

OLD AGE: APPEARANCE AND REALITY

STEVEN M. REUBEN

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
New York, N. Y.

Date: March 5th, 1976

Advisor: Professor: Dr. Leonard Kravitz

OLD AGE: APPEARANCE & REALITY

Table Of Contents

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

Chapter I. Statement of The Problem

SECTION II: BIBLICAL ROOTS

Chapter II. Appearance - Positive Statements

Chapter III. Reality - Negative Statements

SECTION III: RABBINIC ATTITUDES - APPEARANCE

Chapter IV. Honor

Chapter V. Intrinsic Worth - Reward For The Righteous

Chapter VI. Wisdom

Chapter VII. Dignity and Authority

SECTION IV: RABBINIC ATTITUDES - REALITY

Chapter VIII. Physical Decay

Chapter IX. Social Undesireability

Chapter X. Mental Decline, Intrinsically Sad

Chapter XI. Sexual Loss, Loss of Livelihood

SECTION V: CONCLUSION

Chapter XII. Reflections

SECTION VI: BIBLIOGRAPHY BY CHAPTER, CATEGORY BREAKDOWN

SECTION I.

INTRODUCTION

There is a need for calm reflection and quiet, serious contemplation of the attitudes encouraged in today's society towards the aged. It must be the responsibility of Rabbis and Jewish leaders today, to delve into the wellsprings of traditional Jewish thought, the wisdom and counsel of the Talmud and Midrash, and rediscover ways of relating to the various problems of old age which are authentically Jewish. This study is a step in that direction. I have begun the process of reconnecting with the attitudes of our past, by presenting in as complete a presentation as possible, both the positive and negative attributes of old age, as expressed by the Rabbis.

There is a need today for a reexamination of traditional Jewish values as they relate to the aged. Does a study of our sources reveal a deep and abiding reverence for age, a sense of honor and respect for the one who has lived out his/her years beyond the traditional "years of strength?" (Psalm 90:10) The answer is clearly yes. Do we also find a certain sadness and melancholy that accompanies the onset of old age, a sense of social scorn at the physical decay and mental decline which the aged must endure? Again, the answer is yes. What then is the appearance, and what the reality of the Jewish attitude towards the aged? The response to this question, is the subject of this thesis.

The material for this study has been drawn from three main sources: Bible, Talmud, and Midrash. The Biblical material was studied as a means of providing both a background and a framework within which to better understand the Rabbinic material. Both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud were searched for appropriate Rabbinic material relating to this issue. My search for Midrashic treatments of both positive and

negative Rabbinic attitudes towards the aged led me to Midrash Rabbah, Midrash Hagadol, Tanhuma (Buber Ed.), Tanhuma (Warsaw Ed.) Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Mechilta, and Yalkut Shimoni. I have been limited in this study only by time and my own ability to discover and adequately interpret the texts.

The main body of this thesis is divided into three sections, each of which contains from two to four chapters. The first major section is entitled Biblical Roots, and contains one chapter on Appearance, and one on Reality. Appearance consists of the Biblical injunctions to honor and respect the aged, the prevalent Biblical view that with age came wisdom, and the concept of old age as a reward for properly fulfilling the mitzvot of God. Reality contains the negative statements regarding old age. In this section are presented the Biblical notion that the primary attribute of old age is physical decay, that along with this comes mental decline, loss of discernment, fear of the world around you, loss of sexual appetite and pleasure, mental depression and a goodly amount of social scorn and undesireability.

The second major section of this thesis is a presentation of the Rabbinic attitude towards old age, the appearance and reality as found in the Talmud and Midrash. Here too, the Appearance is presented first, with the various positive attributes of old age being listed and discussed in separate chapters according to the number of citations expressing a given opinion, from greatest to least. This section includes the Rabbinic notion that with old age should come honor, that age is a result of divine reward and therefore has intrinsic merit due to positive deeds performed in previous years, that with age comes wisdom, that the aged are

worthy of respect, that they possess dignity and authority, that there is a certain amount of privilege due the aged, and that age contains power to atone for earlier sins and transgressions.

After the discussion of the positive aspects of Rabbinic thought, we learn of the Reality of aging according to the Rabbis. We learn that the primary attribute of old age is in fact physical decay, much as it was for the Biblical writer. We discover that age contained a measure of social undesireability and scorn, that it included the rather unpleasant side-effects of mental decline, loss of livelihood, sexual loss, mental depression, and fear, as well as being intrinsically sad for a number of Rabbinic sources.

At the end of the study, we try to reach some overview of the Rabbinic attitudes towards the aged, and to draw some conclusions as to how these attitudes relate to the Jewish concerns of the modern era.

## SECTION II

### BIBLICAL ROOTS

## APPEARANCE

### Chapter II

The following two chapters outline the Biblical attitudes towards old age, the process of aging, and the aged. They bring to bear upon the issue thirty-eight citations from various books of the Bible. It is interesting to note that of the thirty-eight citations, twenty-six are positive and only twelve are negative. We shall see that it is impossible to isolate one particular attitude as being most representative of Biblical thought. However, the closest one could legitimately come to such a statement would be to maintain that the Bible generally speaking is much more expressive of the positive aspects of old age than of the negative. Furthermore as we are about to see, by far the most prevalent single concept within Biblical thought (as expressed in those writings which are preserved for us), is that old age is granted to an individual by God as a reward for the proper fulfillment of Mitzvot and Mishpatim.

#### APPEARANCE - LOOKING AT THE POSITIVE

Perhaps the best known of all Biblical pronouncements regarding old age, is that found in Psalm 90 verse 10. This verse has become the Biblical standard measure for the length of one's life, and against it all subsequent lives are measured; whether positive or negative. Psalm 90 verse 10 reads, "The span of our life is seventy years, or by reason of strength, eighty years." In this verse we are told that the normal length of a human life is seventy years. If this is the case, at what then does "old age" commence. Fortunately we are supplied the answer in Pirkay Avot at the end of chapter five where it says, "Sixty for old age, and seventy for grey hairs." (Avot 5:24)



From this passage in Avot, the sages determined the specific time of "old age," and that of "sayva", or "grey hairs" which coincides with the length of a normal lifetime, as expounded in Psalm 90.

We also find in this Psalm verse a positive statement regarding those who surpass in number of years the normal life expectancy. According to the psalmist, if one lives beyond the normal span of years, it is by reason of strength. In this statement then, we see what may be termed the "naturalistic" understanding of old age, for it is by virtue of physical strength and fortitude that one lives to see eighty years of age. In the Rabbinic period, we shall see how the Rabbis leave the realm of the naturalistic in favor of a more metaphysical explanation of longevity, which is also present in the Bible.

In short, we can use the time-span indicated in Psalm 90 verse 10, as the normative framework within which the rest of Biblical and subsequent Rabbinic statements regarding old age are included.

#### THE CONCEPT OF OLD AGE AS INTRINSICALLY GOOD - REWARD FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

The first use of the term sayva (which for our purposes is synonymous with "old Age") in the Bible is found in Genesis 15:15. Here we find God making a covenant with Abram, and describing to him what the future will bring for him and his descendants. After promising Abram that even at the old age he has already attained he will yet father a child who will be his heir, and that his descendants will be as numberless as the stars in the heavens, he tells Abram, "You will go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age (sayva tova)."

Here, the first use of the term sayva in the Bible is interestingly enough coupled with tova, good. Thus from the very outset of the Biblical narrative, the intrinsic value of old age is proclaimed; Old age and goodness

are linked together so that one can only understand that dying at an old age is indeed viewed as good. Although at first glance this may seem as an overstatement of the obvious (after all who wants to die young), one must not forget that this does indeed imply a certain, specific value judgment, that may not necessarily be universal, i.e. that attainment of old age is to be seen as a positive virtue. (See Genesis 25:8)

What is interesting to note (and we shall see that the Rabbis took note of this in the Talmud), is that the phrase "sayva tova," "good old age" is used exactly four times in the Bible, and with only three individuals. The first is Abram/Abraham, and we find that God does fulfill his promise in Genesis 25:8 where it is written "Then Abraham died in a good old age (sayva tova) and old man (zaken) and satisfied of years..."

The second use of this phrase is with Gideon, one of Israel's Judges whom the Bible holds in high regard. Of him it is written, "And Gideon the son of Yoash died in a good old age (sayva tova)..." (Judges 8:32). Once again, the Biblical writer refers to the death of someone who died at an old age in a positive vein. Here Israel has just enjoyed 40 years of peace and quiet under the wise counsel of Gideon, and the Bible rewards him by describing his death as at a "good old age." In this way the notion of old age as intrinsically good is reinforced.

The third occurrence of this term is found in relation to King David. Once again the reader senses a kind of spiritual reward being offered to a great Biblical personality. We are told "And he (David) died in a good old age (sayva tova), satisfied of days..." (1 Chronicles 29:28). Here as with Abraham, we are told that the individual died at a good old age, and furthermore was "satisfied of days." That is what both Abraham and David felt that their

lives had been complete, that their days had been satisfied, and they therefore died at a "good old age." The Biblical writer can be seen as using this phrase as a kind of reward, in that they were allowed to die at an old age (which is obviously a good thing), and on top of that were described as dying at a "good" old age.

In contrast to this notion, and in a sense as a foil to the positive concept of dying at a good old age, is the fear of Jacob found in Genesis 44:29. Jacob is in despair, worrying over the loss of his supposed only remaining beloved son. He says that should something evil befall him (Benjamin), he would be cast into deep sorrow, and be robbed of dying at a "good old age." Instead, he would die as it were, in "sorrowful old age." In verse 29 we read, "And if you take this (Benjamin) also from me and evil befall him, you shall bring down my grey hairs (sayvatee) with sorrow to the grave." In this passage we see the desire of Jacob to be numbered among those lucky enough to go down to the grave satisfied, as did Abraham his predecessor.

At this point one must ask the question, "For what is one rewarded with old age, if it is indeed a reward?" The answer is found most directly stated in Proverbs 16:31. Here it is written, "The hoary head (sayva) is a crown of glory, it shall be found in the way of righteousness." What do we learn from this? We learn that one is rewarded by God with old age, as a result of following the paths of righteousness in one's life. Old age is intrinsically good now, because it is a result of righteousness that one has reached it.

This identical thought is given expression at least six other times in the Bible. We find old age described as a divine reward in the midst of the giving of the Ten Commandments, when we learn that by fulfilling the precepts

of the fifth commandment, one can lengthen one's life on the earth. Honoring one's father and mother is presented to the people by Moses as one of the ways of increasing the life span - God will reward those who fulfill His mitzvot according to this concept, with the gift of longevity. Exodus 20:12 tells us, "Honor your father and your mother; that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God has given you."

This notion that it is through the fulfillment of God's mitzvot that brings about long life is echoed in numerous Biblical passages. In Deuteronomy 6:2, it says "That you might fear the Lord your God, to keep His statutes and commandments, which I command you, and your son, and your son's son, all the days of your life; and so that your days may be lengthened." This statement comes as a general prelude, or overview of what is to follow in the text. Directly after this suggestion that long life is the reward for those who follow God's mitzvot, comes the Shema and Veahavta, and a list of things that Israel is to do when entering the promised land. They are told here to specifically keep in mind at all times that if they do whatever it is that God commands them to do, they will increase their years, and lengthen their lives. This comes as a promise from God, to those who are present, and to their descendants as well ("your son and your son's son...").

We find the same thought expressed in regards to specific mitzvot that are described in the Bible, and not merely to the general category of "God's commandments." When God commands the Israelite not to take the mother bird with the baby, the promise of long life is again raised. "You shall definitely let the mother go free, and take (only) the young, that it may be well with you, and that you may lengthen your days." (Deuteronomy 22:7) God here promises

long life as a reward for the fulfillment of this very specific commandment.

