the rabbis are quick to offer evidence to the contrary: "If you have had children in your youth, take a wife in old age and beget children as well. From whom do you learn this? From Abraham, who had children in his younger years and yet took a wife in his old age and begot children, as it says (Gen. 25:1), 'And Abraham took another wife.'"[57] Anecdotes about other biblical heroes indicate that aging persons were deemed able to experience enjoyable sexual relationships. At the same time, declining physical strength yielded a variety of concerns (including sexual dysfunction because of severe terminal illness--as in the case of King David). See also: Gen. Rabbah 47:4, 48:17; Baba Metzia 87a; Kidd. 82b; Niddah 65a.

Thus, the ability of a person to perform a particular physical function (as in the case of the priest whose trembling precludes performing the

[55] Baba Batra, 119b-120a.
[56] Shabbat 152a.
[57] Bereshit Rabbah, 61:13.

sacrificial service or the woman who has entered menopause and is unable to conceive) affects the way in which that person is viewed by society or, ultimately, by themselves. There is evidence that the pressures of society and loss of self-esteem prompted people to try to cover up or change the signs of aging. Gray hair, for example, the symbol of dignity, nonetheless could be unwelcome. According to testimony in the Talmud Bavli, old men would dye their beards so they would look young[58]. On the other hand, a baraita states that an old woman is prohibited from wearing a wig of "young woman's hair" because it is considered unbecoming for her to make herself look younger (although the commentators admit her quest is understandable).

Seeking to change the most obvious indicator of age, gray hair, indicates a desire to return to a state of youth. Recalling better, younger days, Rav Dimi said: "Youth is a crown of roses, old age a crown of thorns."[59] Individual dissatisfaction with the physical reality of being old is clearly linked to the socio-psychological aspects of aging.

Psychological Change:

In addition to the physiological changes described above, the biblical and rabbinic writers were keenly aware of those factors that affected psychological changes in old age. Among the changes which impacted upon psychological and spiritual well-being were the experience of social undesirability, loss of livelihood, and mental decline.

[58] Nazir 39b.
[59] Shabbat 152a.

Social Undesirability:

Rabbinic commentators observed that a loss of social status brought a sense of low self-esteem and demoralization: "When we were young, we were treated like men, where as now we have grown old, we are looked upon as babies."[60] The rabbis go even further in describing the inconvenience of the elderly: "An old man must not make of himself a nuisance by passing and repassing, so that people have to get up constantly."[61]

Rabbinic social "standards" even went so far as to say that old men are deemed unfit for marriage to younger women. "You shall not profane your daughter" (Levit. 19:29); Rabbi Eliezer says, "This refers to one who marries his young daughter to an old man."[62] The notion of the "lecherous old man" apparently is familiar to rabbinic culture (see also Deut. 29:19; Ruth Rabbah 6:4; Pesachim 113b).

Interestingly, rabbinic society at times valued older women more than men (due to their ability to fulfill certain physical tasks, as discussed above). The following passage is noteworthy: "Why is a female, when she is old, valued at only one third, whereas a man, when he is old, is not valued at even one third?" Said Hezekiah: "People say, an old man in the house is a burden in the house, but an old woman in the house is a treasure in the house!"[63]

In biblical narratives, elders feared becoming undesirable, useless burdens on families and society. Barzillai, the Gileadite, voiced his anxiety about losing his independence and becoming a hindrance in his old age. He refused David's invitation to join him in Jerusalem, using words with which

[60] Baba Kamma, 92b.
[61] Kiddushin, 31b and 32b.
[62] Sanhedrin, 76a.
[63] Arakin, 19a.

only a person who was aware of his own aging condition could identify: "I am now eighty years old. Can I tell the difference between good and bad? . . . Why then should your servant continue to be a burden to my lord the King?" (2 Sam. 19:31)

For some elders, remembering a time when they were socially "desirable" is the only way of holding on to the image of themselves as valued, functioning, respected human beings. But, sometimes, respect for aging adults declines because their memories tend to idealize the past and depreciate the future. Those who dwell in the past are often portrayed as uncompromising, conservative and cynical. But not every aging adult in the Bible is depicted as skeptical, intransigent or nostalgic. The advantage of being older advisers who are experienced and wise balances this negative stereotype. Though some elders are depicted as valuing earlier events more than the present, other elder leaders retain a flexible vision for the future and deal skillfully with the present (Ahithophel in 2 Sam. 15:31, 34; 16:20-23; 17;23; the elders of Solomon, 1 Kings 12:6-8). Perhaps the personification of elders as intransigent and skeptical (such as I Kings 13:1-31 where an older prophet brings about the death of a younger one because of his skepticism, or Ezra 3:12-13 where the elderly worshipers undermine the rejoicing over the rebuilding of the Second Temple through their sentimental weeping over the lost Temple of Solomon), should be understood as a warning against such behavior, not as a characterization of old age.[64]

And, strangely enough, perhaps there is even a "good" side, beyond the warnings, to illustrating "bad" behaviors and attitudes imposed on the elderly. Eschatological passages from the prophets of Israel regard disrespect

[64] Harris, pp. 44-45.

between generations as a sign of the end of an old era and the precursor to a new one; in other words, things are so bad that they will have to get radically better soon. The degenerate people represent the worst of the old era and their universal condemnation signals the beginning of a new era, a messianic kingdom which will be characterized by uninterrupted aging and intergenerational respect.

The Book of Micah includes a passage in its latter chapters that describes the breakdown of trust between the generations. When Israel's society nears its extinction, honor and respect for parents, which are commanded by God, will disappear. Consequently, in those dark days the home loses its value as a sanctuary from enemies. Such a society, Micah implies, deserves nothing except extermination (Micah 7:6).

According to Isaiah, "No longer will there be an infant (who lives but a few days), Or an old person who does not live out their days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred, And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred shall be thought accursed" (Isa. 65:20). Members of the rejuvenated people of God will enjoy a complete life without interruption or danger in the new heavens and earth. The ideal of old age according to this vision will become reality for all the faithful.

In fact, the prophet Zechariah's vision of the renewed city of truth expresses joy that both the elderly and the young again will fill the streets of Jerusalem (Zech. 8:4-5). According to an apocalyptic passage in Joel, every generation likewise will perform some important role during the messianic age: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your elderly will dream dreams, Your youth shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). Echoing Zechariah, Malachi describes the return of Elijah as the time

when the generations of the family will be united: "And he will restore the hearts of the father to (their) children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (Mal. 4:6).

Prophetic visions of the new age of reconciliation held that the social cornerstone of God's community would be restored once again. Generation "gaps" would become creative and unifying forces and each generation would enjoy its own rightful place in God's new kingdom. Differences would blend to complete the marvelous new society. No longer will strife and death be the enemies of peace and unity. According to the realistic words of the prophets only a new era could fully implement the ideals of Israel's faith concerning care and honor for the elderly.[65]

Loss of Livelihood:

The psychological repercussions of the loss of livelihood are significant. Rabbi Hanina bar Sheleyma observes: "As soon as a person's teeth fall out his means of a livelihood are reduced."[66] The Rabbis recognize that the physical realities of old age often brings "forced retirement" with the subsequent loss of economic resources and a revision of self-identity. From the Rabbis' perspective, though, whatever one loses in terms of a job or income, the only thing that can ultimately offer sustenance, support, and shelter against the ravages of old age is the study of Torah. Rabbi Nehorai said: "I would ignore all the crafts in the world and teach my son only Torah, for a man enjoys the interest thereof in this world and the principal still remains in the world to come. With all other crafts, when a man comes to sickness or old age or to troubles, and he is not able to engage in his

[65] Harris, pp. 72-73.
[66] Niddah, 65a (see also Kiddushin, 82b).

occupation, then he dies of hunger. In the case of Torah, however, it is not so; it protects him from all evil in youth, and it presents him with a future and hope in his old age."[67] Torah-study is the one thing on which people may rely, for Torah-study brings the assurance of 'future' and 'hope' in the metaphysical world to come. For elders facing so many losses and changes, such hope is significant.

Mental Decline:

Elderly people are depicted in biblical and rabbinic literature as expressing fears for the loss of their mental acumen and alertness, which they feel are in jeopardy with the onset of old age (Gen. 24:61; 62-22; 240:20; I Sam. 2:24; I Kgs. 11:4-5). Many texts reflect not so much a major breakdown of memory or behavior patterns, but more subtle changes noticed with age. This can be seen in the simple observation of Elisha ben Abuya that a person who learns as a child is as ink written on new paper, whereas a person who learns when old is to be compared to ink written on erased paper (Pirke Avot 4:25). While this text refers to the difficulties of Torah-study at an old age, i.e. memorization becomes difficult, the text may also suggest that even though some people became wise with age and experience and reached positions as advisors and judges in Israel (Job 15:9-10; Prov. 16:31), there were those in old age who could not distinguish between right and wrong (I Sam. 19:36; Kgs. 11:4) and at times brought disaster upon themselves and the nation (I Kgs. 11:12). As the writer of Job said, "It is not the aged who are wise, the elders who understand how to judge" (Job 32:9).[68] As noted above, growing old was not held to guarantee a gain in wisdom, nor did it provide a mechanism to

[67] Kiddushin, 82b.
[68] Dulin, pp. 51-52.

assure its retention.

On the surface, the Bible seems to present a stereotype of senility in the aging process. It mentions a number of older people who experience declining health, increasing dependence, and marked difference in behavior. On the other hand, other incidents involving older persons indicate that old age does not necessarily lead to helplessness or a brain disease such as senile dementia or Altzheimer's. Even where one might be handicapped by a physical problem such as blindness, the mind can remain clear. This is depicted, in particular, through the Bible's heroes (representing culture-ideals) who maintain their mental acuity because of their being God-fearing.[69]

A narrative about an aging Jacob represents a good biblical case study of a strong-minded but physically feeble elder. Though tribal concerns dominate the text, some insights about aging can be gained secondarily. Jacob is dying and suffering blindness when he blesses his grandsons, Joseph's sons. He reverses their order of importance when he places his hands on their heads, settling his left hand on Mannaseh, the first born, and his right one on Ephraim, the youngest. When Joseph angrily tries to move his hands to the proper sons, Jacob refuses to change, saying: "I know, my son, I know" (Gen. 48:19). He is perfectly aware of what he is doing and resists being pampered or forced to change his actions despite his illness and impending death. In the passage his mind functions with clarity. Thereby the story gives his unorthodox decision credit for Ephraim's rise to supremacy.[70]

On the other hand, there are passages which also describe elderly who become emotionally feeble and easy to manipulate, as in the cases of Isaac (Genesis 27) and David (I Kings I) The psychological effects of aging go beyond

[69] Harris, p. 47.
[70] Harris, p. 47.

the frustration of loss of mental acumen by producing anxieties and fears of oppression and loss of independence which, in turn, resulted in the loss of faith, hope, and self respect. The writer of Psalm 71 expresses the kind of stereotype complaint that *may* have been voiced by an elder by asking God for protection. The psalmist felt pursued by his enemies, helpless and weak: ". . . save me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and rescue me . . . For my enemies talk against me; those who wait for me are of one mind, saying, 'God has forsaken him'" (Ps. 71:2; 10-11).

Qoheleth:

The text and interpretations of Qoheleth (Chapter 12 in particular) express the feelings of anxiety, pain, sadness, nostalgia, and concerns (physical, psychological, and spiritual) of the elderly more explicitly than in any other biblical text. Apparently an aging teacher, Qoheleth questions the values of life that diminish under the specter of old age and approaching death. Qoheleth knows by experience that youth, not old age, possesses blessings and opportunities. Age and experience reap handicaps and hardships for which wisdom has no answer. Old age limits the options of life and makes it tenuous.[71]

Rabbinic literature, alert to these nuances of time, characterizes Qoheleth as the work of Solomon in his old age. Rabbi Yonatan said: "Solomon first wrote the Song of Songs, then Proverbs, and then Ecclesiastes! Rabbi Yonatan argues from the way of the world. When a man is young he composes songs, when he grows older he makes sententious remarks, when he becomes an old man, he speaks of the vanity of things."[72] See also Shabbat

[71] Harris, p. 54.
[72] Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10.

89b; Deut. Rabbah 13:6; Avot 4:25; Shabbat 152a; Yalkut Shimoni, Mishle 116; Avot 4:27; Yer. Pe'ah 7:4.

Qoheleth insists that the elder's awareness of approaching death crushes all remaining potential for successful human endeavor and achievement. And, yet, the teacher explains that although attempts to recapture youth or stave off death are vain, there is nonetheless an important role for the elderly to play. Aging adults can teach the next generations to be grateful for life and remind them to live fully and vigorously each day before the strength of youth ebbs away, by providing a cautionary example.

> Remember your creator
> in the days of your youth,
> Before the evil days come
> and the years draw near
> Of which you will say
> I have no pleasure in them (Qoh. 12:1)[73]

The attitudes reflected in Hebrew Scriptures, particularly in Qoheleth, make very clear that old age, by its nature, presents the aging with uneasy alternatives. However, the physical and psychological burdens of aging--and even the nearness of death--need not defeat the elderly. Rather, each may accept the challenges of aging through an ongoing investment in the future, continued learning, and faith. [74]

Spiritual Change:

The aging person maintains a potential for self-fulfillment and growth. Within every human being, regardless of age, is an animating force, the spirit--in biblical literature known as "neshamah" or "nefesh" or "ruach." As physical activity diminishes in old age, the person begins to move toward

[73] Dulin, pp. 51-52.
[74] Harris, p. 56.

an emphasis on the nonphysical aspects of life. The focus of personal identity shifts from what one does to who one is while still allowing old age to be a time of productivity.

A well-know midrash found in Vayikra Rabbah[75] (also found in other sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish) illustrates the importance of the elderly's continued cultivation of and investment in the future. It teaches that even though one may not reap the reward of one's labors, there are deeds worth working for in old age that provide meaning and happiness.

> Emperor Hadrian was traveling in the area of Tiberias and came upon an old man digging furrows and planting trees. Hadrian says: "Old man, old man, had you worked in your youth you would not have had to have worked in your old age." The old man replies: "I have worked in my youth and in my old age and what is pleasing to the God of heaven I have done." Hadrian: "By your life, old man, how old are you today?" The man replies: "One hundred years." Hadrian: "You are one hundred years of age and are digging holes to plant trees? Do you think you will eat of them?" Old man: "If I merit, I shall eat. And if not, as my fathers toiled for me, so do I toil for my children!" (The story goes on to tell that the man does indeed merit to eat of the fruit of his labors and is richly rewarded by the Emperor.)

Investing in the future is as important for the old as the young. This concept is seen clearly in the many texts on the value of life-long learning and study. While the Rabbis held that Torah-study in fact keeps one (specifically Torah scholars) alive and increases one's lifespan, a modern interpretation might be that as long as a person is learning, age acts to increase the quality of his learning. On the other hand, learning can help to increase the quality of his aging, making old age the high point rather than the low point of his life. For example: Rabbi Ishmael bar Rabbi Yossi says: "Scholars, the older they get the more wisdom they accrue." As it is said: "In the aged is wisdom and

[75] Vakikra Rabbah, 25:5, Soncino edition, pp. 576-578.

understanding is the long lived" (Job 12:12). But the ignorant, the older they get, the more stupidity they accrue. As it is said: "He deprives trusty men of speech. And takes away the reason of the elders" (Job 12:20).[76]

The value of Torah-study is spelled out here. The act of study keeps the mind lively, but it also seems that the content of Torah (which is God's revelation) can give a person purpose and hope in old age. As noted earlier, the sustenance and quality of life, according to the Rabbis, depends on the study of Torah--it has, in fact, a prophylactic quality (refer to quote of Rabbi Nehorai, Kiddushin 82b, in section on "Loss of Livelihood"). Through Torah-study, the self finds fulfillment and value. Old age is thus valuable because Torah-study is valuable; both are cumulative and more will accrue with the years.

Rabbi Yose b. Yehudah of K'far Bavli says, "He who learns from the young, to what may he be compared? To one who eats unripe grapes and who drinks wine from the vat. And he who learns from the old, to what may he be compared? To one who eats ripe grapes, and he who drinks old wine" (M. Avot 4:20). Old age is therefore a time when one can bear the fruits of a long life of learning, it is a time that is mellow and rich, like old wine. A modern interpretation of this teaching may suggest that the cultivation of the soul through study of Torah can lead to a greater appreciation of the wholeness and meaning of life. Torah, say the rabbis, fills life with more value, and that means that a long life is experienced as more valued and more blessed.

[76] Mishnah Kinnim 3:6; B. Shabbat 152a.

Broken Tablets:

While the notion that old age is valued and blessed is an ideal, reality does not always prove this to be the case, regardless of one's study of Torah. We have already discussed that one of the physical characteristics of aging can be loss of mental acuity and memory. If a person forgets some of his learning, particularly the learning of Torah, does that make an elder less praiseworthy, less blessed? And, what about an aged person who is not a Torah scholar?

The learned old person who is debilitated by age and who forgets his learning is alluded to in the Talmud when Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi warns his sons (perhaps with his own self-interest in mind) in the following way: "Be mindful of a 'zaken' who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his own. For we have learned that both the Tablets of the Law and the broken Tablets were placed in the Ark" (Berakhot 8b--compare to Yerushalmi M.Q. 1:3 where a similar thought is expressed in the name of R. Aha who says that one is to conduct himself toward such a person as one would toward the holiness of the Ark).

Rabbi Harlan Wechsler, in his doctoral dissertation which he named for this midrash, concludes that the broken Tablets symbolize the state of Torah--or, the living Torah as it is in the sage--at a point when the sage has involuntarily, because of his physical condition, forgotten his learning. The sage is broken, like the Tablets, but the sage is still worthy of occupying the principle place of distinction, as were the Tablets of the Law.[77]

What about the elder who is not a scholar? While some rabbis argue that the Tablets refer only to scholars (see above), R. Yohanan, supporting the opinion of Isi b. Yehudah, insist that ALL the old, wise or not, are to be

[77] Wechsler, p. 141.

included. This reasoning is drawn from the text: "How many troubles have passed over these." [78] Troubles, the experience of living, are, in and of themselves, something for which credit accrues to the individual and are reason for according that individual respect.[79]

While all human beings deserve a special degree of respect because they are created in the image of God, the old person (and especially the Torah scholar) is in a special position: he has lived and learned, acquiring for himself a special distinction as a result. Even when the Tablets become broken, living and learning are justified reasons for placing them in the Holy Ark.[80]

In the ancient world, longevity was looked upon as possessing wisdom because wisdom was equated with life experience, and if nothing else, it was certainly an abundance of life experiences that distinguished the aged from the young. In modernity, the task of achieving wisdom can be interpreted as accepting one's self as significant and transcending temporal difficulties to achieve spiritual fulfillment with a sense of continuity in relation to one's family and forebears. From a "spiritual" perspective, there could be no more powerful image of communicating human value from one life stage to another, from one generation to another than to depict it in terms of imitatio dei. It is because God respects the old that humanity should do likewise, and the concrete actions which embody such respect are therefore actions to be shared by God and humanity alike.[81]

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[78] Kiddushin, 33b.
[79] Wechsler, p. 142.
[80] Wechsler, pp. 142-143.
[81] Wechsler, p. 165.

Conclusion:

The Bible and Rabbinic sources present a paradox with regard to aging: on the one hand, age is physically and psychologically demeaning and debilitating, and, on the other hand, age, is a reward and a blessing. In Jewish tradition, longevity is an ambiguous term and sometimes an equally ambiguous experience. Chronology is only one factor in the definition of aging. The three most prevalent aspects of the aging process are based on physical, psychological and "spiritual" changes. These changes differ from person to person but societal expectations clearly impact the manner in which an elder is treated, whether or not those changes have occurred. While there is a stated responsibility of honoring and respecting the "hoary head," this is not necessarily the reality--in biblical, rabbinic or modern times.

Physical changes in an aging body have always been a reality. The impact that such changes can have on self-image is defined partly on the basis of experiencing the diminution of physical well-being, and partly on the basis of signals one gets from the surrounding society. Psychological changes are affected by the interpretation of qualities that are deemed to make a person "valuable" in society; a person's sense of self-worth is decreased with the loss of strength, livelihood, mental acuity, and authority. Consequently, the elderly often are led to believe they are burdens to their families, society, and themselves.

How does Jewish tradition address these concerns? First, ethical structures are mandated through the Torah in a legal system which, at least ideally, demands deference and honor to the old. Jewish texts illustrate positive behaviors towards aging, both individually and communally, which can provide comfort and hope to the elderly. Second, there is the possibility

of continuing to learn, or at least being a repository of what one has already learned. Torah-study is a source of self-esteem which may continue into old age. If it does not, tradition still mandates respect for the shattered repository of Torah-study and teaches that both the whole Tablets and the broken Tablets possess holiness and both were placed in the Ark.

But that is still not enough. An aging person gets messages from his body and from society that he is less valuable than in his youth. What he needs is a strong affirmation that he is becoming more, rather than less, worthy as a human being. Social mores and the study of Torah may go a long way toward providing a lasting sense of an individual's worth, but pain, failure, the closing off of one's world by encroaching inability make it hard to really treat those broken tablets like anything more than so much stone.[82]

If individual and social behavior are not modified enough to right the balance caused by the pain of living, then, in Judaism, it is God who provides the needed antidote: God as an agent of blessing, the protector of social systems, and the proponent of justice. Humanity turns to God through ritual, prayer, and other religious activities to restore hope and dignity in aging and to create a balance in life between the physical and mental realities, and the values held sacred by faith.

Today's society needs to continue holding sacred such faith: there is indeed value in every individual. Having been created by God, the human being is holy. Jewish tradition teaches that the wrinkling of skin and graying of hair do not diminish the image of God within a person, and every age group possesses adequate potential creativity and "spiritual rejuvenation." Youth remains only a brief span of life (Eccles. 11:9-12:2; Ps. 90:12). Though

[82] Wechsler, p. 167.

aging brings some physical changes, meaningful service and happiness can continue. New respect for the image of God which all elders reflect may help overcome the stigma that the possibility of death attaches. Biblical theology teaches that aging adults carry with them life and potential health.[83] At the same time, Jewish tradition offers dignity to those whose health may be worsening and reminds the elderly that, as images of God, their contributions as human beings are valuable at every stage.

Following biblical examples, physical changes of age become less of a burden and more a challenge to growth. They shatter stereotypes and demonstrate that old age can be a time of vitality and continued growth. Jewish texts point out that an understanding mind develops out of a life-long struggle for knowledge. Though true wisdom comes from God, it never arrives automatically. It must be grasped by learning the lessons of life through discipline and obedience (Prov. 1:7-8; 6:23). Elderly learners must put aside misconceptions that people grow too old to learn. Instead, they need to open themselves to new ways of experiencing life through which they may acquire the wisdom of the ages. Such is the key to a meaningful aging process.

Aging is never without its problems, but biblical and rabbinic texts offer realistic yet positive images and expectations of the later years of life which alleviate some of its mysteries and sense of burden. Through fresh insights and understanding of the blessings of God, Jewish tradition can relieve ambivalence about growing old.

In any case, the relationship between God and the elderly remains secure. As God delivers Israel in its transitions, so God cares for the aging.

[83] Harris, pp. 112-113.

"To your old age I am the one (who will look after you); to gray hair I will carry (you). I myself have created (you) and will lift you up; I myself will carry and deliver (you) (Isa. 46:4). Though others abandon the aging, God will not cast them away.[84]

If humanity is to learn from God's example, there must be a sense of personal responsibility taken for the emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of the aging for, as Ben Sirach teaches, "we shall be numbered among them."[85]

[84] Harris, p. 115.
[85] Ben Sirach, 8:6, cited in Rosten, p. 381.

Chapter Three: New Ritual and Liturgical Responses to Aging

Aging is described thoroughly in the Bible and rabbinic texts and, yet, in Jewish tradition, the bulk of rituals developed to mark the lifecycle take place only during a concentrated period of time, between birth and marriage (approximately 0-35 years). Although modern marriage may come chronologically later than earlier social standards, the reality is that Judaism does not mark life transitions for the individual in the middle and elder years between marriage and death. One could argue that after marriage, the rituals of birth, coming of age (B'nai Mitzvah, Confirmation), and nuptials are experienced vicariously through the next generation. While there is certainly truth to this argument, there are nonetheless many life transitions which continue to occur for the individual in the middle and later years. And, of course, in modernity, there are many people who do not necessarily "fit" in the traditional structure of family and thus do not mark the same life passages or rituals as others but still seek to be connected to their faith, their people, and their tradition. Just as "family" must be redefined today, so too, must we reassess our rituals and liturgies to make them relevant to the present and, if necessary, create new means of marking the changes in our lives as Jews.

This chapter will present a basis for understanding the purpose and meaning of traditional and creative ritual and liturgy in religion and then analyze "new" Jewish rituals and liturgies related to aging that have been gathered from across the country. The goal of this analysis is to determine how new rituals/liturgies reflect and respond to the lifecycle transitions and needs of the aging. While effectiveness of the rituals/liturgies cannot

necessarily be assessed, we can draw some conclusions about how the ritual/liturgy relates across time and to other Jewish traditions. And, working from the assumption that my collection is a representative sample, we can try to determine what kinds of lifecycle markings are "missing" and what direction new aging liturgies might take in the future.

According to Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, lifecycle rituals and ceremonies are opportunities to affirm social dimensions of individual growth and change through public ratification and acknowledgment within the ongoing life of the Jewish community. Ritual serves to orient and reorient our lives. The transformation of traditional rituals and the creation of new rituals enables us to:

--integrate tradition and innovation

--bring together modern conceptions of the individual with traditional conceptions of community and vice versa

--celebrate the fullness of our adult experiences

--acknowledge and mark both the expected and the unexpected changes in our lives

--challenge us to live intentional lives finding a firm place to stand through Judaism or the reevaluation of Judaism.[86]

New rituals help us turn the events of our lives into spiritual milestones. They encourage us to view what we might think of as simply special experiences--a milestone birthday, a retirement party--in a spiritual light. They add a new dimension to our lives--as human beings, as men and women, as Jews. New Jewish rituals may also fill the gap when there is no secular ritual to acknowledge an event. By creating new rituals of our own, a

[86] Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell. "Celebrating Life's Passages With New Rituals" (Los Angeles: American Jewish Congress Feminist Center), n.d., n.p.

voice can be given to the many, many events of life that have not been acknowledged before.

Liturgy, which is customarily associated with formalized words or text that convey mythic meaning, is a kind of ritual which has constantly evolved over time. While some liturgies have been standardized in the prayerbook structure, other liturgies have been added or created as times and circumstances have required. Liturgy is an aspect of the ritual process and, as Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman points out, it should not be limited to a narrow definition of verbal formulae. Hoffman describes liturgies as, "acted out rituals involving prescribed texts, actions, timing, persons, and things, all coming together in a shared statement of communal identity by those who live with, through, and by them."[87] Liturgy, he points out, is not primarily a literary matter, since it comprises the core of worship which is not at all a literary activity. Worshiping is not reading. Instead, he argues, words can have a performative function, bringing a certain reality into being, establishing a meaningful past and imagining a particular future.[88]

> Thus, liturgy and ritual are powerfully connected to one another. In ritual, words shift from being merely descriptive or informative to become, in one degree or another, carriers of transforming power. However much they may refer to things past or future, performative words mainly work, along with music and other artistic techniques, to constitute the immediacy of ritual's present moment. They have more affinity with heart, throat, mouth, lips, ears, and expressive bodies than they do with eyes looking at cold print.[89]

Just as liturgical formulae change to reflect new historical and sociological

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[87] Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p. 3.

[88] Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only* (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1988), pp. 225-242.

[89] Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 214-215.

factors, so too, does ritual performance, which enacts and dramatically constructs meaning in the world. Thomas Peterson writes that the "meaning of ritual is never fixed and is always shifting because its meaning comes from its use. There can never be exactly the same meaning for any ritual act, because, while the form might be held constant, the context which is inseparable from the form will always vary."[90]

Our liturgies grow as we grow. Recently, the creation of new Jewish rituals/liturgies has been largely inspired by those who have felt ostracized or silenced by tradition. For example, many new rituals have come from the women's movement which recognized that many of the events in women's lives are not acknowledged in the mainstream Jewish experience. The elderly are another segment of the Jewish community which has seemingly been unacknowledged in lifecycle expression. Some of the events in the aging process which have received little or no ritual acknowledgment include: singlehood, grandparenthood, celebrating our professional lives (commitment, change, conclusion), hysterectomy, menopause, and other medical or physical changes, simchat hochmah/binah (celebration of wisdom), return to Judaism, moving to a retirement community, giving up driving, removing a wedding ring, marking milestone birthdays, anniversaries, and intergenerational ceremonies.

Perhaps these rituals have been missing because it is difficult to accept some of them as realities in life. Jews, like all human beings, face loss, anguish, tragedy. "Some of those situations need more than a funeral to help survivors cope. Rituals fill a need that self-help books, counseling, and

[90] Thomas Peterson, "Wittgenstein's Theory of Language and Ritual Change" (Paper written for the Ritual Studies Group, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Dec. 5-8, 1987, Boston, p. 7) in Driver, p. 187.

therapy sessions cannot; because ritual forces you to look for the elements of divinity within you."[91] Rituals can help integrate life experience and facilitate the process of finding glimpses of the meaning of life.

Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts, authors of *Rituals for Our Times*, suggest that the best resources for creating meaningful rituals are each person's own experience. Personal perspectives are the passion that drive ritual innovations; they not only deserve to be honored, they are essential to the creative process. In addition, says Debra Orenstein, meaningful rituals are grounded in Jewish sources and ritual theory.[92]

Beyond the validation of personal life experience, Jewish ritual plays another important role: it connects Jews to their tradition. It makes the spiritual odyssey of Jewish life more than an intermittent phenomenon and into a regular, daily confrontation with Jewishness and with meaning. Each ritual creates and reinvigorates connections and helps to reestablish Jews' relationships to the people who give their lives context, joy and meaning.[93]

According to Daniel Gordis, "We return to Judaism because we want to feel. Western culture and our newly diluted Judaism never satisfied our need to feel, to touch the transcendent world. So many of us, when we want to express that which goes beyond the mind and beyond reason, hark back to tradition out of our sense that maybe, if we are fortunate, returning to tradition will allow us to feel."[94]

What is it that those engaged in ritual and worship want to feel? In the

[91] Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller, "Creating New Rituals; Expanding the Lifecycle to Encompass Other Aspects of Our Lives" (Rosh Hashanah sermon, September 15, 1993) n.p.

[92] Rabbi Debra Orenstein, ed. *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones, Volume I* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), p. 370.

[93] Daniel Gordis, "Putting Ritual Back in Spiritual," *Moment Magazine*, October, 1995, p. 37--adapted from *God was Not in the Fire: The Search for a Spiritual Judaism*, New York: Scribner, 1995).

[94] Gordis, p. 37.

summary of her thesis on creative liturgy, Rabbi Betsy Torop concludes:

> When looking at how they relate to the world at large, and to God, it is clear that the individuals who worship at these [creative] services are searching for a sense of direction and a feeling of security. They want a way to make the world meaningful, and the liturgy conveys the message that they can create meaning in the world by acting to change it. They want a way to belong, and the services stress that the community formed by the worshipers represents the warmth and comfort that people desire. The act of coming together to worship is viewed as leading to the existence of community, which may be a major motivation for the individual to attend services. The fact that the community to which the individual belongs is part of a people that has survived gives this belonging an added dimension of meaning. The feeling of survival reinforces the communal bond. Furthermore, because they are part of a very unique people--a people that has survived in spite of persecution and hardship, worshipers are convinced of the ethical imperatives that face them. Survival leads to a moral obligation to the world at large; provides the individual with a sense of community and belonging.[95]

People want to feel that they belong; ritual and liturgy can provide a sense of belonging and connection across time as well as through immediate relationships. Rituals can foster a sense of intimacy that not only creates a bond that unites individuals into a community but also can help make that individual, that community feel meaningful and holy. Rituals, according to Tom Driver, can create communities of love.[96]

Furthermore, concludes Driver, fostering communities of love, along with making and preserving order, and effecting transformation are among the three major functions of ritual.[97] Driver analyzed these functional aspects of ritual through the observance of ritual performance. He determined that ritual is not only derived from emotion; rather, ritual's enactment combines

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[95] Rabbi Elizabeth W. Torop, *Individual Creative Liturgy Within the Reform Movement: 1965-1985* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati,1985), p. 385.

[96] Driver, p. 150.

[97] Driver, p. 71.

feeling, thought, and bodily movement. The interaction of these elements brings about a "transformance," that is, the transformation from one status, identity or situation to another.[98] Ritual controls and releases emotion. Thus, rites of passage are performed not simply to mark transitions but to *effect* them.[99]

In addition, ritual shapes our sense of order, our theological structures. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman states, "Ritual is first, not last, in the chain of belief formation."[100] Hoffman notes the importance of synecdochal language (not only words but gestures and actions that point to something beyond themselves, in this case the master image of the Divine), and suggests that ritual and liturgy--which work toward the creation of community--represent people's efforts to feel God's presence and perceive themselves in relation to the Divine. Connection with the Divine is felt particularly strongly through lifecycle celebrations because they integrate the personal experience, the lifecycle transition of the individual, into a larger social and transcendent whole. These ceremonies help worshipers feel part of a unique religious community, and, by reinforcing the feeling of community, individuals often experience an awareness of the presence of God.

Rituals grow out of something essential to our humanity, a need for order in life--physically, emotionally, and even morally. In the image of God, human beings, who become human by way of ritual and need it in order to be humane, nevertheless will lose their humanity if they do not take moral responsibility for the rituals they perform.[101] In Rabbi Hoffman's

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[98] Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory , 1970-1976.* (New York: Drama Book Specialists ,1977), p. 71, in Driver, p. 95.

[99] Driver, p. 93

[100] Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer*, p. 148.

[101] Driver, p. 118.

words, "It might be said that whatever worshipers presume to say to God, they are at the same time directing a message to themselves. The very act of worship takes on the function of identifying to the worshiper what it is that he or she stands for, what real life is like, what his or her aspirations are."[102]

Rituals thus express the power of human beings to act. People who perform rituals enact a certain reality. This reality leads the participants into a more holistic understanding of the world and, according to Driver, to a sense of transcendence of the mundane to the spiritual. And, it is the desire to experience the "spiritual" which draws people to ritual that goes beyond historical ties, beyond the text, beyond the present understanding of the world.[103]

In Jewish tradition, it is clear that rituals conform to Driver's and Hoffman's theoretical criteria of effective ritualizing and worship experience. Whether marking lifecycle passages, daily routines, changes in the natural world, or holy times and places, Jewish ritual is a process--one participates in Jewish ritual to be connected to the building of community (and family), the process of personal and social transformation, and the preservation of both a religious and cosmic order. Lifecycle rituals for Jews (as for others) can ease the passage through life, shape relationships, help to heal losses, express deep beliefs, and celebrate existence. Jewish rituals announce change and create change. Indeed, Jewish ritual today is about interrupting the pace of modern life to provide a chance to think about, and to celebrate, that which is most enduring, most compelling and most important.

The challenge for rabbis and others today is to provide the forum for identity and meaning that will meet the needs that people are expressing in

[102] Hoffman, *Beyond the Text*, p. 69.
[103] Torop, p. 26.

an ever-evolving world, without abandoning the standard and values intrinsic to religion. We recognize that there are many crucial lifecycle transitions for which there are no familiar and accepted rituals in Judaism or in our culture. Since lifecycle rituals enable us to begin to rework our sense of self and our relationships as required by life's changes, the lack of such rituals can make change more difficult. Fortunately, we live in a time when people have begun to create new rituals for previously unmarked and uncelebrated lifecycle changes.[104] The creation of these new rituals helps us to turn the events of our lives into spiritual milestones.

For those who are "aging" and those who are considered "elders," new ritual needs are emerging. Reconnection of older persons, in particular, with dominant society will require the regeneration of meaningful ritual activities related to important aspects of older people's lives. For many people, aging is a time of spiritual integration, a time for coming to peace with one's life and, perhaps, seeking assurance of life beyond this one--whether that be through offspring, personal achievements, or God. In her thesis on literary reflections of the aging process, Rabbi Camille Angel concludes:

> A spirituality of aging ought to help us turn our losses into gains, to learn how the stripping process which often accompanies our aging can be a gradual ripening into freedom and new life. . . . At each step along life's journey, we are instructed to act in a particular way, with a particular faith. The same is true for us as we reach the end of our journey. We are heirs to a great legacy of tradition that can be manipulated to respond to most, if not all, circumstances: our efforts to deal creatively with retirement and to find a purpose for our lives after our families have been raised; our struggles with the loss of a spouse or the move from a home after many years; questions of self-worth and fear of reaching out to make new friendships; the discovery of new

[104] Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts, *Rituals for Our Times: Celebrating, Healing, and Changing Our Lives and Our Relationships* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), pp. 283-284.

talents, deeper peace, wider boundaries of love.[105]

The rituals in our lives contribute to our changing sense of ourselves over time, while also connecting us to the generations who came before us. They are a bridge capable of linking our history, our present lives, and what we most hope for our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren. They can provide an opening into ways of being and beliefs that both affirm our own and are totally different from our own.[106]

NEW AGING RITUALS AND LITURGIES

The next section of this chapter will examine new rituals and liturgies which have been developed to mark the transitions of aging through the voices and ceremonies of individuals, families, communities, congregations (both synagogues and nursing home settings). I will attempt to assess the rituals and liturgies in several ways. First, I will define what type of ritual/liturgy it is and analyze its structure (is it a "traditional" Jewish structure?; if not, what makes it "Jewish"?). Then, I will attempt to determine the purpose of this ritual/liturgy--how it creates meaning for those who experience it, how it shapes and maintains relationships, how it heals from betrayal, trauma or loss, how it honors and celebrates individuals and life. Finally, I will try to surmise what kind of transformation or transition has been effected and how this is accomplished (through words, symbols, music, etc.)