Another example of long life as a reward for the fulfillment of specific commandments is found in Deuteronomy 25:15. Here the issue is one of social justice, and the welfare of the community at large seems to be at stake. The specific commandment is "You shall have a perfect and just weight, and a perfect and just measure shall you have; that your days may be lengthened in the land which the Lord your God gives you." Again, the concept seems to be clear, that God grants long life as a reward for the fulfillment of His commandments, which indicates that one who has attained long life did so as a reward from God.

Since it is certainly the case that the claim just made for longevity being a result of God rewarding one for fulfilling His mitzvot does not follow as a necessary conclusion of the foregoing examples, further proof is indeed necessary. Lest one say that although it may be the case that God grants old age to those who fulfill His commandments, it is not necessarily the case that those who do not carry out His mitzvot, and are therefore evil in the sight of the Lord, do not also reach old age, I offer as proof the words of Ecclesiastes 9:13: "But it will not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow because he fears not before God." Here we find the opposite side of the Biblical attitude alluded to previously, for it is clearly stated that the wicked who do not fulfill God's commandments will not be rewarded with old age, and will not have their days prolonged.

The last example of the expression of old age as an intrinsic good, is found in the prophetic vision of Isaiah. In it, the prophet looks forward to that messianic time when Jerusalem will be restored and the people of Israel will once again bask in the glory of God's favor. In the midst of this idyllic

scenario, during which the lamb and the lion are able to dwell together in peace and harmony, Isaiah tells us that as a result of God's beneficence "There shall be no more an infant of days, nor an old man that has not fulfilled his days." (Isaiah 65:20). The portrayal of a life in which each person lives into old age as representing the ultimate messianic time, is a clear indication of the intrinsic value of a long life, and its use as a reward for the deserving righteous in the mind of the Biblical writer.

#### THE AGED AS POSSESSORS OF WISDOM

The practice of equating age with wisdom is a well documented one in the ancient world. Within the Bible, we often find a juxtaposition of the terms "elder", "counsel", and "wisdom", which indicates that those who were of old age were consulted as advisors due to the wisdom that accompanied their age. The most direct statement of the Biblical concept is found in the book of Job. In chapter 12, verse 12, age and wisdom are inexorably bound together in the statement, "With the aged is wisdom, and in length of days understanding."

We find evidence of Kings and prophets who refer to the wisdom of the aged in various ways. In 1Kings 12:6, we learn that King Rehoboam followed in the footsteps of his father, King Solomon and took counsel with the old man in his court: "And King Rehoboam consulted with the old men (zekayneem) who had stood before Solomon his father." In this statement we find expression of the idea that age was equivalent with wisdom in the Biblical mind.

Further evidence for this mode of thinking is found in the book of Ezra. We are told of the edicts of Ezra to the people, which he issued in conjunction with the counsel of the princes and the elders, who were assumed to have wisdom and authority among the people. In Chapter 10 verse 8 we read: "And whoever would not come within three days (to Jerusalem), according to the counsel of

the princes and the elders (zekayneem) all his substance should be forfeited..."

The positive association of the aged with wisdom is evident in this description of the calamities that shall befall Israel from the mouth of Ezekiel (7:26): "Mischief shall come upon mischief, and rumor shall be rumor; then shall they seek wisdom of the prophet; but the law shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the aged (zekayneem). " In this passage, wisdom is again equated with the aged, for it is their normal place within the society to be looked upon for counsel and advice. It is only when society is experiencing a catastrophe, and the foundations upon which it is built are crumbling, will "law...perish from the priest, and counsel from the aged."

The final example of age and wisdom being linked together in Biblical thought is found in an exclamation from the Psalms. In Psalm 119:100, we find a statement that indicates that the aged and wisdom were so closely bound up together in the Biblical mind, that they could be used almost as a fixed literary device to demonstrate the psalmist's reward for zeal in following the precepts of the Lord; as it says, "I have gained more understanding than my elders..." which only makes sense against the supposition that with age normally comes the most wisdom. In this psalm, the writer tells us of his joy as being granted more understanding than even the zekayneem.

#### HONOR AND RESPECT ARE DUE THE AGED

The statement most often quoted from the Bible when referring to the respect and honor that one is enjoined to show to the aged, is that of Leviticus 19:32, which reads: "You shall rise up before the hoary head (Sayva), and give honor to the face of the aged." The mandatory acts of respect and honor that this statement suggests, give rise to an attitude among the ancients that the grey head of the aged is like a crown. In

Proverbs 20:29 it says, "The splendor of young men is their strength, and the crown of old men is their hoary head." This can only be a reference to the honor that is supposed to be shown the aged, as characterized by the commandment in Leviticus 19:32. One rises before the aged out of honor and respect, just as one would rise before the "crown" of state, whether it be king, prince or the President of today's society.

Another example of an exhortation to respect the aged, is the statement in Proverbs 23:22 that one should "Listen to your father that begot you, and do not mock your mother in her old age." This of course is a reflection of the commandment to honor one's father and mother (as discussed earlier), and also is indicative of the possibility (which will be discussed further on) that the aged were not always looked upon with honor, respect, and reverence, as the citations presented to now would have us believe.

We find in fact, that in the book of Job, there is a disappointment expressed over the discovery that not all those who have old age are necessarily wise. Although even here, in spite of the evident lack of wisdom, the concept of respect for the aged is still demonstrated: "Now Elihu had waited till Job had spoken for they were older than he...and he said, I am young and you are old, so I was afraid and didn't show you my opinion. I thought, "Days should speak, and many years should teach wisdom...but great men are not always wise, neither do the aged understand judgment." (Job 32:4-9).

Once again it is possible to understand the extent to which honor and respect were assumed to be due the aged in Biblical times can be demonstrated by how the lack of it is described. In three separate descriptions, we are told of periods in the people's history when evil shall reign over good, when Israel will be suffering at the hands of oppressors, and when anarchy, gloom and destruction shall pervade the land. In each of these descriptions the lack



of honor and respect paid the aged are described. In Deuteronomy 28:50 Moses paints a picture of an evil, fierce enemy, that is sent by God to attack Israel. To demonstrate how evil this enemy will be, he tells the people that they will not honor the aged, indicating that respect for the aged is a mark of civilization which these invaders will lack: "The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away...a nation of fierce countenance will shall not respect the face of the aged..."

When in a later era the people actually are attacked and carried away from their land by invaders, they lament to God of their awful situation, and how low they have been cast down. They tell God that they are mocked by their captors to the extent that the aged are not even honored: "Princes are hanged up by their hands; the faces of the aged were not honored" (Lamentations 5:12).

The final example of how central the idea of honoring the aged was to the minds of the people comes from a prophetic vision of Isaiah, in which he paints a gloomy picture of anarchy and destruction, which is epitomized by the acts of the young, who break away from the established order and mock the aged: "And the people will be oppressed, every one by another; the child will behave insolently against the aged..." (Isaiah 3:5).

An appropriate sentiment upon which to send this section of the study is given expression in Psalm 92:15. We have seen that there is a general attitude within the Bible that old age is a positive thing; that it comes as a result of having fulfilled the mitzvot of God; that one who attains old age can legitimately expect honor and respect from those around him, and that one of the outstanding attributes of old age is wisdom. It is undoubtedly pleasing to note, that there is one more quality of life enjoyed by the

righteous in their old age beyond wisdom, respect and honor; and that quality is virility. For in Psalm 92 we read, "In old age they (the righteous) still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness." (which for all we know might well contain a double entendre, but I won't go into that).

REALITY

## CHAPTER III

Although the mainstream of Biblical thought seems to lean in favor of a positive view of the aged, the realities of the human condition never escaped notice of the Biblical writer. "The metaphysical thought that gives rise to a promise of long life as a result of proper carrying out of the commandments of God, is still not quite spectacular enough to completely overshadow the nagging realities of the aging process. In this chapter, we will discover the ravages of physical decay, the depression that accompanies mental decline and sexual loss, and the fear of abandonment and social scorn that are part of the legacy of the aged.

PHYSICAL DECAY AND LOSS OF FACULTIES

Perhaps the most poignant description of the ravages of old age upon the body found in the Bible, is that of Barzillai who answers David's suggestion that he come with David to live in Jerusalem by saying: "I am today 80 years old: can I discern between good and evil? Can your servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Can I hear any more the voices of singing men and women? Should your servant any more be a burden to my lord the King?" (2Samuel 19:35).

In the above description, we are told of the loss of the senses that accompanies old age. Embodied in this statement is loss of sexual appetite, loss of taste and hearing, and the feeling that one is a burden to the world when one is aged. We are told of other instances of physical loss due to old age as well.

In genesis 27:1, we learn of the loss of sight: by Isaac as he grew old in life: "And it came to pass that when Isaac was old, and his eyes grew dim..." This physical loss is just one of the many that accompany old age. With

King David, we are told of another: "Now King David was old and stricken with years; and they covered him with clothes, but it did not warm him." Here we find that David was unable to generate enough body heat to keep himself warm due to the advanced condition of his age.

The most poetic, and perhaps the most enigmatic description as well, of the physical decline that accompanies old age, is found in the beginning of the last chapter of Ecclesiastes. In this classic Biblical description of the physical infirmities of old age, a metaphorical description of the end of one's life is pictured--when the body begins to fall apart, and the mind is filled with imaginary fears, so that the voice of a bird so startles one that it invokes dread, and walking itself becomes a burden. The description of Ecclesiastes 12:1-5 is

"Remember your creator in the days of your youth, while the evil days do not come, nor the years approach when you shall say, "I have no pleasure in them"...In the days when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows shall be darkened...and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird...Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way... and desire shall fail..."

#### MENTAL DECLINE OF THE AGED

Along with the vicissitudes of physical decay come the psychological pain of mental decline. When one is old, according to at least two Biblical sources, there is a loss of mental agility and clarity, and the understanding that is expected to be present fades into folly. In Job 12:20, Job mentions, as part of a long list of what God does in the natural order of the universe, that he causes the aged to lose the sharpness of mind. A normal part of God's manifold workings among humanity, is the mental decline that accompanies

old age. "He (God) removes the speech of the trustworthy, and takes away the understanding of the aged."

In Ecclesiastes too, we are given a clear implication that one of the normal results of aging is loss of mental agility. We are told that the king becomes foolish in old age and will no longer listen to the counsel of his advisors: "Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king who doesn't know how to be admonished any more." (Ecclesiastes 4:13). In this passage, contrary to what we learned in the previous chapter, along with old age comes loss of wisdom, loss of discernment, and the ability to act a fool.

#### FEAR OF ABANDONMENT, SEXUAL LOSS, AND MENTAL DESPRESSION

Along with physical decay and the decline of one's mental powers, comes a somewhat natural fear of being abandoned, and left upon one's own now limited resources. Not only fear of human abandonment is felt, but fear of being forsaken by God as well. In Psalm 71, twice the psalmist pleads with God not to forsake him in the hour of his old age: "You have let me experience it (God's beneficence) God, from my youth; until now I have proclaimed Your wondrous deeds...and even in hoary old age, do not forsake me, God." (Ps.71:17-18) And earlier in the psalm we hear the cry, "Do not cast me off in the time of my old age; forsake me not when my strength fails me." (Psalm 71:9). In this second verse we are struck by the note of urgency in the pleading to God, and the touch of sadness at the loss of strength that accompanies old age.

Within Jewish tradition it is Abraham and Sarah who epitomize the infinite possibilities of old age to transcend the bounds of mortal limitations. It is with Abraham and Sarah that we are at once introduced to the unpleasant reality that along with old age comes a loss of sexual arousal and potency, and the

pleasant abnormal "miracle" that allowed the two of them to give birth to Isaac. When Sarah hears that God has promised them a son, her reaction is disbelief: "And Sarah laughed within herself saying? "after I have become old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (Genesis 18:12). In this passage Sarah expresses the natural surprise of an old woman, long past the normal time of sexual arousal and pleasure, who has a husband already 100 years old, who is also past his sexual prime.

Further on in the story, when Sarah actually does conceive and give birth to Isaac, the miraculous nature of this event is amply given notice: "For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age...and Sarah said... who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? For I have given him a son in his old age!" (Genesis 21:2-7). Here Sarah again expresses natural wonder and amazement at the "miracle" that has occurred, allowing her to give birth at such an old age. The very fact that it was such an unusual event of course, is precisely that which gives it special significance in the Bible. It is clear that even within the ancient world of Sarah and Abraham, old age was synonymous with loss of virility and sexual potency. Here, it is the exception which clearly proves the rule. In fact as we shall see later in this study, the Rabbis of the Talmud went to great lengths to describe the numerous ways that Sarah and Abraham were able to "prove" to the world that they were the actual parents of Isaac. This they needed to do since it was unheard of to bear children at their age. (See Baba Metzia 87a).

We have ended this chapter as we did the previous one on the subject of virility in old age. It is in fact a rather typical paradigm for our purposes, for as with many of the characteristics that are assigned to the aged, we are presented with both a positive and a negative description. At the end of Chapter II, it was pointed out that the psalmist boldly declared that there was virility in old age, while we have just demonstrated that old age is characterized

by exactly the opposite, by loss of sexual potency. The possible solution to this seeming contradiction within the Bible lies in the Biblical (and later the Rabbinic) notion of divine reward. Within the Biblical frame of reference God is a power which acts in the world of human beings. God has the ability to prolong life and to shorten it, to bestow men and women with virility in their old age, in spite of all the normal and expected debilitating characteristics of old age. But this power of God's to cause the aged to possess the positive qualities described in Chapter II, is clearly a conditional one, and the condition is clearly spelled out. God grants long life, and the possibility of "miraculous" physical recovery from the onslaught of old age, as a reward to the righteous who faithfully carry out the mitzvot and mishpatim of the Lord. It is the result of this concept of divine reward, that is worked out here on earth while the recipient is still alive to enjoy it, that the seemingly contradictory statements concerning old age can be brought into harmony.

### SECTION III

#### RABBINIC ATTITUDES - APPEARANCE



## HONOR

### Chapter IV.

The concept of showing honor (Kavod) to the aged is the most prevalent obligation mentioned in Rabbinic sources. It takes its root in the Biblical injunction of Leviticus 19:32, "You shall rise up before the hoary head," and is given expression by numerous Rabbinic interpretations and discussions found in both Talmudic and Midrashic sources.

The origins of old age itself is attributed to Abraham, and is related by the Rabbis directly to the concept of honoring the aged. Abraham is credited with being the first individual on earth to take on the physical appearances of old age. According to the Midrash, he did so in order to facilitate the paying of honor to the aged (after all if no one looked old, how would you know who you were supposed to give honor to?) In Genesis Rabbah 65:9 the following discussion is held between Abraham and God: "Soverign of the Universe, when a man and his son enter a town none know whom to honor. But if you will crown the fathers with the appearance of old age, one will know whom to honor. Said the Holy One, blessed be He to him; "As you live, you have asked well, and old age will commence with you." (See San. 1076, B. Metzih 87a)

After Abraham was able to convince God to bestow upon humanity the appearances of old age, the Rabbis were able to discuss who exactly was meant by the commandment mentioned earlier of Leviticus 19:32. In Kiddushin 32b-33a the problem is raised of who to rise up for, and numerous answers are proposed. Within this discussion are raised the variety of definitions for the term "zaken" as well. For some it means strictly an old person, and for others it refers only to one who is both old and wise, i.e. a sage.

Our Rabbis taught: 'You shall rise up before the hoary head'--I might think even before an aged sinner (zaken ashmai), therefore it is said: 'and honor the face of an old man (zaken).' and zaken can only refer to a sage, for it is said: 'Gather unto me seventy men of the elders (mi-zeknay) of Israel (Num. 11:16)' (Kidd. 32b.)

In this part of the discussion, the Gemara equates "old age" with "sage", or "zaken" with "haham." Thus honor would be due one who is a sage, but not necessarily one who is merely old.

"Issi b. Judah said, 'You shall rise up before the hoary head' means even a hoary head." (Kidd.32b) Here Issi b. Judah seems to place wisdom as his primary consideration along with the previous passage, but goes farther in suggesting that also one who has attained old age but is not a sage is deserved of honor.

This is taken even farther by Rabbi Yohanan, for it is said of him:

'Rabbi Yohanan would rise up before the aged of the heathen saying, 'How many troubles have passed over them. 'Others did not go as far in this. Raba would not rise up, yet he showed them respect (he sent messengers to greet them in his behalf). Abbaye used to extend his hand to them for support. Rabbi Nahman sent his guardsmen..' (Kidd. 33a)

In this passage it seems obvious that the only relevant factor for showing honor is age. It could hardly be seen as wisdom, since it is doubtful that a heathen would be considered "wise" according to Rabbinic standards, or else he wouldn't be a heathen. It is also clear that according to the Rabbis mentioned here, there are various ways one can demonstrate honor towards an aged person, beyond the specifically enjoined "rising up." Raba showed honor by sending his emissaries to greet them: Abbaye would offer his physical support for them, and Rabbi Nahman would send his guardsmen to help them.

The issue of intent to perform mitzvot or to avoid performing them is brought up in this context. We are told of the importance of proper intention and are reminded of the significance placed by the Rabbis on the innermost thoughts of one's heart with respect to divine mitzvot. In Kiddushin 32 b we read, "You shall rise up;" one might think that one might shut his eyes when he passes, as if one hasn't seen him. This is a matter which is entrusted to the heart; that is why it says: 'You shall fear your God.' (Lev. 19:32)" "Fear of God" in the second half of the verse is linked to the "rise up" of the first half, to imply that God knows what is in your heart, and that your intentions can not be hidden from Him. Furthermore, they seem to be as important as your actions, for the implication is that one is judged equally for his intentions as for his actions.

A final note to this question is brought by Rabbi Meir in the Yerushalmi. In his statement is found a hint of a topic which will be dealt with further on with reference to old age, and that is the notion that with old age comes an inherent worth or merit, and that length of days is a reward for righteousness. It is written of Rabbi Meir; "Rabbi Meir would rise up even before an aged ignoramus saying, 'It is not for nothing that he has been allowed a long life.' (Yer. Bikkurim 3:3)." For him, old age alone was sufficient merit to warrant the giving of honor. And when is the proper time to rise up? According to Numbers Rabbah 16, it is when one is "within 4 cubits, a person is obligated to rise before an old man."

The Rabbis also deal with the question of how one shows honor to the aged. We have already seen how certain Rabbis demonstrated their respect and honor for the aged, either by rising up, extending a hand, or sending support through emissaries, but there are other specific ways that the Talmud and Midrash recommend as well. How does one honor an old man? "When one asks him a law, one must do so with reverence. One must not be hasty in replying to him, nor

break in upon his words." (Numbers Rabbah 15:17). Patience it seems is always a virtue, and especially with respect to old men. One shows honor to the aged by allowing them the time to think, speak and act, and by not contradicting their words. In fact, as we shall now see, contradicting the words of an elder can lead to a very grave retribution from God.

In Menahot 68b, a discussion is taking place concerning the law regarding fitness of offerings before the Omer. Rabbi Tarfon makes a statement, and Judah b. Nehemiah responds...

Rabbi Tarfon remained silent, and at once the face of Judah b. Nehemiah brightened with joy. Then Rabbi Akiba said to him, 'Judah, your face has brightened with joy because you have refuted the sage; I wonder whether you will live long.' Said Rabbi Judah b. Illai, 'This happened two weeks before Pesach, and when I came up for the Atzereth festival. I asked after Judah b. Nehemiah and was told that he had passed away.'

In this passage, the importance of showing proper honor and respect for the sages is dramatically portrayed, with the consequences for gloating over an intellectual victory resulting in nothing short of death.

The Rabbis not only give us an example of what can happen to an individual who fails to show the proper honor and respect to the aged, they also demonstrate the possible deleterious effects such an action could have on the entire people:

That is the meaning of the verse, 'Whose leaders are borne with. There is no breach and no going forth.' (Psalms 44:14). Rabbi Yohanan said: 'It is not written "who bear," but rather "who are borne." When the young bear with the old (accepting their orders and guidance) there is no breach, that is there is no breaking out of the plague, as it is said, "And the plague broke in upon them (Ps. 106:29)" "And no going forth," there is no going forth of the plague, as it is said, "And there came forth fire from before the Lord (Lev. 10:2)." "And no outcry," there is no outcry from the plague, as it is said, "And all Israel that were around about them fled at the cry of them. (Num. 16:34)" (Ruth Rabbah 9:6)

Thus from this Ruth Rabbah citation it is clear that the possible outcome of not showing honor and respect to the aged is a plague upon all of Israel.

The importance of showing honor to the aged, and of rising up before them is so great, that the Rabbis depict a time of utter confusion and turmoil, when the foundations of society as it had been known were shaken to the core, by describing the collapse of this honor: "Rabbi Eliezer the great says: 'On the day that the Temple was destroyed, youths put old men to shame, and the old stood up in the presence of the young. (Sotah 49b)."

The Talmud suggests other ways of showing honor to the aged: How does one honor an old man? "It means that one should not sit in the seat of an old man, or speak before he has spoken, or contradict him." (Kidd. 32b). Honoring the aged in the view of the Rabbis, most often is demonstrated in the setting of the academy, as is evident from the previous passage. The notion of not speaking before your elder is taken from a passage in Job, which we will deal with further on.

We are presented with a more earthy example of how one is to honor the aged in a comment of Rashi to Kiddushin 31b:

A certain man, a miller, had a father living with him at the time when all people not working for themselves were required to labor a certain number of days for the government. When it came near the time this service would be required of the old man, his son said to him: 'Go and labor for me in the mill, and I will go and work for the government, because those who work for the government are beaten if their work proves unsatisfactory. It is therefore better for me to run the chance of being beaten than to allow you to risk it.' Therefore such a son deserves the reward of a son who honors his father."

This is an example of a practical case where a son honors his aged father, and one which is used as an example of how to honor the aged.

There is another practical example of how the Rabbis expected honor to be shown the aged. In Baba Metzia 30b, the Gemara is commenting on Exodus 18:20 which says, "And you (Moses) shall teach them ordinances and laws, and shall show them the way in which they must walk, and the work that they must do." The Gemara says that the words "the work" refer to burying the dead. It then asks, "Isn't burying the dead already covered by 'the way' (which has already been equated with loving kindness, (g'meelut hasadeem))? They reply no, it is needed to refer to specifically to the 'old person' (zaken) and cannot be taken as referring to the honor owed any person. The implication here is that the Talmud wants to be clear that one is obligated to bury an old person regardless of his/her particular status as an individual in society. It is not according to rank, prestige or any other "artificial" quality--but merely due to the physical attribute of old age that one is entitled to the honor of the mitzva of kevurah, of burial.

In Bekorot 30b, the concept of honoring the aged is drawn upon to stop one Rabbi from slandering another in an argument. "Rabbi Judah said, 'His father (R. Hanina ben Antigonus) held scholars in contempt and he also holds scholars in contempt.' Rabbi Yossi replied to him; 'Let the honor of the elder (zaken) lie undisturbed in its place.' " Here, even in the heat of argument, one sage calls upon the other to respect and honor the dignity of his elder, in spite of his disagreement with how the other acted. The operating principle clearly is the honor due by right to the aged, and one can see that self restraint in the face of anger and disapproval is another way one can honor the aged.