I will first examine liturgies which have been written specifically to be

[105] Rabbi Camille Angel, *These Are Our Lives and the Length of Our Days: Images and Concerns of Aging Women in Hebrew Literature* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York,1995), p.97

[106] Imber-Black, pp. 305-306.

used with elders in nursing home settings. These services come from The Wexner Heritage Village in Columbus, Ohio, the Philadelphia Geriatric Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged in Boston, Massachusetts, and Glen Manor in Cincinnati, Ohio. The first three are served by full-time rabbinic chaplains and the last one is served by student rabbinic interns from Hebrew Union College.

Nursing home services have a number of difficult tasks to achieve. First, residents come from many different Jewish backgrounds--from the most observant to the completely secular. In many nursing homes, services are geared to the more traditional element, assuming they are the ones who will most likely come to pray. Often, Jewish nursing homes are served by community rabbis who take turns doing the services or by a retired rabbi who comes to lead the minyan regularly but does not necessarily develop other pastoral ties to the residents. Research shows that spiritual development is as important as physical and emotional stimulation for the elderly. Thus, creating a service that will meet a diverse religious population with a leader who may not be attuned to the diversity is a challenge.

Then, of course, there are many physical concerns to consider: the service must be short in length, the prayer books must be in large print (though the book itself must be light and easy to hold), the leader's voice must be amplified, the Hebrew must be transliterated, the music must be easily recognizable, the synagogue (and bimah) must be wheel-chair accessible, and there must be enough English to help those who are unfamiliar with the service to understand and feel included. In certain situations there are additional concerns (such as working with Alzheimer's patients or individuals with senile dementia). Somehow, the liturgy must be

recognizable for all and, at the same time, offer something that touches the spirit--that is, beyond connecting to memory and something of the past, it is the task of the service to express the longing of the elder soul that may not have other outlets of expression.

I believe a great portion of this "spiritual experience" comes from HOW the service itself is conducted as much as the words of the prayers themselves. For some residents, simply hearing the familiar words and melodies is enough of a connection to move from the limitations of the secular to the sacred. For others, the connection must be created--through tone and explanation and especially through the senses (candles, wine, bread, the blessing of touch).

High Holy Day Services:

I examined four High Holy Day service booklets from the Wexner Heritage Foundation. The booklets were for the morning of Rosh Hashanah, Kol Nidre, morning of Yom Kippur, and musaf and afternoon of Yom Kippur. The services are structurally based on the Reform *Gates of Repentance* (GOR). Much of the liturgy is directly xeroxed from GOR. However, there are additions made in the services to accommodate more traditional worshipers including the repetition of the *Kaddish*, use of traditional phrases such as "m'chayei ha-meitim," two days of Torah and Haftorah readings (with the traditional portions on the first and second days and also the inclusion of the special *maftir* portions), special Psalms, and complete versions of prayers in Hebrew (such as "al cheyt") which are not found in GOR. There are also *musaf* services included and *Yizkor* is done on the morning of Yom Kippur. On the whole, it does not seem that the

services were changed to address an aging congregation. Some of the prayers were enlarged (bigger font size) but this is not done consistently. Very few of the Hebrew prayers are transliterated. The services are of "full length," at least in written form. Additional prayers/readings that have been added reflect more of the themes of the holy days rather than necessarily addressing the needs/issues of the participants.

On the other hand, the services are bound nicely and are probably very accessible to older adults who have the capacity to take part in a "regular" service but simply cannot or do not attend a synagogue service. There is a balance of Hebrew and English and, for those who are traditionally observant, the important elements of the service are there in complete forms. Simultaneously, these are also services which less traditional people would find comfortable and which could be shared with family members who might attend the services.

It would seem that the purpose of these liturgies is simply to follow a "traditional" style but with some compromises made to accommodate the diversity of the participants. There is no evidence that a transformation is sought other than those otherwise attempted on the High Holy Days. Although divided into smaller "booklets" which are more easily held, the liturgies are as "normative" as possible, presumably so that the worship experience is like any held in a congregational setting. (I do not know if the entire text is recited; it may be that everything is provided in the booklet but that the rabbi shortens and changes things appropriately to address the physical and emotional needs of the worshipers.)

Congregation Shaare Tzedek of the Philadelphia Geriatric Center (PGC) has created three volumes for the High Holy Days entitled: *Gates of*

Righteousness: A Machzor for the Days of Awe (Volume One: Rosh Hashanah--Ma'ariv and Shacharit, Volume Two: Yom Kippur--Kol Nidre, Shacharit, and Yizkor and Volume Three: Yom Kippur--Minchah and Neilah). All of the Machzorim were compiled and edited by Rabbi Dayle Friedman. In the introduction to each booklet Rabbi Friedman writes, "This Machzor was compiled in order to enable the residents and tenants of the Philadelphia Geriatric Center to maximally participate in the prayers, the traditions, and the aspirations of the High Holy Day Day liturgy. Toward this end, it includes special features: large print text in Hebrew and English; abridged versions of the traditional services; transliterations of Hebrew prayers read and sung by the congregation, English translations which have been adapted to include gender-neutral references to God and human beings."[107] In addition to these features, the booklets are spiral bound, easy to hold and turn pages, and professionally printed. The Machzorim are very sensitive to traditional aspects of the service and include Torah and Haftorah readings for two days (in the traditional order) and other traditional rubrics (such as "m'chayeh hameitim" in the "G'vurot" blessing). The Yizkor service includes appropriate prayers of remembrance for all significant family members, friends, and martyrs as well as several versions of "El Maley Rachamim." Sections of the services are clearly marked, as are prayers for congregational participation.

Although the prayers and readings are drawn from a variety of other prayerbooks (cited in the beginning of each booklet), there is sense of unity in tone and expression. The readings reflect the holy day themes or the motifs of the prayers; there is no attempt to gear the readings to a "special" audience,

[107] Rabbi Dayle Friedman, *Gates of Righteousness: A Machzor for the Days of Awe* (Philadelphia: Congregation Shaare Tzedek, Philadelphia Geriatric Center, 1986), Preface, n.p.

and yet, I sensed that the prayers were chosen very conscientiously to reflect the realities of life–its joys and sorrows, the fears and hopes, for elders as much as for any other age. Indeed, Rabbi Friedman's personal prayer is that ". . . this Machzor will allow our entire congregation to feel part of the beauty and awe of these days, and to emerge from the Days of Awe with our souls refreshed, our enthusiasm rekindled, and our commitment to the ideals of the Jewish tradition renewed."[108]

The Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged (HRCA) in Boston takes a different approach to the High Holy Day liturgical experience. Rather than printed pages, Rabbi Sam Seicol has created service "experiences" which include storytelling, music, prayer, and discussion. These "experiences" can be led by the rabbi or by other staff members (who are trained and are supplied with "leaders guides" to assist them) and can be tailored to the needs of the particular "group" involved. In other words, the same materials could be used with a high functioning group or a lower functioning group but with different emphases. "In anticipation of the New Year" is almost like a mini-sermon; the theme of life's changes is presented in prose form but with clear images and issues that resonate with the aging experience:

> The hands on the clock of life continue to turn. We may be saddened at times, as we realize that time moves on; the years slip through our fingers. We need not be depressed by these thoughts. . . At this New Year we ask, 'How are we using the threads of life we have been given?' The question may be unsettling because the answer challenges us to examine the sum of meaning we have created in our lives.[109]

The service continues with meaningful quotes from Jewish and non-

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Rabbi Sam Seicol , "In Anticipation of the New Year: Leader's Guide for Rosh Hashana" Based on an essay by Ben Zion Bokser (Boston: Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged, n.d.), n.p.

Jewish sources, songs appropriate to the holiday, a story, and prayers/blessings that express hope in the face of the difficulty of age and are also appropriate to the themes of the New Year. The materials for Yom Kippur are similar but also include discussion questions which draw on the stories shared. The questions, again, reflect both the themes of aging and the holidays. The sensitivity to the needs and concerns (both physical and spiritual) participants is very compelling. While I cannot assess the "performative experience," it seems that these "services" would accomplish many of the goals of Jewish ritual. There is recognition of the reality of the participant, words and actions which assist in connecting that individual to the greater Jewish community and transforming the person who feels trapped in the limits of the body to one whose spirit transcends the physical. Music is used to create another level of connection and transcendence while the use of stories allows people to find both individual meaning and collective interpretation. The questions asked allow for introspection and also sharing of wisdom and life-review. As a "creative" approach to ritual and liturgy, Rabbi Seicol has left behind the traditional framework but has also very conscientiously maintained the integrity and power of the High Holy Day experience with acute sensitivity to the needs of a "congregation" of elders.

Three Festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot:

In form, the "Three Festivals" morning services booklet for the Wexner Heritage Village is similar to the High Holy Day services. Most of the text is drawn from the Reform prayerbook, *Gates of Prayer*, with additional sections added for *Yizkor* and *Musaf*. The opening prayer sets an appropriate tone for an elderly congregation (although it could apply to any constituency

as well) and there are special readings inserted at the beginning and end of the services to draw attention to the themes of the particular festival being celebrated. Again, a mixture of Hebrew and English, no transliterations, and "traditional" inclusions of "Kaddish Shaleim," "Hoshanot" hymns, psalms, the prayer for dew, etc. all reflect the intention to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of the congregants with the advantages and disadvantages of such a situation described above.

The siddur for the celebration of the Festivals at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center also is the Siddur for Shabbat morning. Entitled *From Generation to Generation: A Shabbat and Festival Morning Prayerbook* , it was created two years after the High Holy Day Machzorim. Several changes in format have been made which clearly reflect the needs of the congregation, such as showing the accented syllables in transliterated prayers through the use of upper-case letters, indicating the sections in English to be read aloud by the congregation in bold type (instead of italics) and very large font sizes used to distinguish the sections of the service. There is also a guide for pronunciation of Hebrew transliteration provided in the front. Beyond the Shabbat prayers, the additions for the Festivals are included as well as the appropriate Torah readings (in very large Hebrew and English fonts) for each Festival (Sukkot, Atzeret/Simchat Torah, Passover--First and Seventh Days, and Shavuot). The Siddur also includes the prayers for the four species on Sukkot, hakafot prayers and songs for Simchat Torah (and the prayer for rain), the prayer for dew for the first day of Passover, and the Akdamut poem for Shavuot. A Yizkor Service is the last section of the Siddur. Like the High Holy Machzorim, this Siddur is complete and yet very manageable for those who need shorter services, easily read and held, and meticulously crafted.

The Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged observance of Shavuot is marked with songs and with the study of the Torah through the reading of the Ten Commandments. A written guide for leaders (other than the rabbi) explains the holiday and the songs. A list of the Ten Commandments is attached to the outline to assist in the discussion. The songs seem to make up the body of the "service," acting as both prayers and thematic instruction with the reading/discussion of the Ten Commandments as the "substitute" for a Torah service.

Unlike the other Wexner Heritage Village services, the *Passover Haggadah* includes an introduction which explains the goals of its compiler:

> For many, participating in a seder on Passover is the quintessential, Jewish experience. Perhaps this is so because the unfolding of the story, and the way it unfolds, engages all of our senses, even as its drama challenges our minds and our spirits. Thus, in order to keep that challenge alive among the residents here at Wexner Heritage Village, this haggadah has been created especially for them. In order that the seder continues to be an engaging and exciting experience, and with their needs in mind, the text is presented in ways that hopefully will make the service more 'available' to WHV residents.[110]

In creating the *Wexner Heritage Village Haggadah* described above, a variety of haggadot were used including *A Passover Haggadah* edited by Herbert Bronstein, *The Haggadah of the Jewish Home for the Elderly of Fairfield County, Connecticut* and *The Passover Haggadah* edited by Rabbi Nathan Goldberg. The WHV Haggadah includes illustrations, some large print, and songs. Condensed to about forty pages, the service still follows the traditional order with contemporary readings and interpretations added. Like other WHV services, it maintains what is familiar to all and yet allows

[110] Rabbi Cary Kozberg, *A Passover Haggadah* (Columbus: Wexner Heritage Village, n.d.), p. 1.

for the less observant community to fully participate in the transformative experience of the service liturgy and ritual.

"The Leader's Guide" from the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged indicate that their *Passover Haggadah* is clearly designed especially for elderly participants. Detailed instructions are provided for the leaders on what ritual objects are to be included, how they are to be used, what they symbolize, and how to run the Seder efficiently (30 to 45 minutes). Tapes of music are provided with song sheets, additional stories and readings, as well as questions and discussion suggestions for use with more cognitively functioning units. The "model seder" is abbreviated but all elements of the traditional Seder are included. Certain sections are written to address the elder listeners: "As we begin to retell the story, we are reminded that it is our duty to tell our children of our history. We must also share in this study, however. No matter how many times we have done it before; no matter how much we know or have learned ourselves; no matter how filled with wisdom or understanding we may be: we can always learn more."[111]

A third Passover "service" is suggested by Rabbi Jay Sangerman in Passages (Spring, 1992), who writes that the "internal" Passover themes of freedom and independence, security and tranquility are central to the reading and discussing of the Haggadah. Not only are we to "re-experience in our own lives that which our ancestors experienced so many generations ago. . . we have an additional task: To take from that ancient experience and to establish for ourselves, individually, tasks and goals to protect for ourselves and for one another the gifts of freedom and independence."[112] He then

[111] Rabbi Sam Seicol, "A Leader's Guide to the Passover Haggadah" (Boston: Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Age, n.d.) p. 3.

[112] Rabbi Jay Sangerman, "Passover: The Time to Plan for Personal Freedom" (Philadelphia: *Passages*, Spring, 1992), p. 6.

applies this to the life of a senior citizen who fears the loss of freedom and independence and the "sandwich generation" children who are torn between their loyalties and obligations to parents on the one hand, and their spouse, children, special relationships and career, on the other hand. Rabbi Sangerman then draws out metaphorical explanations of each of the Passover symbols which reflect these concerns of aging and issues of "personal freedom." For example, the afikomen:

> Remember the center piece of the matzah we broke into two pieces, at the beginning of the Seder? One half we put back with the two whole pieces. The other half we separated out from the other matzah and kept for our dessert. This piece of matzah is the promise of tomorrow. Let us join together as family and friends, young and not so young, and plan for tomorrow, so that each of us will be able to live in dignity and respect, have the strength to give to one another, and the vigor to retain our independence. Some of us are very young, some of us are of many years, and others of us are "sandwiched" in between. When we stand together, we have strength. We pray to God, that God may grant us the foresight to plan for our tomorrows and that we may go from strength to strength. Thanking God, let us partake of the Afikomen." The Afikomen is broken and shared and then the shechechianu is recited. [113]

Other holidays: Chanukah, Purim, Tu Bishevat, Tisha B'Av, Rosh Chodesh:

"Blessings and Songs for Chanukah" is the only booklet from the Wexner Heritage Village that truly seems designed for elders. All the type is in very large, easy to read script. All of the Hebrew is completely transliterated. Bold face is used to draw attention to titles, communal readings, transitions. This booklet of blessings and songs would be accessible to any elder who wanted to follow along.

"Leader's Guides" for Purim and Tu Bishevat were provided from the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged. As in the other "services" from

[113] Sangerman, p.6.

HRCA, these liturgies/rituals are adaptable to the needs of different participants. There are clear instructions and background for the leaders, stage directions, as well as additional stories, readings, music and discussion questions for use at the "discretion" of the leader. There are places for listening and places for participating and many opportunities for "sensual" involvement (sound, taste, smell, touch). Food is central but is carefully connected to the ritual/liturgy. The closing of the "Tu B'Shevat Seder" is indicative of the writer's attempt to make the service meaningful to the participants' lives:

> "May it be Your will, Our God and God of our ancestors, to renew the trees of Israel, as we have blessed the fruit of the trees before partaking of them. May the trees of Israel continue to blossom and grow with your blessings. May we continue to grow, too, in our commitment to share with one another. May we find blessing in life." [114]

Rabbi Friedman created special services for Tisha B'Av and Rosh Chodesh at PGC. The Tisha B'Av Service contains traditional readings from the Book of Lamentations but also several additional readings and prayers which are particularly effective for the elderly Jewish community, including "The Karaite Dirge for the Fall of Jerusalem," and "Begin With Us" (by Sidney Greenberg).[115] The "Rosh Chodesh Celebration" is a brief three-page service which includes lighting a Rosh Chodesh Candle, a beautiful prayer (author unknown) entitled "Create Me Anew," an abbreviated Hallel, Kiddush, blessings over the wine, pastries, and the new month. Sensitive to the need to continue marking time in Jewish ways (particularly important for nursing home residents whose time is marked by the schedule of the nursing staff and

[114] Rabbi Sam Seicol, "Leader's Guide to the Tu B'Shevat Haggadah" (Boston: Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged, n.d.), p.9.

[115] Rabbi Dayle Friedman, "A Service for Tisha B'Av," (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Geriatric Center, n.d.) p. 2 and p. 13.

not necessarily the lunar or solar cycles), this beautiful service reminds the elders that "Like the moon, may we be renewed in time to come, honor You, our Maker, and Your glorious creation."[116]

Shabbat:

Two Shabbat liturgies from the Wexner Heritage Village were studied. The Shabbat morning service was similar to other WHV services; the text was drawn primarily from GOP with additional traditional psalms, prayers, and readings inserted. The "Shabbat Warm-Up" Service (presumbably for "Kabbalat Shabbat"), is different than other WHV liturgies. It begins with songs (in large, transliterated, translated texts) and continues with interpretive readings, some of which seem to more appropriately address an elderly population (although the words can speak to all others, as well). Liturgically, this "service" contains only the b'racha over candles, and the Shema but songs like L'cha Dodi at the beginning and Adon Olam at the end give signals that this is indeed intended to be experienced as a full service. For an elder with limited physical or mental capacities, this brief service, filled with music, pictures, and very recognizable readings, will constitute a genuine Shabbat liturgy.

The "Kabbalat Shabbat" service from the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged is more complete liturgically than WHV; it is a much more "standard" service than the other "creative" approaches of HRCA. I assume that this is so because the cover indicates it is offered regularly at 3:00 to 3:30 on Friday afternoons. And, rather than being "adapted," it is meant for all those who would want/are able to be part of a regular Shabbat evening

[116] Rabbi Dayle Friedman, "Rosh Chodesh Celebration," (Philadelphia Geriatric Center), n.d.

service. The only specific note Rabbi Seicol makes about this service is that it is "very musically enhanced." So, while the setting and liturgy may not be "creative," the service was consciously designed for the congregants who will attend. This is strengthened by the attention to very large Hebrew type face and transliterations.