In the Yerushalmi, Peah 1:3 we are told how to show honor to an aged mother: "What is meant by: 'And despise not your mother when she is old? (Proverbs 22:23)' Rabbi Z'era said: 'If your mother has grown old, stand by her and protect her.' " We shall see further on that one of the realities that afflicts

the aged is physical fear (which was mentioned in Chapter III), and so it makes good sense to direct the young to give protection to their parents when they reach old age.

There is a further example of how one is to show honor to the aged, which comes in a curious story found in Baba Metzia 60b. We are told of an aged slave and how Rabbi Papa b. Samuel is shown as giving him honor. The story is as follows:

It happened that a certain old slave painted his hair and beard so that he would appear younger and would be purchased. He was bought by Rabbi Papa b. Samuel. One day the slave said to Him, 'Give me some water to drink!' 'Hereupon he went and washed his head and beard white again, and said to him (Rabbi Papa b. Samuel), 'See, I am older than your father.' And Rabbi Papa read to himself the following verse (Proverbs 61:8), 'The righteous is delivered out of distress, and another comes in his place.'

In this curious tale, it is obvious that the slave was well aware that he could rely upon R. Papa to treat him kindly and with respect once he knew that the slave was actually an old man. He could therefore be so bold as to demand that the Rabbi bring him water (the slave giving orders to the master), knowing that honoring the aged was so much a part of the Rabbinic mores that he would suffer no retribution.

The Rabbis not only described how one was to show honor to the aged, they also made numerous statements regarding the importance of showing this honor, often equating the aged with some element of the divine, or even with the tablets of the covenant themselves. "Rabbi Judah said: 'Be careful to honor an old man who has forgotten his learning involuntarily (through the aging process), for we are told that both the second tablets and the fragments of the first tablets were placed in the ark of the covenant. (Berahot 8b).'" (See B.B. 14b).

In Sanhedrin 96a the honor due an elder who has forgotten his learning is equated with the significance of an halahic prescription regarding sheetah: "Rabbi Z'era said: 'Rabbi Judah b. Battria sent a message from Nisilus saying, 'Observe the respect due an elder who has forgotten his learning through a misfortune (such as illness); and be careful to cut the jugular veins in accordance with Rabbi Judah's ruling.'"

So far we have seen that an old man who has forgotten his learning is compared by the Rabbis first to the fragments of the first tablets of the covenant, and second to the importance of an halahic decision regarding sheetah. In the Yerushalmi, Moed Katan chapter 3, the comparison is carried to the holiness of the holy ark itself: "An old man (zaken) who has forgotten his learning from his own loss of senses, is to be treated with the same reverence (kedusha) as the holy ark itself."

Not only is there a comparison made between the aged, the tablets of the covenant and the ark, there is also a comparison between the day of the giving of the Torah, with the ordination of the elders. We find in Numbers Rabbah 16, that "Those young men (who were ordained) were called "elders" (zekayneem) to let you know that the day the elders were appointed (ordained) was precious before the Holy One blessed be He as the day of the giving of the Torah."

In an attempt to support the importance of showing honor to the aged, the Rabbis even called upon God, Moses, and Solomon, and declared that all of them enjoined us to show such honor. God is mentioned at least twice, as having shown through personal example that it is important to honor the aged. In exodus Rabbah 5, we are told, "Just as a fowl cannot fly without wings, so Israel cannot stand without elders. In many places we have learned



that the Holy One blessed be He has dispensed honor to the aged." And in Leviticus Rabbah 2 the same sentiment is expressed: "Not in one place and not in two have we found that the Holy One blessed be He dispensed honor to the aged, but rather in many places."

We find Moses used as an example of one who taught the importance of showing honor to the aged in the Mehilta to Yetro, 19: "'And Moses called to the elders of the people' is written to teach that Moses gave honor to the aged." And Solomon's wisdom is called upon to tell us of the importance of honoring the aged in Baba Batra 10b: They asked Solomon, 'Who will merit the world to come?' He said to them, 'All who show honor to their aged.'" With such an eminent group as this declaring the importance of giving honor to those whose lives have been blessed by an abundance of years, it is hardly necessary to mention the final source for the importance of honoring the aged, in which the honor shown them is equated to that due the Almighty Himself. In Genesis Rabbah 63:6, we have the following equation: "He who welcomes an old man is as if he welcomed the Sheeheenah." (See Midrash Hagadol Yoldot, 535 For Parallel Passage).

Within this chapter we have seen the importance attached to the honoring of the aged by the Rabbis. They often equated Age with Wisdom, and the cynical amongst us might suggest that they had themselves in mind when they came out so strongly in favor of this honor. But for whatever reason, and certainly the fact that the Holiness Code itself in Leviticus 19:32 clearly demands it is reason enough, the tradition of the Talmud and Midrash was to strongly proclaim "honor the aged," be they scholar or not.

INTRINSIC WORTH - REWARD FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

Chapter V.

"Rabbi Samuel b. Isaac said: 'The Holy One blessed be He said to Abraham: "It is my function to dispense love; since you have embraced my function, come and don my raiment." Hence, 'And Abraham was old, well stricken in age,' (Gen Rabbah 58:9)." In this passage, Rabbi Samuel b. Isaac introduces us to the very prevalent notion that old age is a reward, a gift from God. Old Age is not only often described as a reward for the righteous, but is couched in terms of actually being God-like. Here, we find God telling Abraham that he has been granted old age due to his quality of love which he has demonstrated in his life, and that old age itself is the "raiment" of God. This concept will reappear further on when the Rabbis comment on the reference made in Proverbs 20:29 to the old age being a "crown" for the aged. (See Chapter II).

The kavod shown to Abraham by the Rabbinic sources is great indeed, and his name is mentioned often with reference to old age as we have already seen. In Genesis Rabbah 59:6, we are told that Abraham's old age was a result of his merit, and that because of it, he merited both this world and the world to come. The Rabbis demonstrate this through a typical play on words: "'And Abraham was old (zaken),' zaken means: this man has acquired two worlds." Thus zaken is taken as zeh kanah, meaning "this man has acquired."

In Chapter II it was pointed out how both the commandment to honor one's parents and the mitzvah of not taking the mother bird with her young were both related to prolonging life. The Rabbis saw this phenomenon as well, and made the following comment in Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:2: "The honoring of parents is the very weightest (of mitzvot), and its reward is

long life, as it is said,

'Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long (Ex. 20:12),' and the sending away of the mother bird is the least weighty (i.e. the easiest to perform), and what is its reward? Length of days, as it is said, "you shall in any case let the mother bird go...that you may prolong your days.'"

And so the Rabbis compare the two instances of prolonging life to demonstrate that length of life is clearly a reward for the performance of mitzvot, and that it is not dependent upon the importance of the mitzvah, or whether it is difficult to perform or easy to perform. This is exemplified by warning in Pirkay Avot 2:1 which says, "Be careful in the case of a light mitzvah as in the case of a heavy mitzvah, for you do not know how the rewards for mitzvot are given." The essential element in the Deut. Rabbah passage is that long life is a reward for fulfilling mitzvot, both difficult and easy.

Pirkay Avot also contains a reference to the intrinsic worth of old age, and its status as a "crown of glory" from God as a reward for righteous: "Comeliness, strength, riches, honor, wisdom, old age, hoary age, and children becoming to the righteous and becoming to the world, as it is said: 'The hoary head is a crown of glory, it is found in the way of righteousness.' (Avot 6:8)."

The concept of old age as a reward from God for righteous behavior in life is further exemplified by the explanation given by Rabbi Adda b. Ahaba in Taanit 20b for his long life:

I have never displayed any impatience in my house and I have never walked in front of any man greater than myself, nor have I ever meditated (over Torah) in any dirty alleys, nor have I ever walked 4 cubits without musing over the Torah or without wearing Tefillin, nor have I ever fallen asleep in the Bait Midrash for any length of time or even momentarily, nor have I rejoiced at the disgrace of my friends, nor have I ever called my neighbor a nickname given to him by myself, or given to him by others.

Not only is it true for the Rabbis that the performance of mitzvot lengthens one's life, it is also true that by neglecting mitzvot one can shorten one's life. In Baba Batra 121b there is another example of the inherent merit of old age, and its relationship to study: "From that day (15th ou Av) onwards, he who adds (hours of study) will also add length of days and years, and he who does not add decreases his years." In this passage we are told that one who is old can be presumed to have done something positive to earn his longevity: especially since we are told that if one does not increase study, he will decrease his length of life.

An interesting anecdote concerning one Rabbi's amazement that it is possible to lengthen one's life outside the geographical boundaries of the land of Israel, is also revealing of the attitude that there is a positive relationship between prayer, piety, the performance of mitzvot and old age. It is written in Berachot 8a:

When they told Rabbi Yohanan that there were old men in Babylon, he showed astonishment and said: 'Why is it written, "That your days may be multiplied and the days of your children, upon the land (Deut. 11:21)" but not outside the land!' When they told him that they came early to the synagogue and left it late, he said: 'That is what keeps them. Even as Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi said to his children: "Come early to the synagogue and leave it late that you may live long."'

A further reinforcement to the connection between old age and proper prayer along with the proper maintenance of the relationship of the individual to the community can be detected in the following statement from Berachot 8b: "Rabbi Huna b. Judah says in the name of Rabbi Ammi: 'A man should always complete his parashot together with the congregation...for it one completes his parashot with the congregation, his days and years are prolonged!'"

There is a famous story about a discussion between Hadrian and an old man. It contains not so much a direct statement about old age, but rather expresses a particular Rabbinic attitude that is praiseworthy in the aged. It projects a picture of age with dignity and respect for the rhythm of the universe, the endless birth, death, and rebirth of God's creatures and creations. It also gives expression to the theme of age as a result of merit, for the old man says that the length of his life will be determined by whether or not he is "worthy."

The accursed Hadrian was once walking along the roads of Tiberias, when he saw an old man standing and cutting down shrubs to set plants. He said to him, 'Old man, old man, what is your age today?' He answered, 'I am a hundred.' The King said, 'You a hundred years old, and you stand cutting shrubs to set plants! Do you think you will eat of the fruit?' He replied, 'If I am worthy, I shall eat; if not, just as my forefathers toiled for me, so I shall toil for my children.' (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 2:20)

There are also times when the Rabbis comment about death, and at the same time are making a statement about the intrinsic value of old age. They use a couple of different metaphors to dramatize the importance of dying at the proper age. The proper age in these instances seems to be the fullness of years, since the context within which the Rabbis are commenting is based around the Scriptural statements about Abraham dying at a "good old age." In Genesis Rabbah 62:2 there is a discussion about one who dies in the fullness of age, and the following metaphor is presented: "What is the difference between the death of the young and that of the aged? Rabbi Judah said: 'When a lamp goes out of itself it is good for the lamp and good for the wick; but if not, it is bad for the lamp and bad for the wick.'" The image of the aged being compared to a lamp which goes out of itself is then further amplified by another metaphor presented by Rabbi Abbahu: "When a fig is gathered at the proper time,

it is good for the fig and for the tree; but if it is gathered prematurely, it is bad for the fig and bad for the tree."

As with many strongly felt positions of the Rabbis, there are those who disagree. In this instance, there are those who object to the notion that old age is a result of a reward from God for acts of righteousness. There are those who maintain that it is merely an accidental fate of one's personal history, or else that it is not oldness itself that has any virtue, but rather oldness when coupled with scholarship. The first idea is found in Moed Katan 28a, where it says "Raba said: 'Length of life, children and sustenance depend not on merit but rather on luck (mazal).'" (See Shab. 156a) And the second notion is presented by an unattributed Rabbinic source in Kinnim 3:15, which says 'Oldness itself is not seen as a virtue; wisdom and knowledge of Torah determine its value.'

The final concept found in Rabbinic sources that falls under the rubric of old age as containing intrinsic work, is that of the redeeming power of the aged for the people of Israel. It seems that the traditional concept of "zehut avot" of the "merit of the ancestors," which normally resides in the outstanding faith, diligence in performance, or loyalty to God displayed by such long-age ancestors as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has been brought closer to home to the point where it resides in part with those "ancestors," still living, whom we call the aged. In the Yalkut Shimoni to Isaiah, 526 we find, "And thus you find that the Holy One blessed be He forgives for the sake of one elder (zaken) against all of Israel." And in Exodus Rabbah 15 and 16, we find the following two statements of the relationship of the aged to the redemption of Israel:

"Thus said the Holy One blessed be He, 'There are no deeds that can redeem Israel except through the merit of the aged.'"

Why did the aged merit that Israel would be redeemed through them? The Holy One blessed be he said, 'See I will loosen (the strickness of the law) for the elders since they made Israel to believe in my name, but the elders accepted it (the full yoke of the commandments) first, and then pulled all of Israel after them.

The aged clearly hold a special place among the people, and the Rabbis have filled the Talmud and Midrash with statements that tell of the inherent merit and worth to be found in one who has attained old age. It is primarily the case, as we have seen, that old age is looked upon as a gift from God: a reward for a life that is filled with righteousness and a concern for the proper maintenance of God's mitzvot, whether they be strictly legal, or found in the interpersonal relationships that exist among people.

As a final note to the Rabbinic concept of the redemptive power of the aged, is a passage from Sukah 53a which claims that not only is old age redeeming for Israel, but it contains personal atonement power for the individual as well: "There are those who say, 'Happy was my youth that did not cause shame for my old age;' these are the pious and those of merit. And there are those who say, 'Happy is my old age, which atones for my youth.'"

WISDOM

## Chapter VI.

There are numerous qualities that the Rabbis felt accompanied old age. Primary among these qualities was that of wisdom. For as it is written in Berahot 39a, "If wisdom is not here, old age is not here." The equation of wisdom with old age was certainly based upon the factual reality that the Rabbis who wrote the Talmud and Midrash were engaged in intellectual pursuits, and represented the intellectual elite of their generation. It is therefore natural for them to look upon wisdom as a very positive virtue, and to make old age and wisdom practically dependant one upon the other within their system of values.

The wisdom of the aged as a result of the long years of worldly experience was a central Rabbinic theme. Even in the writings of Ben Sira (25:6) we find, "Long experience is the crown of the aged." This sentiment is echoed in the Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:3, which tells us "Do not have confidence in yourself until the time of your old age." The implication is clear that one needs to gather long years of experience in the world before wisdom can be gained.

The Rabbis went to the extent of playing on the word "zaken" in a classic statement which equates zaken with wisdom: "Rabbi Yossi the Galilean said: 'Zaken' means, he has acquired (zeh kanah) wisdom. For it is said: 'The Lord possessed me (i.e. wisdom) as the beginning of His way.' (Proverbs 8:22)." And since it is obvious that within the Rabbinic frame of reference, haham meaning 'sage' can only be equal to one who is wise, the following citation from Kiddushin 32b is as direct an equation of old age with wisdom as can be found: "Zaken only means haham." (ain zaken eleh haham).



Another example of how the Rabbis equated old age with wisdom is found in the statements which deal with the positive nature of seeking advice from, and learning under a zaken. In Deut. Rabbah 6:3 there is a description of what happens to one who has studied Torah when he attains old age. The rewards of old age in this context are significantly enough, the ability to serve as a teacher of the wisdom of the Torah to others: "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."

This sentiment is further amplified in another passage from the Midrash, which not only equates old with wisdom, but claims that all of Israel is supported or upheld by the presence of the aged. This is an echo of the sentiments expressed in the previous chapter about the redemptive qualities of the aged, and contains within it as well, an exhortation for the people to be aware of the importance of the aged, and to give them the honor that is their due. In Exodus Rabbah 3 we read, "The aged uphold all Israel. When does Israel stand? When they have old people. For anyone who takes advice from the aged will not fail: (therefore) dispense honor to the aged." (See Num. Rabbah 6:3 For Parallel Passage). In this passage it seems that the honor due the aged is a result of the wisdom that they possess, and of the good advice that they are able to impart to the people as a result of their wisdom.

The final example of the importance of studying with and learning from the aged, as opposed to one who has not attained old age, comes from Pirkay Avot. In it is expressed the opinion that age is wiser than youth, for like old wine, it has benefited from the mellowing effects of time and experience. Old age is therefore wisdom that is the result of proper ripeoning, and the recipient

of well seasoned experience. In Avot 4:26 is written: "Rabbi Yossi bar Yehudah of Chephar ha-Bayli said: 'He who learns from the young to what is he like? To one who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine from his wine-press. And he who learns from the old to what is he like? To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks old wine.'"

It is further belief of the Rabbis that the aged are better suited than the young to be members of the Sanhedrin, to pass judgments for the people, and to sit at sessions of study and legal decision making. This sentiment is found expressed in a number of Talmudic passages. With reference to this belief, the Talmud compares the young with the old in so far as fitness, or appropriateness for specific tasks is concerned. Its decision is that the young are best suited for those activities that involve or require physical strength and stamina for the best execution, and the old are best suited for those activities that rely upon wisdom, discernment and understanding.

An example of the above is found in Hagigah 14a, which compares the attributes of the young with the old:

One verse says, 'His raiment was as white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool (Daniel 7:9)' and elsewhere it is written, "His locks are curled and black as a raven (Song of Songs 5:2)' - there is no contradiction. One verse refers to God in session, and the other in war. For a Master said: "In session none is more fitting than an old man, and in war none is more fitting than a young man."

Here it is clear that the Rabbis feel that an old man is the most fit to be at sessions of study and legal judgment, as opposed to the necessity of having young men, filled with strength and vigor to fight wars. This is naturally a reinforcement of the notion that old age is equivalent to wisdom.

This equation of wisdom and fitness for judging with old age is further exemplified in the statement of Rabbi Yohanan in Sanhedrin 17a: "None are to be appointed members of the Sanhedrin, but men of stature, wisdom, good appearance, and old age." Since one of the requirements of being a member of the Sanhedrin was presumably old age, it seems to have represented a mark of stature and distinction. The importance of appearance with respect to wisdom and membership in the Sanhedrin is best exemplified by the "miracle" which occurred to Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah upon his appointment as head of the Academy. The description of the events surrounding his ascent to this position reveals the ingrained notion that age is equivalent to wisdom, and that one needed to have all the appearances of old age as a sign of personal maturity and stature.

She (his wife) said to him (Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah): 'You have no white hair.' He was 18 years old that day, and a miracle occurred for him, and 18 rows of hair turned white. That is why Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said (in the Mishnah) 'Behold, I am like 70 years old,' and did not say simply '70 years old.' (Berahot 28a).

The desire to be graced with the appearance of old age, that is with the white hairs of a sayva was not limited to Elazar ben Azariah. In Genesis Rabbah 59:3 we find that it is proper not only to be desirous of attaining old age, but of attaining the "raiment" that accompanies it as well:

'And even unto old age and hoary hairs, O God, forsake me not (Psalms 71:18)' Said Rabbi Aha: 'Are not old age and hoary hairs identical? But the meaning is this: If you have granted me old age, grant me hoary hairs, From whom do you learn this? From Abraham, because it is written of him: 'That they may keep the ways of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him. (Gen. 18:19)' - he attained old age.' (Genesis Rabbah 59:3)

The final example of the relationship between old age, wisdom, and the ability to sit as scholar and judge over Israel, is found in Rosh Hashanah 25a. In this passage, the term zaken is used to mean "judge" or "wise-one" and not merely "elder." It is a further example that authority was based on wisdom, which the Rabbis tried to equate with age as well:

'Then went up Moses and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel.' (Ex. 24:9) Why weren't the names of the elders mentioned? To show that every group of three that acted as a bait din over Israel is on a level with the bait din of Moses.

If we leave aside the political ramifications of this passage, we can still see in it, the relationship of age to authority and wisdom.

Beyond the specific attributes of the aged that the Rabbis claimed they possessed, such as wisdom, distinction, authority, and judgement, was a general positive attitude towards the aged as scholars, over those who were old without the benefit of scholarship. In Shabbat 152a, the difference between the aged scholar and the aged am ha-aretz, is simply put: "Untutored old men (zeknay am ha-aretz)--the older they get, the greater is their folly; scholarly old men (zeknay talmeday hahameem)--the older they get the steadier their minds." (See Kinim 3:6 For Parallel Passage).

A further illustration of the faith in the wisdom of the aged over the advice of the young is found in Megillah 31b. Once again there is no distinction between wise and foolish aged, it is the purpose of this passage to make it clear that if there is listening to the counsel of the aged over the young, the aged are vastly to be preferred: "If the old say 'tear down,' and the children 'build up' - tear down, for the 'destruction' of the old is

construction, and the 'construction' of the young, destruction."

(See also Nedarim 40a for parallel passage).

It is evident from the passages presented in this chapter, that the Rabbis held age as a premium, and equated it primarily with the attribute of wisdom. They counselled against following the advice of the young over the old, and declared that all of Israel itself was upheld only by the merit of the wisdom of the aged. Since the Rabbis themselves had strong political motives involved in any attempt to convince the people at large of the importance of wisdom and the following of the advice of the elders, the fact that they spoke so forcefully to this issue is naturally to be expected.

DIGNITY AND AUTHORITY

Chapter VII.

With old age one is supposedly the recipient of honor, the rewards of righteousness, and wisdom, as we have seen. As we shall now discover, the Rabbis distinguished the aged as being possessed with an intrinsic element of self worth and dignity as well. Dignity is a quality that is both accorded the aged and possessed by them. It is possible to have numerical age, mere length of days, and be void of the important quality of dignity that Judaism prizes. In Genesis Rabbah 69:6, the Rabbis discuss this possibility, and bring up Abraham as an example of one who possessed both:

Rabbi Aha said: 'Some have the dignity of old age without actual length of days, while others have years without the dignity of age; but in the case of Abraham the dignity of age corresponded to long life, and long life to the dignity of age, as it says: "And Abraham was old, well stricken in age."'

As Rabbi Aha said, it is possible for even those who have not attained length of days and years to be possessed with the dignity that is rightfully expected to be one of the characteristics of the aged, and the Rabbis did not describe ever aged person as being possessed with dignity.

The dignity of the aged is demonstrated by the use of the term "crown" with reference to certain of our ancestors:

These were crowned with old age and length of days, and were pre-eminent in their trials: Abraham, Joshua, and David. Abraham was the head of the Patriarchs. Joshua was the head of the royalty which came from the tribe of Ephraim...and David was the head of royalty which came from the tribe of Judah. Genesis Rabbah 59:6

The situation most often referred to when describing the dignity of the aged is that involving one who finds a lost thing while walking down the road, and the individual's obligation to try and find its original owner.

This issue is discussed both in the Mishnah and the Gemara in at least three different places. In Baba Metzia 30a we find the following:

'If one finds a sack or a basket, or any object which it is not dignified for him to take, he need not take it.' (Mishnah) This means if one was an old man, and it was inconsistent with his dignity (to lead a lost animal home for example)... there it is said, 'And you shall hide yourself.' (Deuteronomy 22:4)

It is clear from this discussion that certain things are beneath the dignity of the aged, and the Rabbis make an interesting use of the phrase in Deuteronomy about hiding oneself, to apply to this case.