The Friday night service from the Philadelphia Geriatric Center was compiled and edited by Rabbi Dayle Friedman specifically for the use of Congregation Shaare Tzedek, the residents and tenants of PGC. The service is entitled "Light and Joy: A Service for Erev Shabbat." As in the preface to the other PGC prayerbooks (such as the High Holy Machzorim and the Shabbat morning Siddur which was reviewed in the Festival section above), Rabbi Friedman explains that the Kabbalat Shabbat service is "intended to facilitate our congregation's connection to the light and joy of Shabbat by eliminating obstacles to maximal participation in Shabbat worship." Also, like the other Siddurim, it features large print text in Hebrew and English, paragraph markings to assist in finding one's place, transliterated Hebrew for prayers read aloud by the congregation, contemporary English translations with gender-neutral references to God and human beings, and abridged versions of the traditional liturgy. Unlike some of the other prayerbooks, this one does offer several alternative readings in some sections so that, depending on the situation, the leader can choose what is most appropriate or leave out the section, if necessary. The readings chosen are mostly drawn from other prayerbooks, but it is clear that they were carefully chosen to be most meaningful for the elderly congregation. For example, the prayer "Bless Us Enough"[117] speaks vividly to and for an elder whatever her stage of well-

[117] Rabbi Dayle Friedman, *Light and Joy: A Service for Erev Shabbat* (Philadelphia: Congregation Shaare Tzedek, Philadelphia Geriatric Center, 1986), p. 6.

being:

"Bless Us Enough"

Source of all goodness, as we join in Shabbat worship,
We ask Your blessings.

Grant us health enough to perform our daily tasks
Wealth enough to answer our needs
Compassion enough to feel the needs of others.

Give us strength enough to recognize our faults,
Wisdom enough to understand Your laws,
Loyalty enough to discharge our duties.

Give us courage enough to be true to the best within us,
Charity enough to see the best in others.

Give us patience enough not to become discouraged,
Hope enough to overcome all fears of the future,
And faith enough to feel Your presence.

Amen.

Rabbi Friedman's work was used as the model for the creation of the Glen Manor Siddur in Cincinnati. The "Siddur of Healing and Truth" was written and compiled by then-Student Rabbi, Mark Kline. Drawing on the PGC Siddur as well as other sources, the Glen Manor Siddur has one additional feature: bold face type along with italics to make congregational readings even more visually clear. All the English of this Siddur is typed in capital letters (I assume this is also for ease of reading but I am uncertain that this is actually helpful). The PGC "Erev Shabbat Siddur" is 43 pages (including several pages of songs), while the Glen Manor Siddur contains both evening and morning services for Shabbat in 36 pages. (Glen Manor both abbreviates more than PGC and also eliminates the "choice" factor of

several alternative readings.)

I have had the privilege of both witnessing and using these two Siddurim (PGC and Glen Manor) in the congregations for whom they were designed. I observed that both were very "user-friendly" for elder residents as well as visiting guests and nursing staff who were in attendance. In both situations, there were people who could fully participate by reading and following the service and those who could not visibly participate at all (although they may hold the book in their hands, nonetheless). At PGC, congregants were encouraged, if possible, to read or lead parts of the service and there were some individuals who took this very seriously and were deeply attached to the section they "always" led. The book was also used as a "guide" for services held on each of the floors of the Center for those who were unable to come to the service in the PGC synagogue (where pews had been removed to accommodate wheelchairs and the bimah made handicapped accessible). With residents who were more restricted in physical/mental capacities, the prayerbook was primarily for the use of the student rabbi but nonetheless provided a basis for appropriate choices of prayers, songs, and readings.

Generally, the Glen Manor service was offered in a "standard" way, that is, with the student rabbi leading the service straight from the book. It is important to note, however, that from the well-worn pages, it was clear that the books have served a very important function in these congregations and were much loved and appreciated by the congregants. As a leader, I found the sensitivity to "function" and "meaning" very helpful in making the service a spiritually effective worship experience.

One final service composed for HRCA is entitled a "Service of

Memory: A Celebration of Shared Community." This brief four-page service includes familiar memorial prayers such as Psalms 121 and 23, special music (such as "Memory" from CATS, "Yeish Kochavim" by Kol B'Seder or a version of "Oseh Shalom") and personal reflections offered by staff, residents, and family members. Rabbi Seicol notes that the service may be facilitated either by the rabbi or the social worker. Furthermore, he notes, the book is not used with more confused resident units.

This lovely, simple service strikes me as a very important liturgical creation to mark the death of residents which can all too often go unmarked in nursing facilities where death is so frequent. It is critical for both residents and staff members to have opportunities to acknowledge the death of each resident. Often, they are "extended family" and yet are unable to attend the funeral. Through this service, the particular home and congregation of the individual is able to mourn the loss and "celebrate" their memory through "shared community." Although the memorial service is not a creative liturgy in and of itself, the creation of this experience through liturgy and reflection is innovative and clearly meets a need of elders that otherwise would not be met.

AGING RITUALS AND LITURGIES:

In reading through a variety of American prayerbooks, I found only one prayer written specifically as a "Prayer for the Aged."[118] This special meditation is part of a series of silent reflections in the morning service of the *Union Prayerbook II* for Yom Kippur. It is a powerful life-review prayer which reflects the many issues of "closure" which a person faces at the end of

[118] *Union Prayerbook II* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1945), pp.215-217.

a long life: meaning, worth, forgiveness, experience. It also articulates the desire for continuity and the hope for a peaceful death.

Perhaps this prayer was the first modern liturgy to acknowledge the spiritual yearnings of the elderly. Although many years have passed since the publishing of *UPB II* and the prayer itself was not included in the new *Gates of Repentance*, there have nonetheless been a variety of liturgies and rituals recently written and published which give voice to the concerns and transitions of those experiencing aging. For example, traditional liturgies can be interpreted in ways that reflect modern aging themes. Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg explores the Amidah and finds a source of wisdom and guidance for the Jew in midlife. She identifies modern issues of the aging experience and then weaves them together with the Rabbinic ideals of the eighteen benedictions including: mortality; fear of loss; being part of a larger whole; the passage of time; the limits of our control over events; people, energy and health; reliance on the divine; willingness to see our many strengths and weaknesses; and the search for ultimate meaning and inner peace.[119]

The only other example of rituals for the elderly that pre-dates the last thirty years (seemingly originating in Eastern Europe) is that of the "second Bar/Bat Mitzvah" (as distinguished from the "adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah"--sometimes called "Bar/Bat Torah"--for someone who may not have observed this ritual as a child) which is celebrated (typically) at age 83. The custom is based on the famous verse from Psalm 90, "The span of our life is seventy, or given strength, eighty years" (Ps. 90:10). Seventy plus thirteen gives us 83. I have heard of those who have observed their "second" (or first, for that matter) Bar Mitzvah at 63, 73, 93, and a variety of other ages. During my

[119] Sheila Peltz Weinberg, "The Amidah and Midlife," in *Lifecycles*, pp. 284-299.

tenure at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, a woman read from the Torah and led her first Bat Mitzvah service at the age of 82. There is no halachic basis for this elder celebration, but it is a custom that has strong symbolic meaning both in terms of Jewish continuity and the values of lifelong Jewish study and prayer. (See below for discussion of "Confirmation" for the elderly.)

Sometimes Bar Mitzvah is interpreted as one's birthday since it is the day one enters into the community as an adult and takes on the responsibility of God's commandments. Thus marking this as a special anniversary after a certain number of years with an aliyah to the Torah, a "Seudah Mitzvah" (festive meal), and perhaps the recitation of the "Shechechianu" prayer is entirely appropriate. However, there is some disagreement in traditional literature about Jews celebrating their actual birthdays in a public way as this is seen as a gentile custom. Traditional sources suggest that birthdays should be spent alone in quiet self-reflection or study. Nonetheless, there is evidence that Jews marked both yearly birthdays and those of special numbers (60, 70, 80, 90) because "whenever new years are added to you, it gives you joy."[120]

A special tract, Kol HaHayyim, written by Rabbi Hayyim Palache was composed for "somebody who has managed to reach 70 and beyond. Let the commentary be with him,and let him read it from the age of 70 and beyond year after year."[121] Special birthdays are to be acknowledged and blessed. When God granted the author of Yishrei Lev the merit to reach a 70th birthday, he said, "I made a great feast, and it was no small matter." His example of offering thanks illustrates an additional reason for the celebration

[120] Aseh Lecha Rav in *Birthday Celebrations and Personal Spirituality in the Rabbinic Tradition* by Rabbi Elaine Zecher, (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1988), p. 65.

[121] Zecher, p. 35.

of completing a particular age because it would seem that additional thanksgiving is in order the more one ages.[122]

Traditional activities for marking the celebration of one's birthday include having a "Seudah Mitzvah" with a "derashah" or a "siyyum"; giving "tzedakah" for any amount or for the number corresponding to the number of years; reciting verses of Psalms equal to one's age and, at 70, saying Psalm 103 every day; having an "aliyah" to the Torah; holding an additional study session in Torah and the Kabbalah; finishing a book or a tractate; taking time out for "cheshbon hanefesh" (an accounting of the soul); and most of all, thanking God for giving us life, sustaining us, and bringing us to this moment.[123] Marking birthdays has become one of the most innovative expressions of new Jewish aging rituals and liturgies. As we shall see in the next two sections, special birthdays are opportunities for life review and celebration.

Midlife and Elderlife Ceremonies:

> Despite the marking of particular birthdays, there is no real difference between the year one reaches 70 and other birthdays. It is always fitting to offer thanks to God's great name, who is blessed. Therefore, it is appropriate to have a celebration and to mark one's birthday each and every year.[124]

Beginning with "midlife," (40 and beyond) and moving into elderhood (60 and beyond), a number of ceremonies have been created with names reflecting the stages of life described in M. Avot 5:21. Several are called "Simchat Hochmah" (A Celebration of Wisdom) or "Simchat Binah"

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[122] Zecher, p. 31.
[123] Zecher, p. 92.
[124] Nuriyahu M. Gottel, in Zecher, p. 91.

(Celebration of Understanding), one is entitled "Ma'aseh B're-shit" (The Work of Creation), another is "A Ritual of Jubilation," and one is named "Av/Em Eitza" (Father/Mother of Counsel). One of the more intriguing designations for midlife is the German *Torschlusspanik*, a "fear of closing gates."[125] This term evokes both the literal image of the Temple gates in Jerusalem closing at the end of Yom Kippur and the liturgical metaphor of the closing gates in each individual's journey through life. Making peace with personal mortality and resolving to remold the days that are left in ways that will be meaningful are themes of those experiencing the transitions of midlife and elder aging.

As the Pirke Avot-inspired names of the rituals and ceremonies indicate, the middle and elder years hold out the promise that life will be marked by greater *understanding* of one's inner self, deepening commitment to *counsel* and care for the generations that follow, and growing *wisdom* to appreciate the subtleties and breadth of existence. As individuals seek to embrace these qualities, they exemplify the ways in which aging can be an experience of both celebration and renewal.[126]

The following rituals and liturgies were collected through a variety of methods: published collections of lifecycle rituals in books and journals, ritual bank files, personal connections with individuals, responses to my advertisements in Jewish publications and my letters of request to experts in the field. If I was able to cull specific details regarding the origins, experiences, or impact of the ceremonies, I have included it in my description as much as possible. (All rituals are listed in the Bibliography in the section on "Creative

[125] Barry D. Cytron, "Midlife from Understanding to Wisdom," in Rela M. Geffen, ed., *Celebration and Renewal: Rites of Passage in Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p.137.

[126] Cytron, in *Celebration and Renewal*, p. 147.

Liturgies and Rituals." Where I was able to procure permission, I have included the unpublished rituals and ceremonies in Appendix A).

Although this thesis is primarily concerned with "old age," midlife ceremonies recognize that the period between middle adulthood and old age requires ritual transition just as do changes of status at other times in life. At midlife or later, there is room for a new start, for major change. The change will be the transition from dealing with the theoretical knowledge of finitude to facing concretely the truth of human limits and death. A ritual which expresses one's sense of meaning and understanding of life may well facilitate greatly the acceptance of aging and death.[127] Thus, midlife ceremonies serve as models for aging rituals and liturgies which communicate meaning and reaffirm the value of life.

A ceremony entitled "Turning 40: A Ritual, Talmudically" (or, more informally, a 'last-chance, exorcise-the-demons 39th birthday party')[128] was created by Rivkah Walton, coordinator of the National Havurah Committee. Her ritual centered around the issue of liminality--being suspended between two statuses. She teaches the community she has gathered around her that the Talmud devotes almost an entire tractate to the problems of women who are between statuses. In the context of completing the fourth decade of her life, she explains "You are neither in nor out, neither here nor there, neither being nor non-being, neither child nor adult--and those in-between times and places in the journey seem particularly fraught with danger."[129] Then, using Psalm 91 as text ("Orech yamim asbi-eyhu vi-areyhu b'yishu-ati"-- "I will let you live to a ripe old age and show you my salvation") and inspiration (in

[127] Rabbi Paul Citrin, "Av/Em Eitza: Proposal for a New Lifecycle Ceremony," *Journal of Reform Judaism* (Spring, 1990), p. 44.

[128] Rivkah Walton, "Turning 40: A Ritual, Talmudically," *Lilith* (Spring, 1992), p.21.

[129] ibid.

rabbinic tradition, this Psalm was used as an anti-demonic incantation) for naming the "demons that make maturing so hard and frightening for most of us," she asks each of the assembled guests to help her banish the demons lying in wait at the door of one's fortieth year. "There is a demon who says, 'No matter what you do, it won't be good enough.' 'Away, away, away, . . .' 'There is a demon who says, 'You have to get your life together by the time your are forty.' 'Away, away, . . .'" And, so on. Then, the song based on the words of Reb Nachman of Bratslav is sung "All the world is a narrow bridge and the important thing is not to be afraid at all." The guests offer Rivkah new spiritual names and finally, the 91st Psalm is read to her by two friends. Spontaneously, dancing begins.

The "Simchat Binah" of Miriam van Kaaltes' fortieth birthday was an opportunity for study of passages concerning the aging process found in Pirke Avot. Beyond the passages cited, little can be discerned about the event. Nonetheless, facilitated by Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller, this was clearly a "created" Jewish experience for the purpose of marking a significant life stage transition. And, since study is considered a form of prayer, it is important to note this celebration as an appropriate model for the aging process.

A second ritual for marking a 40th birthday was created by Carolyn Litwin in honor of Rhonda Karol, wife of Rabbi Lawrence Karol of Topeka, Kansas. It was the last of a three-year cycle of programs celebrating "The Jewish Woman--Creating Rituals for Holiday Celebration." The goal was to mark the birthday of a Jewish woman in the context of Jewish time and space, thus the celebration was linked both to the actual birth date of the celebrant and to the holiday of Shavuot. The event included a Rosh Hodesh ceremony; study of *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*

(editors, Judith A. Kranes and Gail Twersky Reimer); an offering of blessings linking Ruth's journey to Rhonda's life journey (including the themes of friendship, spiritual choice, community of women, and mother-daughter relationship); the passing of a rose wrapped in a bow of wheat (each person holding the rose and then sharing personal wishes for the birthday celebrant); presentation of gifts; a rite of passage ceremony (linking Rosh Hodesh, Shavuot and the 40th birthday celebration); the singing of "L'chi Lach;" the giving of tzedakah to MAZON; and the presentation of a birthday cake decorated with wheat and roses.

This birthday celebration clearly brought together all elements of traditional Jewish ritual--blessing, study of Jewish text, marking of sacred time and space in community, personal transformation, and the linking of past generations with the present and future. It stands out from many of the other rituals both in scope, innovation, and connection to Jewish symbols, holidays, and texts.

The midlife ceremony (age 50) of Bonnie Feinman is entitled "Ma'aseh B're-shit" (Work of Creation) and is based on the change of status Abraham experiences at the age of ninety-nine (just beyond the half-way mark of his one hundred seventy-five years). In Genesis chapters 12-18, Abraham goes through a series of life changes which Irene Fine interprets as "ingredients" for the creation of a new rite of passage ceremony. The essential elements include a covenant agreement, the signing or sealing of the agreement, a name change (with an introduction describing the "journey" of one's midlife passage) as well as blessings, songs, dance, food, and the presentation of gifts.

Ms. Fine explains that the midlife ceremony could be celebrated when one begins the midlife journey, when one completes it, or at any stage along

the way. The ceremony lends itself to being celebrated during a fiftieth birthday party, in conjunction with a festival celebration, in the formal setting of a synagogue, or the informal environment of a havurah group. It can also be adapted as a transition ceremony for other points in the lifecycle (such as a preretirement event).[130]

Rabbi Paul Citrin proposes the "Av/Em Eitza Ceremony" as a lifecycle observance for a person fifty years of age or older. Fifty is the age of "counsel" ('eitza") in the Pirke Avot outline of the stages of life. Yehudah ben Teima thought that the wisdom accumulated over half a century made one fit to give advice, all the more so if one considered the place to which he or she was ultimately going.[131] In order to become a "Mother or Father of Counsel" Citrin suggests one would compose a written "Tzava'at Eitza" (a Testament of Counsel). "Such a testament would include what one considers the important lessons one has learned in life--insights on human relationships, coping with hardship, and finding fulfillment--and an expression of what message one has sought to convey through life."[132]

The "Tzava'at Eitza" will also be based on a course of study and discussion carried out with others seeking to become "Av/Em Eitza." This group, under the guidance of a rabbi, will begin with the study of Ecclesiastes followed by an examination of a selection of ethical wills as well as discussions about their own lives, failures, accomplishments, hopes and their feelings about facing death. Throughout the 12-week course, participants would keep journals which may serve as the foundation of the "Tzav'at Eitza." The "Tzava'at Eitza" differs from a classical ethical will in that it

[130] Irene Fine, *Midlife, A Rite of Passage and The Wise Woman, A Celebration: Two Books in One* (San Diego: Woman's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1988), p. 22.
[131] Citrin, p. 45.
[132] Citrin, p. 45.

would be presented to one's synagogue community on the first morning of Sukkot or on the Shabbat during Sukkot and the written document would be placed in a special notebook called the "Sefer Eitza" (Book of Counsel) which would be kept in a place of honor in the congregational library.