A similar discussion is found based around the same verse from Deuteronomy in Sanhedrin 18b. Here, the issue involves both the inappropriateness of a Kohen in certain circumstances, and that of an old man in other circumstances:

But has it not been taught: 'And hide yourself from them'; there are times when you may hide yourself and there are times when you may not. How is that so? For example when the finder is a Kohen and it is in a graveyard; or an old man, and it is undignified for him...

Once again the issue is raised that there are simply certain things that are undignified for an old man to do, and therefore he is free from any obligation to do them. The same passage is found in Berahot 19b, and the same point is made again.

Old age has other advantages within the Rabbinic frame of values beyond those mentioned already. Among other things, it is a central pillar of the Rabbinic system, that age carries with it a certain fundamental authority that must be seriously taken into consideration when making, or attempting to change any decision. The fact that age does carry authority and takes precedence in certain instances, naturally causes a certain amount of disagreement

over exactly under what circumstances age is and is not a factor. In Baba Batra 119b-120a we are shown a glimpse of an obvious disagreement over when age does in fact take precedence: "Rabbi Ammi said: 'At a session priority is given to wisdom; at a festive gathering, age takes precedence.' Rabbi Ashi said: 'This (priority at a session to wisdom) only when one is distinguished (i.e. outstanding) in wisdom, and that (priority of age at a festive gathering) only when one is distinguished in old age.'"

In reference to the passage cited above, Rashi states, "If neither are distinguished, one should give priority to the old age; for the sake of a younger one who is a bit more wise, we should not embarrass the elder one, and the younger one would not be embarrassed to follow the older, since he would know that because of his age he is deserving of honor." It is clear that the general position expressed here is to favor honoring the dignity of the aged over the intellectual superiority of younger person. In fact, it is reasonable to assume in this instance that anyone connected with a session of study or judgment of law would certainly be wise, and the wisdom of the younger one is merely a matter of degree.

We find further instances where age is taken as a factor in accepting or rejecting an opinion. In Baitzah 27a, a younger sage is commended by having his opinion linked to that of an older sage, Rabbi Meir: "But these (the Rabbis who formed the Holy Congregation of Israel) are much older than he (Rabbi Simeon b. Menasah). Therefore they taught it according to the opinion of Rabbi Meir."

It was regular practice of the Rabbis to look to their elders for authority in such matters as proper ritual practice, opinions, minhagim, and



the like, as is clearly demonstrated by the following passage from Berahot 30a:

Rabbi Ashi used to say the tefillah while still with the congregation sitting, and when he returned home he used to say it again standing. The Rabbis said to him: 'Why does not the master do as Mar Zutra did (they collected 10 people on Shabbat before a festival, and say the tefillah, then go and deliver their lectures)?' He replied: 'That is a troublesome business.' 'Then let the master do like the father of Samuel and Levi (who said tefillah before dawn and then Shema);' He replied: 'I have not seen any of the Rabbis who were my seniors doing this.'

Rabbi Ashi refutes a suggestion of proper practice on the grounds that he hasn't seen any one of his elders do it--that is that he takes as authority in such matters the actions and opinions of his seniors. This is typical of standard Amoraic practice; to use older authorities as the basis of law and proper minhag. It is further proof of the weight of authority carried by those of age, even if the age factor is often quite relative.

A further example of age as a factor in accepting the legitimacy of a particular point of view can be found in Baba Batra 142b-143a. In this passage, one group of Rabbis calls upon their age to demonstrate that their opinions must be correct:

Rabbi Abbahu said to Rabbi Jeremiah: 'Is the law in accordance with our views or in accordance with yours?' He replied to him: 'It is obvious that the law is in accordance with our view because we are older than you, and that the law cannot be in accordance with your view because you are only Juniors.' The other retorted: 'Does the matter depend on age? Surely the matter depends on reason.' 'And what is the reason? (Asied R. Jeremiah)' 'Go to Rabbi Abin (replied R. Abbahu) to whom I have explained the matter at the college, and he expressed his approval.'

This passage is fascinating for two reasons. First because it appears as an attempt by a younger colleague to refute the notion that authority rests with age, and to substitute the notion that it should properly rest

with reason. And second, because at the same time that it appears that Rabbi Abbahu has in fact refuted the notion of authority resting with age, in his moment of supposed glory he calls upon Rabbi Jeremiah to go to Rabbi Abin for verification that his opinion is in fact correct, and Rabbi Abin is clearly an elder. Thus even in the midst of claiming the authority of reason over age, the younger Rabbi calls upon the authority of the older to prove he is correct. This surely is proof of the power of age within the Rabbinic system to wield authority, and the importance placed upon the words of the elders by the Rabbis in their discussions.

It is fitting to end this section of "appearances" on the authority of the aged over the young, for it was such authority that was the backbone of the entire Rabbinic system. Age for the Rabbis meant a variety of things. It meant honor and wisdom, it meant dignity and authority, but most of all it meant that one had been granted a heavenly reward here on earth. For no matter what else is ascribed to the aged, for the Rabbis the very fact that one had attained length of life was indication enough that God had not forsaken that individual. And the thrust of all Rabbinic teachings were to live a life of righteousness, and thereupon be rewarded in this world, with the gift of longevity.

SECTION IV.

RABBINIC ATTITUDES - REALITY

PHYSICAL DECAY

Chapter VIII.

Beyond the well meaning platitudes about the importance of showing honor and respect to the aged, about the wisdom that is theirs, the dignity they possess, the authority that they wield, and the sense of reward for a life of righteousness that is theirs to enjoy, is the cold, stark, unpleasant reality of old age which is the subject of this chapter: physical decay. There are more statements in Rabbinic literature, in the Talmud and Midrash about the frailties and physical decline of old age, than about any other single characteristic ever mentioned by the Rabbis. Throughout the writings of the Rabbis, the reality strikes home, that all the illusions of old age presented in the previous chapters are nought, when held up to the cold light of the reality of the physical infirmities that inflict the aged.

In Pirkay Avot 5:21, there is a list of the various stages of a person's life, and the corresponding life-activity that typifies each age:

At 5 years old, one is fit for Scripture, at 10 for the Mishna, at 13 to fulfill the Commandments, at 15 to study Talmud, at 18 for wedlock, at 20 for a calling, at 30 for office, at 40 for discernment, at 50 for counsel, at 60 to be an elder, at 70 for white hair, at 80 for vigor, at 90 for a bowed back... and at a hundred you are as one that had died and left this world.

The infirmities of old age are less than pleasant, and the Rabbis were concerned a great deal about them. They also used the fact that when one was old he/she suffered from certain physical disabilities to serve as a factor in determining from when to count "old age." In Hullin 24b we find the following determination:

"Until he grows old," when is this? Rabbi Ila'a said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: 'Until he begins to tremble...' How long is one regarded as young and healthy? Rabbi Ila'a said in the name of Rabbi Hanina, 'As long as one is able to stand on one foot and put on and off his shoe.' It was said of Rabbi Hanina that at the age of 80 years he was able to stand on one foot and put on and take off his shoes while standing on one foot. Rabbi Hanina said: 'The warm baths and the oil which my mother applied on me in my childhood have protected me in the time of my old age.'

Rav Hanina is the exception that proves the rule. The very fact that his agility at age 80 was indeed noteworthy is proof that what was considered normal for that age was loss of physical prowess and mobility. It is also interesting to note, that the very definition of "old age" and its opposite of "young and healthy" was proposed by Rav Hanina who himself could qualify for the obviously more desirable category of "young and healthy," according to his own definition.

The loss of faculties that accompanied old age was a great worry to the Rabbis, as one would expect. Since it is only reasonable to assume that the Rabbis each expected to live a long life, being that they were righteous people, and that righteousness within their system was rewarded with longevity, they must have been concerned about what their life would be like when they reached those "years of strength" and beyond. And so they interpreted scriptural passages with an eye towards their old age, and the implications that the Bible held for them. In the Tanhuma, Miketz: 10, Rabbi Abba interprets the verse "For this let every one that is godly pray unto You in a time when You may be found" (Psalms 32:6) in the following 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!'"

"In old age, all powers fail." This is the theme of this chapter, and a constantly recurring one for the Rabbis. The greatest source for interpretations concerning the failing powers of the human body in old age, is to be found in the plentiful interpretations of the first six verses of the last chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes itself was ripe with material on age and the aged, and the Rabbis were even able to utilize the uses of the word "vanities" to describe the cycles of a man's life, and the condition of the aged:

The seven "vanities" mentioned in Ecclesiastes correspond to the seven 'worlds' which a man beholds. At a year old he is like a king seated in a canopied litter, fondled and kissed by all. At 2 and 3 he is like a pig, sticking his hands in the gutter. At 10 he skips like a kid. At 20 he is like a neighing horse, adorning his person and longing for a wife. Having married, he is like an ass, working hard for his livelihood. When he has begotten children, he grows brazen like a dog to supply their food and wants. When he has become old, he is bent like an ape. (Ecc.Rabbah 1:3)

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:1 introduces the relationship between chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes and the infirmities of old age. It interprets the opening words of the chapter as referring to old age, and allows the rest of the verses to thereafter be linked with specific physical problems of the aged. "'Remember then your creator in the days of your youth,' while in possession of your strength, 'before the evil days come' that is, the days of old age: 'and the years draw nigh,' that is, the time of suffering."

Now that we have been introduced to the notion that "old age" is equated with "suffering," we can delve more deeply into the interpretations of these first 6 verses of chapter 12. In shabbat 151b we are given the following additional interpretations:

'Before the sun and light...are darkened'  
 This refers to the forehead and the nose: 'and  
 the moon,' this is the soul: 'and the stars,'  
 these are the cheeks: 'and the clouds...after  
 the rain,' this is the light of a man's eyes  
 which is lost after weeping.

The Rabbis continue to carry out this line of interpretation of the text,  
 so that each line in the chapter that is discussed, is equated with one  
 or another possible physical ailment or weakness. The discussion is  
 continued on Shabbat 152a, and the interpretations continue in the same vein:

'In the days when the keepers of house shall  
 tremble;' these are the sides and the ribs;  
 'and the strong men shall bow themselves,' the  
 legs; 'and the grinders cease because they are  
 few,' the teeth; 'and those that look out shall  
 be darkened in the windows,' the eyes.

This can only be seen as a description of the physical decay that accompanies  
 the process of aging, and undoubtedly the Rabbis who were writing these words,  
 were relying on their own personal experiences. On the same dof of the Talmud  
 (Shabbat 152a), there is a further explanation of this chapter:

'And the doors shall be shut in the street,'  
 this refers to the orifices of man: 'when the  
 sound of the grinding is low,' on account of  
 the stomach's failure to digest; 'and one shall  
 start at the voice of a bird,' even a bird will  
 awaken him from sleep; 'and all the daughters of  
 music shall be brought low,' even the voices of  
 male and female singers sound like a whisper to  
 him.

This list of infirmities seems to include such things as kidney trouble,  
 constipation, digestive failure, insomnia, deafness, and physical fear brought  
 about by the chirping of birds which the aged imagine is the sound of bandits  
 coming to rob them. (See Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:4 for parellel).

The rabbis also use the imagery of this chapter to describe the physical

deformities that characterize old age. In Shabbat 52a, verse 5 of the last chapter of Ecclesiastes is interpreted in the following manner: "'And the almond tree shall blossom;' that refers to the nut of the spinal column which becomes dislocated and protrudes in old age; 'and the grasshopper shall drag itself along;' the rump."

The imagery of this chapter became so ingrained in the Rabbinic mind, that Rabbi Yehoshuah b. Hanania made use of it without specifically referring to it, and his physical description of the aged was quite graphic: "The mountain is snowy, it is surrounded by ice, the dog doesn't bark, and the grinders don't grind." (Shabbat 152a) Here we have a description of hair and beard that have turned white, the voice which has become inaudible, and the teeth which can no longer function properly and chew, once old age has struck.

The Rabbis also found within this verse descriptions of the lack of physical strength of the aged, and the fear that was perpetually in their minds. In Ecc. Rabbah 12:5, the frailty and degeneration of the aged is described like this:

'Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high:' when they call an old to a place (invite him to a banquet), he says to them, 'are there ups and downs (in the way to it)?' 'And terrors shall be in the way:' Rabbi Abba b. Hahana and Rabbi Levi comment: one said, 'Fear of the journey falls upon his and he asks, "Shall I go or not go?" and decides not to go; the other said, 'He begins to map out the way there, saying, "As far as that street and that place I am strong enough to go, but up to the place (where the banquet is to be held) I will not have the strength to go."

The combination of fear and lack of physical strength to adequately negotiate walking over rough ground seems to have a serious problem with the aged. The problem of fear itself, which is in part indicative of a lack



of respect for the person of the aged within society is dramatically portrayed by Elazar b. Prata in Avodah Zarah 17b:

Why didn't you visit the house of study?' He answered, 'I am too old and feared perhaps I would be trampled down under the feet of the crowd.'

The problem of the physical frailty of the aged preventing them from walking in certain places is taken in a different direction in Erubin 56a, where we are told that difficult terrain itself is responsible for aging people before their time:

Rabbi Yehuda in the name of Rav said, 'In a town that is hilly and has slopes and valleys, both men and cattle die young.' Will die? How can you believe so? But say rather they will become old prematurely. Rav Huna the son of Rabbi Yehoshua said: 'Those hills between the cities of Bay-Biri and Bay-Nari made me old prematurely.'

From this alone it is clear that the Rabbis recognized the deleterious effects of physical strain upon the body, and felt that too much walking up and down hills and valleys could cause a person to grow old prematurely.

The fact that the aged were seen in a sort of adversary relationship with the land itself is evident from this most poignant statement from the Yerusahalmi, Baitzah 1, which says, "Stones which we sat on in our youth, make war against us in our old age."

A decided loss of physical control over the bodily functions was also noted by the Rabbis. The first 6 verses of chapter 12 of the Ecclesiastes are again brought forth to serve as the basis of this description, found in Leviticus Rabbah 18:1:

"Rabbi Levi said, 'As applied to scholars it (Ecc. 121-6) means: when in old age one wants to weep, his eyes overflow with tears: 'as applied to ignoramouses his explanation was: 'When in old age one wishes to pass water, the excretion of faeces takes place first.'

Colorful as this description may be, it does give expression to the real problem of loss of physical dexterity and bodily control that afflicts the aged.

As we have seen in previous chapters, one of the foremost physical marks of old age is the changes that occur to one's hair. When an aged slave wanted to hide the fact that he was old, he died his hair to remove the whiteness. Of course the Rabbis have an appropriate remark for even this type of cosmetic deception: "When old men dye their beards, they grow white again at the roots." (Nazir 39b). This is not only a physical description, but a philosophical statement as well. The Rabbis are saying that the realities of one's existence, as exemplified by a condition of old age, can not be altered merely by changing the external appearances of the condition; for the roots that comprise its fundamental substance will remain and reappear.

Old age carries with it more than merely the problem of one's hair turning white, for along with it is the ever-present loss of the hair itself. In fact, in Nazir 59a, we are told that it is not the hair on ones head or beard alone that is affected by the process of aging: "The Rabbis said to Rabbi Shimon b. Abba: 'We have seen that Rabbi Yohanan has no hair in his armpits.' Rabbi Shimon said to them: 'It has fallen out because of his old age.'" If nothing else, this shows that no part of the anatomy is safe from the ravages of age.

In Chapter III we read of Barzillai the Gileadite, and his description of the physical decay that had accompanied his old age.

The Rabbis utilized this description to make further commentary on the physical and mental state of the aged, as well as making a point against lewdness:

'And this too did Barzillai the Gileadite say to David: I am this day 80 years old; can I discern between good and bad?' This shows that the opinions of the old men are changeable. 'Can your servant taste what I eat or what I drink?' This shows that the lips of old men go slack, and they can't enjoy the taste of food. 'Can I hear anymore the voice of singing men and singing women?' This proves that old men are hard of hearing. Rav said: 'Barzillai the Gileadite was a liar.' For there was a servant in Rav's house, 92 years old, who could taste the dishes served there. Raba said: 'Barzillai the Gileadite was steeped in lewdness, and whoever is steeped in lewdness, old age hastens upon him.'  
(Shabbat 152a)

This passage reinforces the notion that along with old age comes numerous physical and mental problems. It also suggests that these come prematurely to the unworthy.

Taste, as we have seen, was one of the often mentioned problems of old age. Barzillai claimed to have lost it, and Rav's servant was outstanding for his continued ability to do it. In Yoma 75a, there is a discussion of the manna that dropped from heaven, and what it actually tasted like. Within this discussion, an understanding of how the constitution of the aged was seen, and the problems involved with the sense of taste are exposed. The Rabbis decide that the young were able to eat the manna as if it were bread, but for the aged, it was necessary for it to have the taste of oil--a rather therapeutic meal: "It is written, 'the manna had the taste of bread, oil, and honey.' What does this mean? For the young it tasted like bread, for the old, the taste was of oil, and for the children, the taste was of honey."

The problem of taste that affected the aged seems to have been widely

accepted. In fact, in Ketuyoth 111b an explanation of a verse from Genesis is given which seems to have the express purpose of refuting the popular fold allegation that the aged can not taste. At least in this case, the issue is over wine, so there may have been more at stake for the Rabbis who wrote it:

'His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk (Gen 49:12)' And since you might say that the wine is suitable for one who is young but unsuitable for one who is old, it was explicitly stated: 'and his teeth white with milk.' Read not 'teeth white' (l'ben shinaim), but 'to him who is advanced in years' (l'ben shanim).

When one is old, youth seems to be all the more fanciful and attractive. The Rabbis associated strength and physical health with youth, and weakness and physical frailty with old age. They compared youth to things beautiful and light, and old age to things staid and heavy. Such a description is found in Shabbat 152a, which reads, "youth is a crown of roses, and old age a crown of heavy willow rods."

The problems of physical frailty that afflict the aged were taken into account in medical treatment as well. Also in Shabbat 152a, we are told of the special care to be taken with the aged when certain medical treatments are administered:

Samuel said: 'The correct interval for blood letting is every thirty days; in middle age one should decrease the frequency, as the body begins to lose heat and frequent bleeding may be injurious; at a more advanced age one should again decrease the frequency.'

Physical frailty is also a factor when it comes to such issues as the giving of a get for divorce. There is a Mishna which says that if a husband is an old man or sick when the bearer of a get leaves him, it is to be presumed that he is alive when the bearer reaches his wife. However, the Rabbis recognize the frailties of the aged, and decide that one who has already reached the years of "strength" (80 years), is presumed to be

physically weak to the point of not recovering from an illness: "Raba said: 'This Mishnah speaks only of an old man who has not reached the years of strength, and of a man who is just ill, for most invalids recover, but not if he has attained 'years of strength.'" (Gitin 28a)

Physical decay of old age is sometimes taken to unusual extremes in the Talmud. There is a very curious story whose point seems to be to describe how very old Rabbi Yohanan was. For we are told that Rabbi Yohanan was such an old man, "...that his eyelashes were overhanging...they lifted up his eyelashes with silver pincers." (B. Kamma 117a) It certainly does not paint a very pleasant picture of the possibilities of old age, and there are a large number of statements which speak in generalities about the decline of age.

On such statement concerning the sadness that is inherent in old age due to physical frailty, is found in Shabbat 152a. The Rabbis in the midst of their discussion of youth versus old age say: "One should seek God in the time of his old age, for it is then that everything eludes him." Such a comment can only evoke a sense of melancholy about old age, and a feeling of sadness for those who experience it. This is followed in the Talmud by a statement from the school of Rav, which said, "'What I did not lose, I seek,' this was a description of old age." And Rashi comments on this by saying that one goes about bent and trembling and appears to be searching for a coin which he has not lost.

The realities of the decline in physical appearance that is part of old age have given rise to a number of 'miraculous' rejuvenations of the body within Rabbinic literature. The most obvious instance involves that of Sarah, who was able to conceive and give birth to Isaac at such an old age.

This will be discussed in more detail further on, but for now it is instructive to note that the Rabbis were not beyond ascribing to God the ability and inclination in certain instances to reverse the natural process of physical decay. In Baba Metzia 87a there is a comment on the verse from Genesis 18:12 which says, "After I have waxed old, shall I have pleasure?" The Rabbis reinterpret this to say, "After I have waxed old, I have had youth," and go on to add, "Rabbi Hisda said, 'After the flesh was worn and the wrinkles multiplied, the flesh was rejuvenated, the wrinkles were smoothed out, and beauty returned.'"

Not only with regard to Sarah did God perform such a miracle as this. According to the Rabbis, when a woman is virtuous, a miracle can happen and she can lose the signs of her old age and have children. In referring to Moses' mother Yohebed, a miracle occurred, since she bore a child at 130 years of age, and was still referred to as "daughter" at this advanced age: "Why then was she called daughter? Rabbi Judah b. Zebida said: 'This teaches that marks of youth re-appeared on her. The flesh of her body was again smooth, the wrinkles of old age were straightened out and her beauty returned.'" (Baba Batra 119b-120a).

Finally, the universal nature of the afflictions of old age were such that the Rabbis could claim that even one good year was truly a sign from heaven for the individual. We read in the Yalkut Shimoni, Beha'alothe, 736, that "We are told that all who acquire for themselves one good year near their old age, it is a good sign for them."

Without question, the single most outstanding characteristic of old age, is the physical decay that goes with it.

SOCIAL UNDESIREABILITY

Chapter IX.

In previous chapters we have seen that the aged were supposedly shown honor, respect, and dignity as a result of their age, but that the reality of their condition was often somewhat different, especially due to the physical decay from which they suffered. Beyond the realm of the purely physical, it also seems to have been the case, that the aged were often looked upon with scorn, and seen as socially undesirable. In fact, there is a popular saying that is quoted in the Talmud (Baba Kamma 92b) which said, "When we were young we were treated like men, where as now that we have grown old, we are looked upon as babies." This is far from an expression of dignity, honor and respect, and presents a rather different view of the aged.

A much more graphic description of derision and scorn being directed toward the aged is found in Kiddushin 31b. Here we find a story of an old man and his son, and a quite derogatory verbal exchange that passes between them:

A certain man placed dainty food before his father and bade him eat. When the father had finished the meal he said, 'My son, you have prepared for me a most delicious meal. Where do you obtain these delicacies?' And the son replied insultingly, 'Eat as the dogs do, old man, without asking questions.' Therefore a son inherits the punishment of disregard.

This story is all the more potent against the backdrop of the Rabbinic attitude towards honoring one's father and mother, which went to the extreme of comparing such honor to the honor due God himself. The story thus must have carried a tremendous amount of power for the Rabbis, and therefore brings to bear even stronger the point that the aged were in fact not always shown honor and respect.

It seems that although it is true that the aged were at times both looked upon and treated with a certain amount of scorn, there also seems to have been a clear distinction between the treatment and value of the various genders (both of them anyway). In a straw hat poll of Rabbinic sources, women seem to have emerged much better off than their aged male counterparts. In Arakin 19a, the following question and answer are presented: "Why is a female, when she is old valued at only one third, whereas a man when he is old at not 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!'"

The relative value placed upon old women over old men seems to reflect a popular belief that a woman is never too old to be useful around the house (which is traditionally her domain), whereas an old man in the house may be seen as an obstacle, or a burden which the woman must put up with and do her work around.