"Av/Em Eitza," as conceived by Rabbi Citrin, brings together both the elements of the "Ma'aseh B're-shit" and "Simchat Chochmah" ceremonies. That is, "Av/Em Eitza" provides public sharing of a lifecycle event and is also rooted in the traditional value of study and reflection which provides Jewish authenticity. This course of study and the ensuing ceremony can take place as part of a 50th birthday celebration, retiring at age 65, completing the traditional life-span of 70 years, or whenever one is ready. Regardless of the timing or age, Rabbi Citrin concludes that such a ritual can be of much benefit to the celebrants and their community. "The Av/Em Eitza celebration creates heroic role models in our midst. Those who confront their mortality and who make explicit the meaning of their lives, swim against today's cultural current which reviles aging, denies death, and move toward life's shallows. The Av/Em Eitza shows us a profoundly richer path toward numbering our days so we may get us a heart of wisdom."[133]

In *The Wise Woman, A Celebration*, Irene Fine gathers excerpts from some of the first "wise woman rites of passage" ceremonies. Each celebrates a new age of wisdom and embodies some sort of ritual performance as well as liturgical aspect. Fine suggests that these ceremonies can make use of occasions already marked on the calendar (such as Shabbat, Havdalah, or Rosh Chodesh or a date marking a birthday or anniversary) and that the ceremony itself draws on Jewish tradition along with creativity in its

[133] Citrin, p. 46.

performance. For example, Fine describes one ceremony of the wise woman where "hakafot" (circumambulations) are performed around the celebrant by friends to demonstrate symbolically their support and enthusiasm for the new status of their friend. Another ceremony had a procession of fifty elder women dressed in flowing white outfits walking in formation from a promontory down to the beach where they sat at small white tables and discussed what it meant to be older women.

Other examples of ceremonies borrowing ideas from the past and transforming them for the present include blowing the shofar (see the "Ritual of Jubilation" described below) or inviting all present to join in the Yemenite wedding "wail" (a shrill piercing sound or ululation) that would drive away "discordant spirits" that might encumber the elder on her journey (see "Banishing the Demons" ceremony described above). Or, to recall the Jewish tradition of wearing new clothes (see Karsh and Teubal ceremonies)[134] or taking on a new name (see Filman ceremony)[135] when a person undergoes a change of status, one woman of fifty-five dons a ceremonial mask signifying the venerated wise woman she is about to become, enabling her to tell her story free of inhibitions and self-consciousness.[136]

In the ceremony of the wise woman (or man), the celebration of wisdom is essential. This can be expressed through an exchange of "words of wisdom" which the guests offer the celebrant--for example, at a retirement celebration, a single rose was passed from person to person with each person who received the rose telling a story about the deeds of the retiree and what she meant in their lives. After the rose traveled around the circle, it was

[134] Fine, p. 26 and p. 30.
[135] Fine, p. 23.
[136] Fine, pp. 17-19.

presented to the celebrant, vested with her friends' stories and good wishes for her future. Or, the "wise woman" herself would take the opportunity of her "wisdom ceremony" to share what she thinks is her wisdom or special insight (see, also, Karsh ceremony).[137]

Several examples from Fine's collection include the writing of new prayers or blessings for the aging process (especially those which focus on female consciousness), such as the following menopausal prayer: "Blessed are You, our Creator, God of all creation, Who has given us creativity. And through an intimate relationship of two loving people, has made us creators and nurturers. God of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, though years of procreation have ended, I thank You for my past fertility and for making me a woman."[138] (See section on rituals marking physical changes below.)

A "Ritual of Jubilation"[139] was created by H.U.C. rabbinic student Susan Bulba Carvutto for the celebration of her fiftieth birthday. As in the "Bar Yovel" ceremony described below, Ms. Carvutto draws on the Leviticus explanation of the jubilee celebration as the basis of her ritual: "You shall sound the shofar throughout the land, and you shall hallow the fiftieth year" (Lev. 25:9-10). In addition to reading a special poem by Joel Rosenberg appropriately entitled "Jubilation," Ms. Carvutto blew the shofar (after the call "tekiah gedolah"), recited "Birkat Hagomel" (in recognition of the many physical and emotional dangers she has survived in her fifty years) and then asked all present to share in saying the "Shechechianu." Finally, she wrote a "midlife Amidah" reflecting the themes of the blessings and her own aging

[137] Fine, p. 19 and p. 25.

[138] Muriel Fillman in Fine, p. 19.

[139] Susan Bulba Carvutto, "A Ritual of Jubilation," Fall, 1996. The ritual was written originally for her 50th birthday celebration and was later expanded as part of a course on creative liturgy. The "midlife Amidah" is based on a similar idea of Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg (see above) in *Lifecycles*.

experiences. This is one of the few rituals in this collection regarding which I have had the privilege of both knowing the creator and being present at (part of) the ritual. I found both the sources, the celebration, and the spirit to be individually cathartic, Jewishly expressive, and communally bonding.

Creation of new liturgy and ritual based on biblical precedents was the foundation of Savina Teubal's "Simchat Hochmah" (or "crone") ceremony. Although Ms. Teubal acknowledges that her ceremony was not handed down from her ancestors, she considers the creation of her ceremony (with the guidance and encouragement of Rabbi Drorah Setel),the fulfilling of a significant need in our society which can be "handed down" to future generations. The ceremony Ms. Teubal created for her sixtieth birthday (like Bonnie Feinman's "Ma'aseh B're-shit" ceremony) was inspired by the Genesis narratives and includes the following ritual elements: a change of name, a covenant, a reconciliation with death, an affirmation of life. She chose to have her ceremony at the temple rather than at home because of the symbolism of the temple as "Jewish community" but also because it represented her roots. She included parts of the Shabbat service because she envisioned "Simchat Hochmah" to be a truly Jewish ritual that springs from specifically Jewish roots.

The service drew on the messages of the "parashah" of "Chayei Sarah" which, according to Ms. Teubal's interpretation, teaches the internalization of death in the lifecycle. Another element from the Sarah and Abraham story that she included was the creation of a covenant or promise. In memory of the promises God made to Sarah, Ms. Teubal offered a grant to anyone who would continue her work in feminist Judaism. Finally, Ms. Teubal ended her ceremony with the planting of a tree which symbolizes the connection

between the depths of the earth where life is quickened, and the canopy above, where life becomes visible.[140]

Facing her own mortality was a theme Ms. Teubal explored by wearing a white linen "galabie" (a simple, long shirt dress worn by Middle Eastern men and women) halfway through the service. The "galabie" also served as a "kittel" (a white ceremonial robe worn on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and also used as a burial shroud). After she changed into the "kittel" (prior to the Torah service which included reading from the Torah portion "Lech Lecha"), the congregants sang "L'chi Lach" by Debbie Friedman, a song which was composed specifically for this service (music by Friedman, lyrics by Teubal). Before the reading of the Torah, people who did not feel that the name they had received from their parents represented the essence of their being were able to ask the congregation to recognize them with a new name: "Hachamah" ("wise woman") or "Hacham" ("wise man").[141]

Ms. Teubal's ceremony inspired the service of Marcia Cohn Spiegel which was a Havdalah service on the Shabbat of "Chayei Sarah." Ms. Spiegel used Ms. Teubal's words to explain her purpose as well: "We celebrate 'Simchat Chochmah' to mark an outstanding event: the beginning of a new phase in our lives, different from all others. It is a rite of passage which honors one of the many stages in life between the time of birth and the time of death. Like many other celebrations (Bar/Bat mitzvah, graduation, wedding) 'Simchat Chochmah,' validates the part of life already lived, and empowers a portion of our future."[142] Ms. Spiegel chose to celebrate her "Simchat Chochmah" with a Havdalah service because her family developed

[140] Savina Teubal, in *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 257-259.

[141] Teubal, in *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, p. 262.

[142] Marcia Cohn Spiegel, "Simchat Chochmah" (Rancho Palos Verdes, CA:1987), p. 1.

a tradition of Havdalah ceremonies to mark special moments.

A "Simchat Chochmah v'Hatchala" ("A Celebration of Wisdom and New Beginnings") was created by Sandy Warshaw in honor of her sixtieth birthday. Her liturgy is divided into five sections: "Beginning the Journey," "Continuing the Journey," "Giving Thanks," "Prayers for Continuing the Journey," and "Anticipating the Adventure Still to Come." In each section there are songs, readings (for individual and communal participation), and personal reflections by the celebrant. From the beginning, the liturgy identifies the importance of Judaism in Ms. Warshaw's life. She speaks of "answering the call to be a Jew" and then of "surviving to speak a new language and receive a new name" (based on the changing of Avram and Sarai's names). In recalling her life journeys, she gives thanks for her recovery from breast cancer, for her teachers, for the wisdom she has gained along the way, and, finally, for life itself. Using the words of Genesis and the prayer for the traveler ("Tefillat HaDerech"), she anticipates the future, recognizes her fears and celebrates her life with the singing and dancing of "Havah Nagilah."

Barbara D. Holender adapted a "Simchat Hochmah" ceremony for her "Ceremony of Passage on My Sixty-Fifth Birthday." The ceremony was written for and shared with her Bible study group who studied together for over thirty years. Ten women were present on her birthday; after the ceremony, each of her friends shared perceptions of her. Like many of the other "Simchat Hochmah" ceremonies discussed above, Ms. Holender's service is modeled on the archetypal Jewish rite of passage: Abraham's journey. It consists of a naming and a covenant. She explains the name she was given by her parents and the name she chooses for herself; she includes

symbols (water-- representing the spiritual cleansing of the *mikveh*; a ring--her grandmother's wedding ring which she will someday give to her daughter and which represents the cycle and binding of generations; and an apple, Eve's fruit,[143] which is cut to represent the covenant Abraham concluded with God by cutting an animal in two). Finally, she offers a poem and a blessing over the seeds she has planted (she chose sage, a symbol of longevity, wisdom, and sagacity) and closes with the "Shechechianu." This is my favorite of the "Simchat Hochmah" ceremonies, perhaps, because it is both simple and eloquent, because it is clearly based on a real human need to mark a lifecycle passage which is not marked in Judaism, and because it is rooted in Jewish text, Jewish symbols, and Jewish spirit.[144]

A "return" ("teshuvah") to Jewish study and practice is often prompted in the aging process, according to Barry Cytron. While many motivations may inspire a person to become religiously observant, Rabbi Cytron notes that "ba'alei teshuvah" tend to be those seeking a way of life that offers greater personal fulfillment and meaning--i.e. those who are facing issues typically confronting the aging mind and body.[145] Furthermore, Rabbi Dayle Friedman emphasizes that every Jew is *metzuveh* (commanded), bound to the covenant and the commandments, both ritual and ethical, even when age brings physical and mental incapacitation. As discussed in Chapter One, using Rabbi Friedman's "Mitzvah Model: A Life of Meaning," the older Jew can find a way to experience a profound sense of self-worth and social value

[143] Note: "Eve's fruit" is a curious mixing of metaphors--the apple is the Christian, not the Jewish, interpretation of the fruit Eve ate. So, while the "cutting" is symbolic of Jewish tradition, the fruit itself is not.

[144] Barbara D. Holender, "A Ceremony of Passage on My Sixty-Fifth Birthday" in *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones, Volume 1* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), pp. 332-334.

[145] Cytron, in *Celebration and Renewal*, p.132.

through participation in ritual obligations.[146] While the mitzvot may need to be adapted to be accessible and attainable for those who are ill or impaired, the assumption is that individuals can fulfill their obligations by simply doing as much as they *can*. According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, it is through this experience of being obligated that one truly exists. Older adults who believe that they continue to be obligated, understand themselves as engaged in the central human task of *tikkun olam*--repairing and redeeming the world through observance of the mitzvot.[147]

CEREMONIES MARKING PHYSICAL CHANGES:

Menopause is one of the great changes in the aging woman's body. Although men also experience many physical changes (including sexual ones), I was unable to find any rituals, liturgies or even mentions of these in the materials I gathered.[148] Just as there was no traditional ceremony marking the onset of menses, the end of menstruation has been a silent transition in women's lives. Phyliss Ocean Berman broke this silence with a celebration she entitled "a seder of womanhood"-- relating the order of the stages of womanhood to the Passover and Tu Bishvat custom of drinking four cups of wine. The first cup was a bright red sangria (cherry-apple cider for non-alcohol drinkers) representing the "drink" of adolescence (the first stage of womanhood is menstruation). The second cup, a sparkling champagne or apple cider for the second stage of woman-life, sex and love. The third cup,

[146] Dayle A. Friedman, "The Crown of Glory: Aging in the Jewish Tradition," in *Celebration and Renewal*, pp. 214-215.

[147] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "To Grow in Wisdom," in *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1966) p. 78.

[148] Note: The lack of new male rituals may reflect the fact that "official" Jewish rituals already speak in the male voice. Most of the rituals in this chapter have been written by women who, influenced by the American feminist movement, are finding their own voices and empowerment through the development of new Jewish rituals.

milk or soy milk, marked the stage of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and child-raising. This stage also included discussions of the silences around abortion, adoption, of not having children, of the sensuality of nursing, and the passionate protection for and connection to children. The fourth cup, (New York City) water, represented the possibilities of this fourth state of woman-life--menopause. After each cup, the women gathered around Ms. Berman shared their own stories, if they had experienced that stage in their lives. Public celebration of menopause, like other life-turning moments, says Berman "makes each life stage a time for revealing, first to ourselves, then one another, and then to the larger human community what may help to free us from the tyranny and alienation of silence."[149]

In a short essay entitled "Spiritual Menopause," psychologist Mary Gendler writes,

> Menopause marks the end of a woman's ability to reproduce, a finality which can bring twinges of regret even to those who are longing only for the limited responsibilities of grandparenthood or those who have chosen not to have children. Yet, for some this is a time of opening, of moving beyond gender definition, of surging energy and a sense of liberation. Like menstruation, menopause is a time of emptying and refilling, a cycle familiar to women. Now that the womb is destined to remain empty of blood, the "refilling" must come in a different mode.[150]

But how does one remain connected to the rhythms of the cycle, to the "womb wisdom" after menopause? The answer, suggests Gendler, is the creation of a "spiritual menopause" where one acknowledges the deep changes in one's soul parallel to the deep changes in one's body. The soul can be nourished through Jewish biblical images like that of the tree as a symbol

[149] Phyllis Ocean Berman, "Recreating Menopause" *Moment* (February, 1994) pp. 49, 72.
[150] Mary Gendler, "Spiritual Menopause" in *Lifecycles*, p. 301,

of wisdom (Proverbs 3:13-18), vitality (Jeremiah 17:8; Psalms 1:3), righteousness (Proverbs 11:30), and fruitfulness (Ezekiel 17:23). The words of Psalm 92:13-14, Gendler finds particularly relevant to menopause:

> The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree,
> and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
> They are planted in the house of Adonai;
> They flourish in the courts of our God.
> In old age they still produce fruit,
> They are always green and full of sap...

A post-menopausal woman can be "always green and full of sap" by following the example of Sarah, biblical matriarch. Sarah's life teaches that one should not be too hasty in declaring oneself or others 'barren.' Although Sarah is not actively seeking when God comes to call, she is available and ready, and this is why she both flourishes and nourishes. Through the images of Sarah and the tree of life, Dr. Gendler creates a ritual and a blessing to affirm the changes in her body and the changes in her soul. She writes, "May we have the courage to follow Sarah's example, to be open to new challenges, new opportunities, new paths and voices, never to forget that despite the changes in our bodies, the sap continues to flow..."[151]

A "Ritual for Menopause" was created by a Reconstructionist Rabbinical College student as part of a course on adulthood and aging. This ritual connected Rosh Hodesh, the cycle of the moon, with menopause, the cycle of women. In addition to Rosh Hodesh prayers, the ceremony incorporates readings appropriate to the theme, opportunities for the individual to express how this passage affects her life, and possibly,

[151] Gendler in *Lifecycles*, pp. 302-303.

immersion in the mikvah.[152]

Miriam's Well also offers a ritual for the cessation of menstruation and the release from the physical tasks of childbearing and childrearing. Editor Peninah Adelman notes that this ritual has not (yet?) been performed but it is presented with the hope that it will assist individual women in coming to terms with menopause, each in her own way. The ritual is based on the celebration of Rosh Hodesh for the month of Iyyar. The Book of Ruth is studied and discussed in relation to the spiritual lifepaths of mothers and daughters and how a mother passes on her life's wisdom to her daughter. (The addenda to Iyyar suggests guided imageries and questions to spark thoughts about the wisdom one might learn from one's grandmother and mother.) The woman who is marking her menopause is called the "mithbogeret" signifying maturity or coming of age and, as a reflexive noun, refers to a process that has been ongoing, a second 'coming of age.' There are photographs displayed of the "mithbogeret" as a baby, young girl, young woman, bride, mother, grandmother. Attending the ceremony are all the female relatives of the "mithbogeret" who can be present--sisters, daughters, mothers, aunts--as well as her good friends, including members of the Rosh Hodesh group.

The counting of the Omer is suggested as a basis for counting the years and deeds and events which make up a woman's life. Seven distinct stages of life are described which are said to correspond to the seven weeks of the Omer: conception, pregnancy, birth, childhood, womanhood, motherhood, and maturity. Seven ritual activities are then explored: meditation, ritual

[152] "Ritual for Menopause" was described to me by Rabbi Dayle Friedman. The ritual was written by an RRC student whom I was unable to locate to obtain direct permission to publish her ceremony in this thesis. Hence, the description is limited.

immersion (mikveh), singing, prayer, storytelling (midrash), text study (talmud torah), eating and drinking. Pertinent reflections are offered: "We are ready to mark the passing of physical fertility and to rededicate ourselves to a greater focus of spiritual, intellectual, and artistic creativity and fertility."[153]

The purpose of this ritual is not to view menopause as a time to mourn the "end of fertility" but to understand and recognize the meaning of menopause for a woman who has experienced it or will soon enter its phases. Adelman notes that, in some cultures, a woman who has passed the age of childbearing is known as the "wise woman" of the community, "In her reside the knowledge and values of her people which she transmits to the young. Hers is the status of a venerated elder."[154] In Judaism, the end of menstruation does not mean there should be an end to sexuality. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, sex is not just for procreation but for the sake of pleasure, wellbeing and harmony in a marriage. Therefore, when a woman has passed the age of childbearing, and even earlier, she is encouraged by Jewish law to enjoy sex with her partner.[155]

Nonetheless, the ending of the physical potential for childbearing is a very powerful passage for women which sometimes comes before a natural end to the menstrual cycle. A ritual for grieving the loss of a womb through hysterectomy was created by Nancy Helman Shneiderman. A "Midlife Covenant: Healing Ritual after Hysterectomy" was designed to help make a

[153] Penina Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Ritual's for Jewish Women Around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1986), p.67.
[154] Adelman, p.69.
[155] Adelman, p. 69.

transition into the "next fruitful stage of life."[156] In contrast to women's ceremonies which are often connected with the moon, Ms. Shneiderman chose the sun as a representation of fire, eternal light, and heated passion. The ceremony took place on the Summer Solstice as a symbolic release from her monthly biological cycle and a transition from the lunar state of reflected light to that of the self-generated creative powers used to heal, repair and transform the world. Ms. Shneiderman retained her womb after the surgery and buried it in the earth in a pottery vessel she made herself (symbolizing a completion of mourning). A minyan of women representing all phases of the life cycle were called together by blowing the shofar. Her youngest daughter played a niggun on the violin which Ms. Shneiderman had written for her own Bat Mitzvah. Prayers were offered and two sapling trees were planted representing the challenges and growth of the next phase of life.

As for men, although there were no "rituals" that I discovered marking the aging body, I was sent a beautiful original story about lovers who are old. The writer explained to me in his letter that the story was written as double counterpoint to the Song of Songs. So, while it does not seem like a Jewish story (or liturgy) on the surface, its author intended it to celebrate the ongoing love and loving of aging people (both heterosexual and homosexual). He writes:

> I take your face in my hands. Run my fingers through your hair. Each silver hair is a story. I listen to them all. What richness of years are in your stories. Time. Wisdom. Love. Our bodies rock. Slowly. I press into your stories. Tree-root of my body pressed to tree-root of your body. Skin opening to skin.

[156] Nancy Helman Shneiderman, "Midlife Covenant Healing Ritual after Hysterectomy," April, 1989 in *A Ceremonies Sampler: New Rites, Celebrations, and Observances of Jewish Women*, edited by Elizabeth Resnick Levine, (San Diego: Woman's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1991), pp. 55-60.

> We are so old , my beloved. Time itself stops in our embracing. Days, nights, morning, all of them are still in our bodies. Even the earth is still. Stopped. Only the sigh of you, breath of you, singing into my body-sighs. And birds fly out of your mouth, clouds, stars, lightning. Like a man who has danced all night, I stagger into your eyes. Fall all the way down into your body. We are one. . .[157]

ANNIVERSARIES AND BIRTHDAYS:

Beyond the marking of birthdays as "midlife ceremonies," according to Rabbi Elaine Zecher, the celebration of birthdays are opportunities for individuals to bring into consciousness their own spiritual moment, mark it, celebrate it, and find meaning in it.[158] Not only do birthdays allow us to acknowledge the past event of our birth but also to recognize that we were born with the task to fulfill our potential in life. Celebrating our potential, we thank and bless God for all the good that has come to us. Although one should celebrate each birthday, as noted above, specific ages are particularly significant because they represent reaching a milestone in one's life. If one has reached a particularly auspicious age, one can rejoice that one has been saved thus far.

Individual anniversaries and birthdays are clearly identifiable (yearly) lifecycle passages which can be marked with some kind of Jewish ritual and/or liturgy. A number of contemporary prayers and ceremonies have been created for these occasions. In addition to readings for the celebration of any birthday (which includes blessings for wine and cake and the reciting of the "shechechianu"), there is a special reading (written by Rabbi Donna Berman and revised by Chaim Stern) for "Simchat Hochmah" (identified here as sixty or seventy years) found in *On The Doorposts of Your House.*

[157] Andrew Ramer, "When We Are Very Old," 1994.
[158] Zecher, p. 83.

This reading reflects a sense of life as a journey and the hope of continued wellbeing in the future. It concludes with a "b'racha"--"Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam she'natan maychochmato l'vasar va'dam" ("We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You give of Your wisdom to flesh and blood.") This blessing is based on the form of a traditional benediction and has its source in B. Ber 58a.

Anniversary prayers are also in *Doorposts* for yearly recitation and for silver and golden anniversaries. The texts include quotations from the Song of Songs but are largely based on prayers found in the *Union Home Prayerbook. The Reform Rabbi's Manual* includes a more extensive anniversary service which reenacts the wedding ceremony itself with participation by the spouses as well as the rabbi. Or, there is a one-page prayer (similar to those in *Doorposts*) which can be said by the rabbi with the "Shechechianu" as the conclusion.

Rabbi Barton Lee composed a one-page anniversary prayer and a ceremony for special anniversaries as well (which includes the previously mentioned one-page reading as the "couple's prayer"). Rabbi Lee draws on blessings from the Siddur of the Karaite Jews for a wedding ceremony which include the blessing over wine and the blessing of "hadas," the sweet fragrance of the myrtle branch, as a symbol of the pleasant memories that the couple have shared and the hope for continued sweetness to be shared in years to come. In his ceremony, there are places for both the rabbi and the couple to make personal remarks.

Sadly, there is also a need to mark the end of a marriage after a spouse has died. A ritual for removal of the wedding ring was composed by Barry E. Pitegoff (with the encouragement of his rabbi, Stanley Garfein) after the death

of his wife. Although this ritual is not exclusive to elders, it certainly would be applicable to many aging couples. The notes for the ritual of removing the wedding band suggest that the ring be removed, at the spouse's discretion, between "shleshoshim" and "yahrtzeit." When this act is performed, a meditation and prayer for the bereaved spouse is suggested (authored by Mr. Pitegoff). The prayer is based on the vows and texts of a traditional wedding ceremony, verses from Ecclesiastes and Psalms, and other liturgical rubrics (like the standard formula "may this be God's will" as the closing phrase). The prayer speaks of what the bereaved has learned from his experiences, his losses, his faith, and his tradition. He asks that memory and love continue to be with him and inspire him, but he also looks to God and Torah as sources which can lead him forward. Mr. Pitegoff says his ritual was more a part of a bereavement process rather than a function of aging but he notes that he believes, ". . . early or late, death always comes too soon."[159]

Two rituals for the completion of the period of Kaddish and the commemoration of a yahrtzeit were composed by rabbinical students as part of a course on aging at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rabbi Amy Kalmanofsky's "Ritual to Close Period of Kaddish"[160] has three objectives: 1) to allow person to say a final farewell; 2) to enable person to transition out of designated period of mourning; 3) to honor community who supported mourner. The mourner is given an "aliyah" followed by a "Mi Sheberach." Before the person leaves the bimah, a "kavannah" is offered which is meant to resonate with the themes and structure of "Neilah," and the mourner says in English or in Hebrew: "Shema" (1x), "Baruch Shem" (3x), "Hashem Hu"

[159] Barry E. Pitegoff, "Removing the Wedding Ring" (Tallahassee: 1993), n.p.

[160] Rabbi Amy Kalmanofsky, "Ritual to Close Period of Kaddish," written for course at RRC, May, 1995.

(7x). Finally, the person sponsors a kiddush to honor and thank the community.

For the commemoration of a yarhtzeit,[161] Yael Ridberg offers a variety of suggestions including inviting friends over for a "seudah shlishit" (third meal) to share memories and stories and close with havdalah. In addition, Ridberg suggests that as part of any home ritual, when the yahrtzeit candle is lit, the following "kavannah" and blessing can be recited:

> May it be your will, Adonai our God, and God of our mothers and fathers that this candle will illuminate the memory of _____ who has left this world. May our souls be like this candle and brighten Your world, as it is written: 'The soul of a person is the lamp of God.' (Proverbs 20:27)
>
> Let us bless the Source of Life, who enables memories to return to us year after year, with love.

RETIREMENT:

The reading entitled "Upon Retirement" in *Doorposts* is by Chaim Stern but it is based on a meditation by Morris Lazaron in *The Union Home Prayerbook* (p. 32f). In the second paragraph, the conclusion ('. . . and the spirit of wisdom . . . reverence for life.') is adapted from Isaiah 11:2. The Isaiah passage is utilized in a prayer traditionally recited during the Torah ritual on Sabbaths and Festivals, deriving from *Shaarei Zion* (a compendium of mystical prayers by Nathan b. Moses Hannover, Prague, 1662). Beyond this prayer, I found two ceremonies for retirement, one proposed by Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph in the *Journal Of Aging and Judaism* in the spring of 1988 and the other by Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer in the *Reconstructionist* in the fall of 1987. Surely there have been other such rituals created since these were written, but I was unable to find them.

[161] Yael Ridberg, "Yahrtzeit Commemoration," written for course at RRC, May, 1995.

Rabbi Joseph writes that "retirement should be celebrated and honored in the synagogue as all other lifecycle events are presently noted. Retirement marks the passing of one stage in life the same as Bar Mitzvah, Confirmation, and marriage. It is a very significant time in a person's life and must be recognized by the community."[162] In order to provide a retiree with something more existentially meaningful than the "proverbial gold watch," Rabbi Joseph advocates inviting the retiree and his/her family and friends to attend synagogue on a particular Shabbat when the retiree would be asked to come up onto the bimah for special prayers, s/he may be honored with an "aliyah," and the rabbi can offer a few personal words and blessings. And, finally, as in many of our liturgies, the congregation would conclude the ceremony with the recitation of the "shechechianu." Rabbi Joseph's "Synagogue Ceremony for Retirement" can be inserted in a regular Shabbat service. Many of the texts for the service are drawn from *Gates of the House* but have been adapted for the purposes of congregational and individual participation. The only liturgy included is the "Shema/V'ahavta"--so, I am not certain if that means that if this ceremony is inserted into a service as suggested, it must be done around the "K'riat Shema" or not. There are also readings which suggest it could be done later in the service, perhaps as part of the closing blessings (except for the Shema). Perhaps it would be best to pick from among the readings/prayers in his service and use appropriately in the standard service of the particular congregation.

Rabbi Fuchs-Kreimer's ritual is named "Bar Yovel: A Lifecyle Ritual for Retirement." "Bar Yovel" was chosen as a theme because it had links to another Jewish lifecycle event, bar mitzvah and because it made a connection

[162] Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph, "Proposal for Ceremony for Retirement," *Journal of Aging and Judaism* (Spring, 1988), p. 181.

with the Jewish cycle of years, reviving a biblical admonition to, among other things, liberate slaves every 49 years at the Jubilee, or *Yovel*. The ceremony involves a variety of participants including a rabbi, the retiree and a number of "friends." The retiree is given a new kipah and then he lights seven candles which he explains is reminiscent of Shabbat, the seventh day, the end of the week of work and the conclusion of "years of work." A blessing is recited over the candles with the words "Baruch atah Adonai, Yotzer Hame'orot--Praised are You, Lord, Creator of lights"). A blessing is recited over wine as a symbol of the sweet taste of contentment, a time for enjoying the fruits of one's labors. The "bar yovel" symbolically puts down and releases the tool of his trade and asks four questions: "As I enter the years of retirement and aging: Will I be bored or stimulated? Will I feel useless or valuable? Will I be lonely or involved with others? Will I feel despair or hope?"[163]

The rabbi responds that only the years to come can answer these questions, but that several things can be done to help in the transition. First, seven symbolic gifts are given to the retiree by friends. Second, tzedakah is given in the retiree's honor (each person gives to a common bowl for a predesignated cause). Third, "demons" (of boredom, uselessness, loneliness, and despair) are scared away with the blast of the shofar. The shofar is then also tied to the proclamation of the Jubilee Year with appropriate texts and explanations. The retiree is declared a "bar yovel" with another sounding of the shofar, he is presented with a certificate testifying to his new place in the covenant community, and he takes on a new name. At the close of the

[163] Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, "Bar Yovel: Creating a Lifecycle Ritual for Retirement," *Reconstructionist* (October-November, 1987), p.23.

service, hands are washed and dried fruits and other foods which gain sweetness as they age are eaten (after the blessing for fruit) and finally, the retiree (and his spouse) recite the "shechechianu" and the congregation sings "Bashanah Haba'ah."

This ceremony contains many of the rituals noted in the "Simchat Hochmah" and "Av/Eim Eitzah" ceremonies reviewed above (such as the blowing of the shofar, offering of symbolic gifts, certificate of new status in community, taking on of a new name, and partaking of food). But, like the ceremony proposed by Rabbi Joseph, this was not created by lay persons or a congregational committee who actually identified the need to mark this life passage, nor was it performed outside of the classroom setting in which it was created. Nonetheless, both ceremonies recognize that retirement is a time of major transition which is both joyous and sad and which deserves Jewish imprint.

A ceremony for entering a retirement home was developed by Rabbi Cary Kozberg for new residents of the Wexner Heritage Village. It consists of excerpts from Psalm 71, the "Shema and V'ahavta" (with the option of affixing a mezuzah to the doorpost), a reading for the new resident, a welcome from a staff member, the song "Eyli, eyli," and the priestly benediction (presumably offered by the rabbi). Liturgically, it offers prayers which will be very familiar to anyone who has some synagogue experience (or who may have learned prayers as a child). Affixing a mezuzah is an entirely appropriate ritual act for someone entering a new home and can certainly affirm the Jewishness of the resident's new dwelling. The Psalm and song may not be familiar to some, but have beautiful words and are meaningful expressions of the fears and hopes of someone going through the

transitions of aging. The readings for the new resident and staff member also address these concerns and give voice to the individual and communal challenges that may lie ahead. Finally, the priestly benediction is a lovely closure, I would imagine, because it gives the resident a real feeling of blessing--a comforting and empowering feeling at a time when there is much anxiety and change.

My sense is that this could be a very positive ceremony for new residents of retirement and nursing homes, but Rabbi Kozberg notes that he has had little opportunity to try it. Like those of Rabbi Joseph and Rabbi Fuchs-Kreimer, the ceremony is one he has identified as needed and important but has yet (at time of publishing) had little or no performative experience. (It may be useful to ask why these rituals were proposed but not carried out and why they were seemingly composed by rabbis without the input of people going through these retirement experiences.)

OTHER:

An intergenerational service was created by Reconstructionist Rabbinic student, Mychal Rosenbaum, entitled "Serving a Graying Jewish Community." It was designed to bring together (5th grade) children and residents of a local nursing home for a Kabbalat Shabbat service and Oneg Shabbat. One goal of the service experience was to help the children think and talk about their images and fears of aging. A second goal was to show the children ways of sharing Jewish experiences with elders. The service began: "We are all here to learn from each other, and to celebrate Shabbat together as the generations have done before us. . . " There were personal introductions, songs, and prayers. The children and elders were brought together both

ritually and liturgically through lighting candles (the child lit the candle first saying their own name and then the names of their new friends) and by saying a "Mi Shebeirach" (prayer for healing).[164] This service had a strong impact on all participants. The elders were moved by the presence of the children and the children learned that there are many aspects of aging. Some of the children were inspired to continue visiting the nursing home. This kind of service has great potential for compelling self-introspection as well as opening communication between the generations.

"A Grandparent's Prayer and Blessing" was composed by Rabbi Howard I. Bogot. It is a prayer primarily for Jewish continuity (through the grandchildren) but also expresses the grandparent's desire for insight and wisdom which can be passed on to others as a legacy. The prayer is as follows:

> Eloheinu Veilohei Avoteinu
> God of all generations, may our (my) grandchildren (grandchild)
> _____ bat _____
> _____ ben _____
> enjoy growing up as Jews who care about themselves, other Jews and all people (as a Jew who cares about herself/himself . . .).
>
> May we (I) be granted the insight that blossoms in old age, and the strength to share with _____
> the lessons we (I) have learned, living as Jews (a Jew).
> May their lives (her/his life) be filled with good health, justice, beauty, and peace.
>
> (Recited while embracing grandchildren/grandchild)
>
> God grant you days of discovery and years of fulfillment.
> God give you the wisdom to respect old age and pursue the future with excitement. Praised be God, Giver of Life.
> --Amen.[165]

[164] Mychal Rosenbaum, "Serving a Graying Jewish Community," written for course at R.R.C., June 1996.

[165] Rabbi Howard Bogot, "A Grandparent's Prayer and Blessing," *Journal of Aging and Judaism*, (Fall/Winter, 1986) p. 74.

A musical blessing, "Birkat Zkeinim: A New Prayer For Growing Old,"[166] was composed by Bonia Shur. The words are "Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam ha'ma'ashir shenot haz'keinim" ("Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe,who enriches the years of the aged.") I am not certain of the original impetus for the blessing or the source of the words but it is certainly an appropriate and lovely blessing to be shared in a variety of settings either musically or verbally. It is a wonderful model of something that follows a clear Jewish rubric and yet is simple, meaningful, and needed.

The concept of a second Bar/Bat Mitzvah at the age of 83 was discussed above. At the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, the woman who had her first Bat Mitzvah at the age of 82 inspired the creation of a Confirmation class to continue her own and other's learning of Torah and commitment to Judaism. In addition to required classes over the course of a year on Torah, Jewish values, and issues such as "Tikkun Olam," "Shemirat ha-Lashon--Jewish Values on Speech," the Ethics of Money, Intermarriage, War and Peace, and others, each student chose a mitzvah project and each student participated in the Confirmation service. Rabbi Friedman explained,

> I had always had the idea of a Jewish recommitment ceremony in old age. . . We have rites of passage for so many events in early life--circumcision, bar and bat mitzvah, weddings, the birth of children--but these stop. Now we've seen a tremendous expansion of the life span, so we need a new way of honoring and framing this unprecedented period of life. . . I realized confirmation could serve as a kind of rite of passage for some of our residents.[167]

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[166] Bonia Shur, "Birkat Z'keinim: A New Prayer for Growing Old," *Journal of Aging and Judaism*, (Fall/Winter, 1986) p. 75.

[167] Rabbi Dayle Friedman, ""For older Jews, a ceremony of celebration," (Article by David O'Reilly in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May, 1996), n.p.

A "senior citizen confirmation class" was also created at Temple B'nai Shalom in Deerfield Beach, Florida.[168] Although each person had different reasons for choosing confirmation, there was an attitude of "it's never too late to learn." Rabbi Alton Winters, himself age 75, found teaching the course particularly "thought-provoking" because of the wealth of life experience the students brought.

A ritual entitled "Hanukat Mitzvah Ceremony" was proposed by Dr. Carol Kasser. This ceremony would mark the culmination of a year of study for the frail elderly which would occur on the last night of Hanukkah (paralleling a rededication to study with the rededication of the Temple). The goal is to help participants find spiritually meaningful ways to express their Judaism and recognize they are useful contributing members of the Jewish community.[169]

In Barbara Myerhoff's landmark study of the elderly in Venice Beach, CA, she describes "learning" as a means, a strategy for appropriate social and spiritual action.[170] Learning was relevant throughout the many phases of life but, for the elders of the Senior Citizens' Center, it became an expression of the successful culmination of life. A group of elders at the Center took part in a Yiddish History Class. At the end of the year of study, a Graduation-Siyum took place. This ritual was both secular (the termination of a course of study within an educational institution) and sacred (the Hebrew word for "completion," a traditional Ashkenazic ceremony marking the end of a

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[168] Beth M. Gilbert, "Senior Citizen Confirmation Class," *Reform Judaism* (Winter, 1996), p. 75.

[169] Dr. Carol Kasser, "Hanukat Mitzvah Proposal." This ritual was written as part of a class on aging at RRC in May, 1995. The author explained that she is currently in the process of expanding the ritual for further use.

[170] Barbara Myerhoff, *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 144.

course of self-assigned study of a Jewish sacred text). The graduating elders wore their finest clothes beneath blue and white satin banners crossed from shoulder to waist. Representatives from various Jewish organizations, the Center director, and the class teacher made presentations as well as members of the class. Along with poems, speeches, songs, and other "ritualistic" elements, the following comments were made:

> You are our parents and we honor you today. You are the people who gave the world, by your efforts, the finest doctors, scientists, professors, artists and musicians that have ever been seen. Your children have given you naches (pride and pleasure), and now it is the time for you, the parents, to give your children naches. . . How proud you must be of your parents and grandparents today. You can rejoice over them; it is your turn. . . Their lives have meaning and they are a model to us. . . Learning is lifelong. We Jews are the People of the Book. Study is the highest activity for any phase of life. Old and young, every Jew is supposed to study a little bit every day. Learning is what makes us stay young forever, so a real Jew is ageless.[171]

Clearly, learning and study can be important elements of the Jewish aging experience (as discussed in Chapters One and Two). But, even beyond the growing number of classes, elderhostels, and kallot being offered by synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, and other organizations, Myerhoff reminds us of the powerful nature of the ritual conclusion itself for the elders and those who attended the ceremony. "The very actions, the mounting of a major, complex event of consequence--public, sustained, original--gave them intense pleasure and satisfaction. For the time, they were what they said they were, despite the most pressing contrary realities. They were a community, a people agreeing on their past and present lives, individuals learning and

[171] Myerhoff, pp. 140-141.

growing, ageless and indomitable."[172] Just as study can continue to be a vital part of a Jew's life into old age, so too, it is important to celebrate, commemorate, and even create new rituals of faith.

CONCLUSION:

There is a gap in Jewish lifecycle rituals between the time of marriage and death. There are many life changes in this time period which individuals and communities have begun to mark through new and adapted rituals and liturgies. Because lifecycle rituals usually only occur once in a person's life, they are events which carry a special sense of sacredness and significance. Hence, such rituals must address the search for meaning and purpose in life by connecting the participants to the past, defining the present, and pointing to the future. There must be familiar symbols in order to ease what would otherwise be unfamiliar changes and, at the same time, an acknowledging of the shifts that have occurred. Ideally, there are three stages: before, middle, and after.[173] It is in the "middle" stage that the action of the ritual (and hence the transformation) occurs. Thus,". . . rituals help us to process the changes which are taking place in our lives and, in doing so, they enable us to move from one stage to another. This transition occurs by making use of symbols and symbolic actions which help us to connect to the sacred, that is, to ultimate reality and value, and find greater meaning in our lives."[174]

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[172] Myerhoff, p. 157.

[173] These stages are based on anthropologist Victor Turner's analysis of ritual and liminality as well as A van Gennup's analysis of rites of passage.

[174] Rabbi Stephanie Wolfe, *Crisis and Celebration: Creating and Adapting Jewish Rituals to Mark Our Lives* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati,1995), p. 17.

In the rituals and liturgies examined above, we saw how individuals and elderly communities marked the ongoing Jewish holidays and daily calendar as well as their personal entry into new life stages--of age, wisdom, health and physical change, retirement, anniversaries, change of residence, grandparenthood, and widowhood. Each of the creative services, rituals or readings analyzed had Jewish associations--be they biblical heroes, texts, historical context, symbols, ritual objects, songs, or blessings. Almost all of the rituals were created in part or in whole by the individual who desired to mark their life change. While rabbis were often noted as guides or facilitators, the efficacy of the ritual is sensed through the personal experiences brought by the individual creator. Although each ceremony is unique, I generally felt that any of these rituals could be used for others going through similar life transitions and, at the very least, the people who shared in the ritual would feel connected to the individual and the Jewish community. This is difficult to measure from the one-dimensional aspect of the words on paper, but from the personal letters I received and those ceremonies I was privileged to witness, I felt that these new ceremonies did strike the balance between the personal and communal, innovative and traditional ideal described by Rabbi Orenstein:

> The most compelling personal lifecycle rituals are those that draw the community in, as witnesses and as participants . . . A good personal ritual is felt vicariously by everyone present, and carries the feeling and the message that the Jewish people will be just a little bit different and more complete because the ritual took place. Ritual not only requires community, it can reinforce and even create it.[175]

For those who are aging and those defined by self or society as elders, the need to be connected to community is vital. The creation of new Jewish

[175] Orenstein, p. 371.

ceremonies which address the needs of the individual elder can provide this fundamental connection to the Jewish community. Leila Gal Berner, in her discussion of how the Jewish community presently responds to the "real-life needs" of its members, points out the following: "The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that 'To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven (3:1).' And yet so many of our 'seasons' are observed silently--unmarked and unaddressed by our liturgical tradition--because our tradition does not hear the silence."[176] There need not be silence for the seasons of middle and later adulthood; we have much to draw on from our tradition and our texts to help us give voice to the challenges, fears, joys, anxieties, achievements, and changes of our elder years. Indeed, as we have seen, the new rituals and liturgies assessed serve as a link between the individual and the community, and provide an opportunity for marking individual change and transformation.

It may be that it will take time for new "aging" rituals and liturgies to become commonly observed passages in the Jewish community. Like women or homosexuals or others who have had no voice in traditional Jewish ritual, elders must first come to a consciousness of the role Judaism can fulfill in their lives (and what is lacking in their experience) before they can identify and create new avenues of Jewish expression. Rabbis (and other clergy) can open the door to making Judaism a relevant and meaningful aspect of the aging experience by providing ritual and liturgical models such as those described above. (This phenomenon will be described in the next chapter in relation to my experience with the elders of Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo who dismissed the need for Jewish observances of aging transitions until I

[176] Berner (pp. 122-123), in Wolfe, pp. 113-114.

shared the ritual for being alone on Shabbat with them.)

In addition to rabbinic (or other professional) facilitation of new rituals, many new rituals have been (and will be) the result of individual initiative. The awareness of the new generation of elders who have witnessed and participated in the ritual and liturgical changes brought about by feminism, Jewish renewal, and other creative sources may inspire (and give permission to) individual elders to develop similar spiritual strategies for the later years of life.

I speculate that as the number of Jewish elders grows, the "silence" of the past will turn into songs, prayers, study groups, and ceremonies that reflect both the textual roots and the contemporary realities of aging. In this spirit, I offer a model in the following chapter for creating a liturgy of elder voices with the hope that, ultimately, those of us who work in the Jewish community will lead the way to creating new Jewish lifecycle passages that provide opportunities for elders to speak and be heard for themselves. When our elders can find their voice in new Jewish rituals and liturgies, they most likely will find a new (or renewed) sense of spiritual fulfillment and a connection to Jewish continuity.

Chapter Four: A Shabbat Ritual and a Sukkot Service for Elders

Rituals are "an assertion of continuity," in the words of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff. Ritual ties past, present, and future; the old with the new. Being a Jew, says Myerhoff, involves four kinds of continuity: social, personal life-historical, cultural and spiritual.[177] In this chapter I will propose two "creative" ceremonies of continuity that draw on the themes and texts of the first three chapters and bring together old with new, symbols with actions, prayers with purpose, young with aging: first, a ritual for those who are alone on Shabbat and, second, a Sukkot liturgy honoring elders in a congregational setting.

Both ceremonies are based in Jewish texts and traditions which are described at length in Chapter Two (particularly Jacob's blessing of his grandchildren in Genesis 48 and Qoheleth's interpretation of old age). In addition, I attempted to draw on the psychosocial experiences of aging defined in Chapter One.

Although I cannot presume to speak for elders and would insist that these rituals and services are only models for congregations (individuals, nursing homes, etc.) to use in preparation of their own liturgies, it is my hope that ceremonies of this nature will give elders a voice through our tradition as well as provide for them access to a place of honor, meaning, and joy in the Jewish community. If we can indeed mark the social, personal life-historical, cultural, and spiritual experiences of our elders, we can create a community which belongs to and embraces all ages.

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[177] Mildred Seltzer. *Responsum: A Voice from the Older Generation*, in *Lifecycles*, pp. 324-325

A Ritual and Blessing for People who are Alone on Shabbat

Introduction:

There is a basic assumption in Judaism that observance of holidays, rituals, and even prayer will take place in the context of community or family. It seems almost anathema to the celebration of Shabbat to consider how it might be observed as a single person. While it is important to consider creative ways we might bring people who are alone together (even via the inter-net!), the reality is that many Jews are not able to be in synagogues or with other Jews on a regular basis. A person who is alone--be s/he an elder, a college student, a widow/er, an adult living in an isolated community, a divorced parent whose children have moved away--may feel little incentive to "celebrate" in a vacuum. In fact, because the rituals themselves can serve as reminders of their aloneness, such observance can be painful and depressing. My goal in this project was to create rituals and blessings which would acknowledge and articulate one's connections to faith and community, so that even when we Jews are alone, we can still engage in Jewish ritual and feel connected, valued, worthy and included.

I originally began thinking about this ritual as one for grandparents who were separated from their children and/or grandchildren on Shabbat. I considered creating a blessing for them to say either over the telephone or simply to themselves for those in absentia. Then, I began to think about those who have no children or grandchildren. More and more images of people who are alone but long to give and receive blessings came into my mind. I wondered, how can we make Shabbat, a weekly reminder of the Jewish emphasis on family rituals and continuity, an opportunity for an individual Jew to affirm his/her connection to their ancestors, their people,

and their tradition--in ways that provide spiritual sustenance, blessing and hope.

I propose that the traditional Shabbat blessings for children based on Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Menasseh and the Priestly Blessing can provide a model for a "new" ritual for those who are alone on Shabbat--both for blessing of those who are not present and blessing for oneself. Jewish tradition provides many precedents for the expanded use and interpretation of these blessings as well as models for acknowledging individual lifestyles and experiences. The creation of the ritual and blessings which I offer are based on the precedents offered below.

Step One: You are not alone: a blessing for the individual.

People who are alone may think there are no Jewish paradigms for leading lives in contexts that are different from traditional family settings. This is not so. One such biblical role model is Joseph: his mother dies when he is young and he is abandoned by his brothers when he is a teenager. After he finally establishes a new life and a new family, he comes face to face with his brothers who do not recognize him and he must determine how to reconnect with his biological family. Joseph's father, Jacob, who lost his beloved wife and his most precious son, is also a model because he feels alone even though he still has family around him. The longed-for reunion of father and son results, ultimately, in the blessing which has become a standard tradition for parents to invoke upon their children on Shabbat. Such physical reunions may not be possible for all, but we can all connect with and receive blessing from a sense of "extended family"--those who are present in our hearts--loved ones, ancestors, the people Israel.

In Genesis 48 (as described in Chapter Two), Jacob is near death and he calls Joseph to him. Joseph brings his two sons, Ephraim and Menasseh, and Jacob offers to bless them. Curiously, he crosses his hands, placing his right hand on Ephraim's head and his left hand on Menasseh's head. Joseph tries to stop his father since it was customary for the eldest son (Menasseh, in this case) to receive the right hand for the blessing. But, Jacob says he is aware of what he is doing and that both will receive blessings, each in his own way. Laying his hands on the heads of the boys, he explains that now his grandsons have become like his sons; they are his posterity and the symbol of the continuation of Israel. The story demonstrates that it is both traditionally acceptable and appropriate to offer blessings in unique, personal ways.

Jacob's blessing has been expanded in other ways, too. The original blessing for sons in the name of Ephraim and Menasseh was adapted in a separate blessing to include daughters by invoking the names of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. A blessing in honor of the mother in the household was added on Shabbat through the recitation of "Eyshet Chayil." Some modern Jews now include a reading for the father figure (Psalm 112). These additions and emendations provide precedents for creating new, inclusive blessings.

Why use the blessing for children for adults? Of course, everyone is someone's child--and in Judaism, we consider ourselves directly linked to our ancestral parents as well. Ephraim and Menasseh are symbols of the strength it takes to maintain Jewish identity and connection when living in a non-Jewish culture; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah represent courage, the value of caring for others, and sisterhood (among many others)--all blessings we wish on ourselves as well as on any child.

Step Two: You are part of a people: a communal blessing.

The second part of the Shabbat blessing of children is the pronouncement of the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:22-27) which has also been adapted to many other settings over time. The benediction was traditionally uttered by the priests and asks God's blessing for protection, kindness, and peace. It is written in the singular, but the framework (vv. 23, 27) is in the plural. Ibn Ezra, following the rabbis, feels that the Priestly Blessing is a community blessing. He identifies it with the blessing recited by Aaron at the conclusion of the first public service after the consecration of the Tabernacle (Lev. 9:21-22). While the collective of Israel is clearly addressed, there is also a significant example of a priest blessing an individual in response to her specific need (I Sam 2:20).

Originally, the congregants listened silently to the blessing, but in the course of time they began to accompany it with the recitation of appropriate biblical quotations (Sot. 40a). Later, considerable magical power came to be ascribed to the Priestly Blessing; special prayers to God to turn bad dreams into blessings were inserted in some rites. Other prayers of kabbalistic origin were also added to those recited by the congregation. The blessing has been used in many ways for many different purposes. Today, the Priestly Blessing is said at weddings, B'nai Mitzvah, B'rith Milah/naming, conversions, and ordinations as well as at the Shabbat dinner table.

Step Three: The Blessing of Touch

Both Jacob's blessing and the Priestly Blessing include a physical aspect: Jacob crosses his arms and places a hand on the head of each child. The Priestly Blessing was traditionally recited by the priests with prayer shawls

drawn forward to cover their heads and their hands were stretched out at shoulder height with the palms facing forward. The hands touch at the thumbs with the first two fingers of each hand separated from the other two, forming a sort of fan. In many communities, the father draws his children to himself and covers them with his tallit. When blessing the children on Shabbat, it is customary for the parents to personalize their words with the touch of their hands, a hug or a kiss.

Conclusion:

Jewish tradition offers a ritual basis for giving blessings to children and others on Shabbat. These blessings are drawn from Torah and have been joined together for the occasion of Shabbat but also can be applied creatively to a variety of other settings. In their broadest scope, the blessings link God to ALL the people of Israel and clearly emphasize that God is the source of all blessings. Even though priests/rabbis or parents may serve as intermediaries, God is our resource, especially when we are "alone." Jacob's blessing connects loved ones across generational distance and experience. The Priestly Blessing asks, in God's name, that each person be blessed with posterity, material bounty, health, strength and peace. Each of these represent basic physical and spiritual values of well-being and wholeness that all human beings desire. In addition to the universal hopes expressed through the words, both blessings are personalized through the power of touch.

Based on these precedents and the perceived need to offer blessings for those who do not share in family or communal rituals, I propose that the traditional blessing can be offered in the following "new" ways:

--as a blessing for those who are not present

--as a blessing for self

How should the blessing be said?

I suggest using the same elements of touch offered in Jacob's blessing or the Priestly Blessing. One's own hands can be placed on the cheeks, over the eyes, on the shoulders, or one's arms can be crossed in a self-hug. A shawl or scarf or tallis could be placed over the head and drawn close--giving a feeling of intimacy and warmth. One could also have a special oil or perfume to anoint oneself; making the body feel sacred, special for Shabbat, adding fragrance which lightens the spirit, and creates a sense of sweetness on a day which is laden with sensual memories. In addition, the following blessing may be said prior to the Priestly Blessing:

A Blessing for ourselves:

Source of Life
As You blessed those who came before me
I ask for Your blessing now
May I be like Menasseh and Ephraim (Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Leah)
May I find their strength within me
Connecting me to my people Israel.

Lighting these candles, tasting this wine
May I remember the blessings I have received and those I still have to give
May I know that today has meaning and my life has worth
To me and to those who are part of me
In the loving circle of Shabbat peace.

A Blessing for those whom we wish to bless but who are not present:

Source of Life,
I ask Your blessing on those I love who are never far from my heart
May_____ be like Menasseh and Ephraim (Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Leah)
May they find their ancestors' strength within them
Connecting them to our people Israel.

Lighting these candles, tasting this wine
May I remember the blessings I have received and those I still have to give
May this day bring a renewed sense of wholeness and love
To me and those who are a part from me
As we join in the circle of Shabbat peace.

Y'varech'cha Adonai v'yishmarecha
Ya'er Adonai panav elecha v'yi'chuneka
Yisa Adonai panav elecha v'ya'sem l'cha shalom.*

*The Hebrew remains the same for either blessing but the English can be done either in first or second person.

For self: May God bless me and keep me!
May God deal kindly with me and graciously with me!
May God bestow favor upon me and grant me peace!**

For others: May God bless you and keep you!
May God deal kindly with you and graciously with you!
May God bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!**

** In The Jewish Publication Society's translation of Judges 4:17, Num. 25:12, and Isa. 54:10, "shalom" means not just peace but friendship ("beriti shalom and "berit shelomi" both mean "my covenant/promise of friendship").

The Harvest of Years: A Sukkot Celebration of Wisdom and Age

The liturgy I have created is to be used in a "congregational" setting (also adaptable for a nursing home, etc.) on the Shabbat of *chol hamoed* Sukkot. It could be used either in the evening or the morning and is intended to be used in place of a regular Torah service and sermon. Ideally, the service would be developed with a group of elders from the congregation who would have participated in study and preparation for this ceremony over a course of time. The basic service liturgy would be from the prayerbook which is most meaningful to the elders of the particular congregation--i.e. *The Union Prayerbook*, Silverman, etc. I initially planned to design an entire service, but after much thought, I decided that one of the most important aspects of worship is familiarity, especially for elders. In many synagogues,

the prayerbooks have changed radically over time and elders often deeply miss the liturgies and even the physical feel of the well-worn prayerbooks themselves. So, I began with the familiar and added a liturgical and ceremonial section to reflect the themes of the holiday and the celebration of the elders themselves.

I chose Sukkot because it seemed an appropriate Jewish holiday to mark the aging cycle of life. There are four aspects to the ceremony: a welcoming of "ushpizin" which includes not only the biblical ancestors but also the ancestors of the elders and the congregation; an inter-textual reading of Ecclesiastes and modern elder voices; an interpretive midrash of the Sukkot symbols representing aspects of age and wisdom; and a covenantal blessing between the elders and the congregation. Because congregants in each setting may have different needs, it would be possible to choose among the four aspects and to shorten or lengthen, as appropriate.

In my "model," I have provided some quotations drawn from the books and interviews of well-known older personalities. It would be my hope that these would be replaced in a congregational setting by the words of individual congregants (prepared in advance). Where I have offered one brief response, there may be several--corresponding to the words of Ecclesiastes, sharing reminiscences of the previous generations who have been "invited" into the sukkah, offering wisdom or blessings to their gathered family, friends, congregation.

My goal is twofold: first, to honor the elders of a congregation by showing them how important they are as part of the whole of Israel and the immediate congregational family and, second, to bring all ages together in a spiritual setting which emphasizes the interdependence and continuity of the

generations of the Jewish people. These goals are accomplished by giving elders a voice for their memories, wisdom, and blessings, by bringing and "binding" together the generations in prayer and through a mutual covenant with one another, and by drawing on the themes of the Jewish calendar and lifecycle (Sukkot as a time of "gathering the harvest" while recognizing the nearing of death; the lulav and etrog as symbols of the changing physical, emotional, and intellectual self; the sukkah itself representing the fragility and impermanence of life; the reading of Ecclesiastes, mythologized as the work of King Solomon in his old age--in recognition of the many paradoxes of life including its simultaneous vanity and pleasure; the anticipation of the covenant between God and the people of Israel that ultimately redemption will come and that God will provide a shelter of peace and hope).

My guides for creating this service were the real and internalized voices of those elders I have been privileged to work with in the past few years including those at the Wellspring/Evergreen Retirement Community in Cincinnati, the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, and members of Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo, New York. It was at Temple Beth Zion, in particular, that the idea for this service germinated in the course of a series of classes and workshops I conducted on "spirituality and aging."

In the beginning, most of the elders I met with could find little sense of connection between the Judaism of their youth and that which they now see in the synagogue. They mourned the loss of their prayerbook (UPB), the formality of the services, the authority of the rabbi whose voice boomed out the Priestly Benediction with arms raised high above his head. When I asked them what they considered to be the blessings of age, they shook their heads in disbelief. As we began to explore their earlier associations with Judaism,

the blessings began to pour out. They spoke of the past but also of the future--especially of grandchildren and the new generations. When I asked them to write about these blessings, or times when they felt "blessed," or what blessings/wisdom they would want to share with others, the floodgates opened. Many said they had never thought about their age or their experiences or their Judaism in these ways.

Similarly, when I spoke to them about rituals marking the aging process, they were dubious, but when I shared the ritual for being alone on Shabbat, there were tears and stories and ideas for other times that needed to be marked Jewishly. I learned that if I began with a model, they soon found ways to connect and to express their own needs, questions, and prayers.

This is the kind of experience I would hope a service "honoring" elders would encompass--not a one-shot event, but an opportunity for learning, sharing, connecting. The words of the elders could be preserved in a special book each year and kept in the library; certificates could be given acknowledging the accomplishments of "the crown of glory"; a role for elders in the congregation could be purposefully developed so that all ages could learn with and from one another as well as pray and celebrate together. Each congregation will have its own ideas in this regard, but the main agenda is to ensure that congregations reach out to, listen to, and include their elders. Who shall merit reward? Those who honor the aged.

Layout is done as simply as possible with written instructions provided in addition to visual cues. Paragraphs are indented (and noted "Leader" or "Congregation" or "Elder") for congregational and responsive readings. Sections are marked with capital letters and bold print and subsections (or instructions within a section) are also in capital letters. A large font is used

which means more pages of printing but greater ease of reading for elders. Italics are used only for Hebrew words to keep the print as clear as possible. It is possible that art work could be added but it would need to be very simple if included on the pages. I would be more inclined to have an artistic cover page with appropriate Sukkot/Harvest symbols.

In terms of aesthetics and setting of the service, my assumption is that it would be conducted in the sanctuary. However, I would want to have a sukkah constructed on the bimah which would be beautifully decorated with fall foliage, vegetables, etc. Elders would be invited to the bimah for the special section of the service and would stand (or sit) in the sukkah.

The only music in this special service I have suggested is Bonia Shur's "Birkat Z'keinim: A New Prayer for Growing Old" as a closing blessing, but I would encourage appropriate Sukkot and Shabbat music in the rest of the service, as well.

The Harvest of Years: A Sukkot Celebration of Wisdom and Age

USHPIZIN--GUESTS

Leader:

There is a custom of inviting *ushpizin*--symbolic guests--to join us in the sukkah. In the mystical tradition, these honorary guests are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David as well as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Abigail, and Esther--one matriarch and one patriarch are invited each day of the festival. In addition to our biblical ancestors, tonight, we invite our elders to share the names of the generations who have walked before them. As members of our elder community speak of those they wish to invite into the sukkah, we can each recall the elders in our lives who live on is us through the life experiences, wisdom, and blessings they transmitted.

Congregation:

May it be Your will, our God and
God of our fathers and mothers,
to let Your presence dwell among us.
Spread over us the Sukkah of Your peace
as we, in awe and love, fulfill the mitzvah
of dwelling in the Sukkah.
Wrap us in the radiance of
Your pure and holy glory.
Let the stream of life flow around
and through us.

We have left the shelter of our houses and
built these fragile walls that we might recall
the desert wanderings of our people
and remember that You are our only protection.
Keep us alive, O God, and grant us a year
filled with your Blessings.

As You fed us and cared for us in the wilderness,
may we, too, provide for those who hunger
and thirst. Let us feel the mystical presence
of our ancestors as in their spirit
we invite guests into our Sukkah. (*Vetaheir Libenu*)

SHARING NAMES OF PAST GENERATIONS AND INVITING THEM INTO THE SUKKAH

Elder:

I, _____, remember the name of _____, my (mother, father . . .) and invite her/his presence through memory to join me as I enter the Sukkah.

READING OF QOHELETH

Leader:

On the Shabbat during Sukkot, we read from Qoheleth, the Book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes' message that worldly possessions

are vain and transitory resonates with the themes and imagery of Sukkot that our material belongings and our houses are not permanent nor are they the most valuable aspects of our lives.

Responsive reading:

Qoheleth envisions the world moving in cycles . . .

On Sukkot, *hag ha-asif* -- festival of the in-gathering-- we mark the beginning of the yearly calendar cycle and the end of the agricultural season and natural life cycle.

Qoheleth speaks of a time of harvesting and a time of rejoicing . . .

On Sukkot, *zeman simhateinu* -- the season of our rejoicing--we are reminded that there is a time to seek Atonement, and a time to praise pleasure for its own sake.

Qoheleth's feelings of cynicism and despair are said to reflect King Solomon in his old age, just as the ecstatic love poems in the Song of Songs reflect his youth . . .

On Sukkot, *heh-hag* -- the greatest festival of the biblical past and also of the messianic future--we pray that in spite of our fear of death and the frailty of our lives, we may hope for redemption and have faith in God's sheltering promise.

BLESSING BEFORE READING FROM ECCLESIASTES :

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu be'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al mikra megilah.

We praise Thee, O God, Sovereign of existence, who has hallowed our lives with commandments and commanded us to read this scroll.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam shechechiyanu v'kiyemanu v'higiyanu la'zman hazeh.

We praise Thee, Sovereign of existence, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to perform this Mitzvah in joy.

RESPONSIVE READING BETWEEN CONGREGATION AND ELDERS:

Congregation:

The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king of Jerusalem.
"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," said Qoheleth.
What profit has a man
From all his labor
Which he labors under the sun? (1:1-3)

Elder:

A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs.

Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*

One generation goes, and another generation comes;
But the earth abides forever.
The sun also rises and the sun goes down,
And hastens to the place
From where it rose. (1:4-5)

From Grandparents children learn to understand something about the reality of the world not only before they were born but also before their parents were born. . . Experience of the past gives them means of imaging the future.

Margaret Mead, *Family*

All rivers run to the sea,
But the sea is never full.

To the place from which the rivers come,
There they return again.
All things are wearisome;
No one can recount them. (1:7-8)

> A long life makes me feel nearer truth, yet it won't go into words, so how can I convey it? I can't, and I want to. I want to tell people approaching and perhaps fearing age that it is a time of discovery. If they say—"Of what?" I can only answer,"We must each find out for ourselves, otherwise it won't be discovery". I want to say—"If at the end of your life you have only yourself, it is much. Look, you will find. . . ."
>
> Florida Scott-Maxwell, *The Measure of My Days*

The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is that which will be.
What has been done
Is that which will be done again.
And there is nothing new under the sun. (1:8-9)

> There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, and to intellectual or creative work. . . . One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of friendship, indignation, compassion.
>
> Simone de Beauvoir, *Coming of Age*

I made great works for myself;
I built myself houses.
I planted vineyards for myself;
I made myself gardens and parks,
and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit.
I constructed for myself pools of water . . .
Also I had great possessions . . .

I withheld myself not from any pleasure,
for I derived great pleasure from all of my labor.
Then I looked on all the works that my hands had
accomplished, and on the labor which I had expended
in making them; and behold: all was vanity and a
striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun. . .
(2:4-11)

> When you cease to make a contribution, you begin to die. I think it is a necessity to be doing something which you feel is helpful in order to grow old gracefully and contentedly.
>
> Eleanor Roosevelt, *Letter to Mr. Horne,* February 19, 1960

Then I saw
That wisdom is better than folly,
Even as light is better than darkness. (2:13-15)

> Awareness is the compensation that age gives us in exchange for mere action. . . While everything else physical and mental seems to diminish, the appreciation of beauty is on the increase.
>
> Bernard Berenson, *Sunset and Twilight*

To everything there is a season,
And a time to every purpose under heaven.
A time to be born, and time to die;
A time to plant,
And a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and time to heal,
A time to break down, and time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance.
A time to cast away stones,
and a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace,
And a time to refrain from embracing.
A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to cast away.
A time to rend, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silent, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time for war, and a time for peace. (3:1-8)

> . . . old age is definitely a time of supreme paradox. It can offer the greatest challenges and the most exquisite personal rewards. Indeed, old age has a distinct meaning and value all its own. Only after many years of collecting and distilling the experiences of life can we possess wisdom to understand and forgive ourselves and others. Only in old age are we allowed the freedom or time to develop our inner resources to the fullest. Only when faced with the inevitable end of life, can we comprehend the meaning of the beginning.
>
> Margaret Fowler and Priscilla McCutcheon, *Songs of Experience*

Two are better than one; for they receive a good reward for their labor. For, if they fall, one can lift up his comrade. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, and has no one to lift him up. (4:9-10)

> The young people may think that we are unreasonably demanding. It seems to them that all our needs are met. We are comfortably housed, well fed, protected from hazards, provided with companionship and divertissements. What else do we need?
>
> Our greatest need is not met. It is one that we never outgrow. It is the need to feel cherished by someone--to know there is a place where we "belong." This is something that no retirement home, nursing home or hospital can provide. These institutions are staffed by dedicated people, but it is not their function to soothe our yearning hearts. The emotional strain would be too heavy.
>
> Polly Francis, *The Autumn of My Life*

Also, if two lie together, they have heat; but how can one get warm alone? (4:11)

> Literature has neglected the old and their emotions. The novelists never told us that in life, as in other matters, the young are just beginners and that the art of loving matures with age and experience.
>
> Isaac Bashevis Singer, Author's Note, *Old Love*

Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely
for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy himself in
return for his labor, in which he labors under the sun all
the days of his life. . . (5:17)

> If one is not to please oneself in old age, when is one to please oneself?
>
> Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent*

Let him remember the days of
his life--that they are not many, and that God fills his
time with joy of heart. (5:19)

> In aging we gain as well as lose. The autumn of human life, like the autumn of nature, can bring richness of beauty. It's a time when our spiritual forces seem to expand. A life of the heart and of the mind take over while our physical force ebbs away.
>
> Polly Francis, *The Autumn of My Life*

Who is a wise man?
And who knows the interpretation of a thing?
"A man's wisdom lights up his face,
And the harshness of his face is changed." (8:1)

> Now that the harvest is gathered, . . . your oar is no longer a driving force carrying you over the oceans of your inner and outer worlds, but a spirit of discriminating wisdom, separating moment by moment the wheat of life

from the chaff, so that you may know in both wheat and chaff their meaning and their value in the pattern of the universe.

Helen Lukes, *Old Age*

I returned, and saw under the sun,
that the race is not to the swift,
nor the battle to the strong,
nor bread to the wise,
nor even riches to those of understanding,
nor even favor to those of skill;
but time and chance happen to them all. (9:11)

Outwardly I am eighty-three years old, but inwardly I am every age, with the emotions and experiences of each period. The important thing is that at each age I am myself, just as you are yourself. During much of my life I was anxious to be what someone else wanted me to be. Now I have given up that struggle. I am what I am.

Elizabeth Coatsworth, Foreword from
Personal Geography: Almost an Autobiography

The end of the matter all having been heard;

What has happened has happened. The water
You once poured into the wine cannot be
Drained off again, but
Everything changes. You can make
A fresh start with your final breath.

Bertolt Brecht, "Everything Changes"

Revere God, and keep the commandments.
For this is the whole of humankind. (12:15)

For what is one rewarded with old age, if it is a reward? The hoary head is a crown of glory, it shall be found in the way of righteousness.

Proverbs, 16:31

THE FOUR SPECIES

Leader:

"On the first day (of Sukkot), you shall take the fruit of the *hadar* tree (etrog), the branches of the palm tree, boughs of leafy trees (myrtle branches) and willows of the brook and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God (at the Temple)." (Levit. 23:39-40, Ps. 90:17, 89:53).

In biblical times, the four species served as the thanksgiving offering of the harvest before God. Centuries later, the rabbis viewed the lulav and etrog also as symbols of the body which in turn are associated with character traits and values which we hope to nurture over a life time.

Congregation:

As we grow in years, may we be like the etrog, a fruit with both flavor and aroma, drawing physical and emotional life-experiences together in a heart of wisdom.

As we grow in years, may we be like the spine of the palm, strong and yet yielding, bearing the weight of life's challenges with courage and perseverance.

As we grow in years, may we be like the willow, with its long, thin leaves shaped like human lips, sharing words of kindness, compassion, and blessing with one another.

As we grow in years, may we be like the myrtle, resembling the eyes, seeing beyond the worst of the human capacity to inflict pain and destruction to the best of the human spirit to heal and sustain what is beautiful and joyous in the world.

The four species of Sukkot offer us a deeper vision. As we bind and bring them together, we remember that the divine presence is found in the interdependence of the branches and fruit making up the whole lulav. God is in the heart no matter how slowly or quickly it beats, in the spine no matter how straight or curved, in the lips no matter how easily they form

words or kisses, in the eyes no matter how clearly they see the external world. Binding the parts together, we discover the unity of the human life cycle and the reliance of one generation of the Jewish people on another.

As we are taught, "Just as birds cannot fly without wings, so Israel cannot stand without her elders." (Exodus Rabba 5)

NETILAT LULAV–WAVING THE LULAV

Leader:

The Hebrew numerical equivalent of lulav is 68, the same as for *chacham* (wise person) and for *hayyim* (life). Hence, the lulav is held in the right hand opposite the heart, in conformity with the biblical statement that "a wise person's heart tends toward the right hand" (Ecclesiastes 10:2).

We shake the lulav in all four directions as well as up and down to indicate that the divine presence knows no barriers of time or space.

BLESSING OVER THE LULAV:

I take lulav and etrog in remembrance of these words of Torah: "You shall take up for yourselves upon the first day [of Sukkot] the fruit of a goodly tree, branches of palm, leaves of myrtle, and willows of the brook." Holy be my thoughts, in token of the abundance of blessing that is mine from heaven and earth. With these four species, I reach out to the Source of all life, our God, whose dominion extends to all creation. Let the beauty of our Eternal God be with us, and may our work have lasting value.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al n'tilat lulav.

Praised be the Eternal our God, Ruler of the world, for mitzvot that make us holy and for the joy of this mitzvah: the waving of the lulav.

COVENANT BETWEEN ELDERS AND CONGREGATION

Elder:

In the presence of God, my congregation, family, and friends, I_____ fully choose and accept these gifts of age:

to cherish my older years
to live, not simply endure
to risk, not merely resign
to seek to "let go," but not to give up
to express pride in the way my body marks this gift of long life
to acknowledge its limitations and learn to live creatively and interdependently
to consciously and continually create family across the generations
to grace these times with a balance of reflection and activity
to preserve dignity and sense of self-worth in dependency
to use the gift of years to forgive the hurts of years
to show faith that in suffering and loss, blessings will come
to bear witness to meaning and purpose in aging.

Leader and Congregation:

As your congregational partners and family, we congratulate you and celebrate your years of wisdom and experience. We commit ourselves:

to cherish your aging years as blessings to us all
to fully embrace you into our congregation
to be extended family when needed
to be present in time of sorrow, pain, and loss
to be a fund of support with information and resources
to welcome your talents and experience and be willing students of your wisdom
to provide and join in your enjoyments and laughter
to enhance the spiritual life of our congregation by creating opportunities for sharing regular worship and prayers unique to your older years.

CLOSING BLESSING

Rabbi:

May God bless and protect you--
y'varech'cha Adonai v'yishmarecha.

Congregation:

You shall rise up before the hoary head and give honor to the face of the aged. (Levit. 19:32)

May God turn merciful eyes toward you--
ya'er Adonai panav ylecha v'yichuneka.

In old age the righteous still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness. (Psalms 92:15)

May God look toward you and grant you strength and peace--
yisa Adonai panav elecha v'yasem l'cha shalom.

With the aged is wisdom, and in length of days understanding. (Job 12:12)

May God bless our mutual commitment to one another from generation to generation.

The aged uphold all Israel. When does Israel stand? When they have elders. For anyone who takes advice from the aged will not fail. Therefore, give honor to the aged. (Exodus Rabbah 3)

Amen.

Song: "Birkat Z'keinim: A New Prayer for Growing Old"
By Bonia Shur

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam hama'ashir shenot haz'keinim.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who enriches the years of the aged.

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Note: All unmarked readings are original, created for the purpose of this service.

Conclusion

In Judaism, time is sacred. We mark the days, weeks, months, and years of our lives with blessings and rituals. Modern psychology affirms what our ancestors acknowledged long ago--as we pass from one life stage to another, we look for meaning and purpose in our existence. We want to feel that our lives are not "in vain." Ecclesiastes teaches that there is a time and season for everything. That may not seem true when we face losses and deaths and other difficult transitions in our lives. But many still long for and seek out a faith that will bring strength and comfort through the turns of the years. As people age, faith and religious observance become important tools in the process of integrating and coming to terms with a lifetime of experiences.

The Torah provides models of aging individuals who find new life and new beginnings even when this seems physically or emotionally impossible. The Prophets offer visions of an ideal society where old and young learn from one another, sharing dreams and skills. The psalmists and sages in the Writings describe the harsh realities and fears of growing old and, still, express the hope that elders will be respected for the length of their days regardless of the level of learning or success the person has achieved or retained.

Hebrew Scriptures and later rabbinic teachings recognize that the value of honoring elders was not always reflected in reality. We know that modernity also tends to devalue older people. So, in a time of a rapidly growing elderly population, what can we do, especially in our Jewish communities, to see and nurture the aging experience in positive and

meaningful ways? This thesis has proposed that one important response to the aging experience is through renewed faith and religious expression. Whether this is carried out in the form of traditional mitzvot or the creation of new rituals, there is a sense of Jewish continuity and spiritual transcendence in the deliberate marking of time.

New rituals mark time in sacred ways that have not been marked before. Through these prayers and rituals celebrating and commemorating the elder time of life, individuals feel they are part of the chain of Jewish generations. Perhaps, in this way, the seasons of age can be experienced as a time for exploration of the past, present, and future and a connection between the self, community, and God. As Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, "Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year."[178] Each stage of life has meaning and purpose if we are conscious of the ultimate significance of time. Thus, through as many or as few years as we shall number may we learn to honor all the times and ages of our lives.

[178] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), p. 8.

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