A more prominent area in which old men are deemed unfit, or undesirable is that of marriage. The Rabbis come out very strongly against a man who marries his young daughter to an old man, to the extent that he will not be able to receive atonement from heaven for this sin. We find this expressed in Sanhedrin 76a, which says, "Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: 'He who marries off his daughter to an old man...of him scripture says...'The Lord will not pardon him.' (Deuteronomy 29:19)"

This clearly expresses something which the Rabbis felt was inappropriate. This may be due to the loss of sexual agility and virility that is part of old age, and the inability to both sexually satisfy the wife and fulfill the mitzvah or pru ur'vu, and/or it is indicative of a general lack of social desirability of the aged. Such a marriage is even called profane by the Rabbis, as we read in Sanhedrin 76a, "'You shall not profane your daughter



(Leviticus 19:29)' Rabbi Eliezer says: 'This refers to one who marries off his young daughter to an old man.'

Of course, beyond the possible legal ramifications of this marriage (i.e. the lack of carrying out the mitzvah of pru ur'vu), is the common sense reasoning that might be applied to this situation. It is usually the case in real life, that young women are not particularly attracted to old men, but rather prefer the company of younger men, closer to their own age and interests. This sentiment is given expression in the Midrash to Ruth, itself a book of love and marriage, which speaks of the preference of young women for young men over the aged: "Rabbi Samuel b. Rabbi Isaac said: 'A woman prefers a poor young man to a wealthy old man.'" (Ruth Rabbah 6:4). The desirability of the young, and the undesirability of the aged couldn't be more straightforwardly expressed.

There are other instances which give the impression that the aged were not always accorded the honor and respect that was their due, in Rabbinic literature. The sexual implications of the aged are dealt with in various places in the Talmud and Midrash, and in a number of places in this study. There is, however, at least one such reference which bears upon the present topic, and that is found in Pesahim 113b: "Our Rabbis taught: 'Four are impossible to bear; a poor man who is arrogant, the wealthy man who flatters, a lecherous old man, and a leader who lords it over the community without cause.'" The lecherous old man, is definitely not in very good company.

The final instance of the aged as socially undesirable, and thought of in terms of a bother more than of an honor to be with, is found in a warning to the aged to watch that they don't make a nuisance of themselves in

public. The assumption of this warning is clearly that the custom was in fact to literally rise up when an old man passed in front of you. Contained within this warning is a sense of the pathetic as well, for one can picture an old man, on his own in the world, mournfully walking in front of people merely to attract some needed attention. Such activity is warned against in Kiddushin 32b, which says, "An old man must not make himself a nuisance by passing and repassing, so that people have to get up constantly."

The image of the elderly that is painted in this chapter, is contrary to that in previous chapters. Here we have seen suggestions that the aged were looked upon more as a burden to those around them than as a joy and an honor to be with. How much this is reflective of the realities of the human condition is left to the individual to decide. And in fact, whether this is true or not, is to a large degree the result of the particular attitudes of individuals towards the aged that are part of their lives. For the Rabbis at least, it is clear that old age was without its social liabilities.

MENTAL DECLINE, INTRINSICALLY SAD

## Chapter X.

Along with the problems of physical decay and social undesireability that are part of the unpleasant baggage of old age, are the problems of mental decline and loss of one's ability to learn and retain information and learning. For a society which held learning, study, knowledge, and intellectual prowess among its highest virtues, this could be a devastating loss. The Rabbis were well aware of the possibilities and realities of mental decline among the aged, and have left a number of references to this phenomenon as it expressed itself in their world.

We have seen in previous chapters, that old age was considered in some measure synonymous with wisdom. It was the practice of the Rabbis to claim that wisdom and understanding was held for the elders, and that counsel was the legitimate possession of the aged. In Shabbat 89b, this notion is refuted, and by God Himself:

In the future to come, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to Abraham: 'Your children have sinned against me.' He shall answer him: 'Sovereign of the universe, let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name.' Then shall he say: 'I will go to Jacob, who experienced the pain of bringing up children, perhaps he will seek mercy for them. So Jacob too will answer, 'Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name.' And the Holy One, blessed be He will retort, 'There is no reason in old men, and no counsel in children.'

The idea is clearly expressed in this passage, that even Abraham and Jacob, those whom the tradition looked upon as the ever-present intercessors on behalf of Israel, will not stand up for God to show mercy to their descendents. And it is also clear, that in the mind of God, this is absurd, and the folly of the aged. This can only reflect the notion that with old age comes a

falling away of reason, and a return to a childlike simplicity and lack of mental ability.

The problems of the aged in learning is mentioned in a couple of places in Jewish tradition. In the Midrash, in Deuteronomy Rabbah 13:6, there is a discussion of the fact that the old have an inability to learn, or even re-learn the wisdom of the Torah that they once were able to accomplish in the strength of their youth: "What is the meaning of, 'The sluggard will not plow when the winter sets in?' (Proverbs 20:4). Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai said: 'This refers to one who not having learnt Torah in his youth desires to learn it in his old age and is not able.'"

Mental decline, and increased difficulty in learning new things is an established aspect of old age. The Rabbis strongly suggested that one learn Torah when he/she is young, since when old age strikes, it is more difficult to retain information. They compare this to the difference between writing on a fresh piece of paper and writing on paper that has already been written on once, and is now merely erased. The difficulty of writing on the second paper is obvious, and the lack of clarity and definition that results from the attempt is equivalent to the difficulty encountered by one who tries to learn in his old age. In Avot 4:25, we read: "Elisha ben Abuya said: 'He who learns when a youth, to what is he like? To ink written on new paper. And he who learns when he is old to what is he like? To ink written on erased paper.'"

The mental decline of the aged also takes the form of the inclination to change one's mind often. This has been alluded to previously, and is made explicit in Shabbat 152a, which says, "The opinions of the old change."

As has been demonstrated previously, it is often possible to gain an

understanding of a normative position held by the Rabbis, by looking at its opposite, or the exception to a rule that is cited. With respect to the extent to which the aged were considered to be suffering from mental decline, it is possible to look at a statement found in the Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlay 116, and to draw certain conclusions by inference. In this passage, the relative effects of wine on the minds of the young and the old are discussed, and the effect that wine has on the mind of the aged, is an interesting commentary on the possibilities of what constituted its "normal" state. In this passage we read, "And for whom does he mix the wine? For the old person; just as wine confuses the mind of the child, so wine restores the mind of the old person." If wine restores the old person's mind, then it stands to reason that his mind was not clear to begin with.

The final instance to be presented reflecting upon the relative mental ability of the aged, is from Pirkay Avot 4:27. This comes as a rejoinder to Yose bar Yehudah who claimed that wisdom is the property of the aged. Here Rabbi says that it is not the age of a person that is significant, but rather his knowledge and wisdom. In fact, he maintains that there are old people who have no understanding in them at all, who are like old pitchers with no wine in them at all: "Rabbi said: 'Don't look at the pitcher but at what it contains. There is a new pitcher which is full of old wine, and an old pitcher which has not even new wine in it.'"

Just as there are statements which maintain that there is intrinsic merit and worth in old age (mostly as a result of the divine reward for righteous behavior), there are those who seem to imply that old age is intrinsically sad. An eloquent statement to this effect is given in the Yerushalmi, Peah, 7:4

by Rabbi Yohanan. In this passage he says, "Better were the overripe fruits which we ate in our youth than the luscious peaches which we eat in our old age." For Rabbi Yohanan, youth itself is seen as good, and old age as intrinsically sad. He would rather be subjected to bad, overripe fruit, but have the pleasure of being young, than be able to enjoy all the delicious food in the world, but be old.

Further evidence for the intrinsically sad nature of old age is found in the explanation of the writings attributed to King Solomon. A sense of despair at the coming of old age is portrayed in this passage from Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10: "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." And so old age is seen as full of vanity and despair, as typified by the words of Ecclesiastes. This thought is echoed further on in the same source, when it says, "When a man is young, he quotes poetry; when he matures, he quotes proverbs; when he grows old he speaks of futilities."

Age is also seen as a punishment for some, as a result of certain deleterious actions or circumstances that surround an individual's life. We are told that there are certain things that can bring about old age prematurely, which is clearly an unpleasant and unwanted thing. In the Tanhuma, Havay Sarah, we are told: "Age seizes a person because of four things; fear, anger at one's children, a wicked woman (or wife - eesha), and wars."

The thought that age can come upon an individual before his time, is

found also in the Midrash Ma-aseh Torah, which claims: "There are three things which make a man old before his time: he who lives on a steep incline, he who raises chickens in his own house, and he who speaks and never listens." In this passage, as opposed to the previous one, all of the elements that were identified as being responsible for ageing a person prematurely are in the control of the individual. Thus it is the actions of the individual himself that bring about this unwanted condition of premature age. Whether the responsibility rests with the individual or not, the essential fact remains that age is looked upon as undesirable, and as a kind of punishment for incorrect living or one sort or another.

The final statement that reflects an attitude of sadness at the loss of youth, and the advancement of old age, comes once again from Shabbat 152a. In it can be seen the sense of loss that accompanies old age, and the sadness and futility of one who sees his youth disappear: "It was taught, Rabbi Yossi b. Kisma said: 'Two are better than three, and woe for the thing that goes and doesn't return.' What is that thing? Said Rabbi Hisda: One's youth."

SEXUAL LOSS, LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD

## Chapter XI.

The advance of old age brings with it, as has been demonstrated a host of infirmities, both physical and mental. One of these more regrettable aspects of physical decline afflicting the aged, concerns the instances noted by the Rabbis of loss of sexual potency and drive. It was clear from the evidence drawn from Biblical sources as outlined in Chapter III of this study, that sexual loss was considered the normal flow of events in one's life, a fact making the "miraculous" conception and giving birth of Isaac by Sarah and Abraham all the more powerful an event. For the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash, this unusual occurrence practically begged for interpretation and further explanation. It is for this reason that practically all of the discussions relating to sexual loss, revolve around the pregnancy and birth of Isaac.

The fact that sexual impotency was a factor in the life of the aged, and one which wasn't looked upon with particular joy, is evident from a passage in Shabbat 152a: "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.'"

Since the event of an old man and an old woman 100 and 90 years old respectively giving birth to a child was of such note in the ancient (and I might add modern) world, the Rabbis took delight in expounding on this phenomenon, and finding in it both statements concerning the nature of the human species, and a number of ethical and social prescriptions as well.



The Rabbis are able to draw a number of very interesting conclusions based upon their reading of the texts surrounding the birth of Isaac. For example, they are able to determine by study--the words of Abraham to God, that within his astonished reaction to the possibility of such an old couple having a child, is hidden the knowledge that a man does not grow impotent in old age, but a woman does (a fact that is repudiated by other Rabbinic sources). This remarkable understanding is found in Genesis Rabbah 47:4, where the following exegesis is undertaken:

'Then Abraham said...in his heart: Shall a child be born to him that is a hundred years old?'  
(Gen. 17:17) Rabbi Judah interpreted: 'Why this astonishment? For, said Abraham: "Shall Sarah, that is 90 years old, bear?" (Ibid) A man doesn't grow aged (sterile) but a woman does.'

Practically the opposite understanding of the relative virility of men over women when they are old, or at least of Abraham versus Sarah, is found in Genesis Rabbah 48:17. In this Midrashic interpretation, of something which Sarah said, the same Rav Judah discovers that it is the case that not Sarah, but rather Abraham is suffering from sexual impotence, even if somehow not from any lack of virility. In this passage we find:

Sarah said: 'A woman as long as she is young, has her regular periods. Even after I am waxed old, I shall have ednah (interpreted) as "menses" and not "pleasure" as in Gen. 18:12), and I shall regain my youth. The fact however is that my lord Abraham, is old.' Rav Judah said: 'He is potent yet sterile.

This passage is an interpretation of Genesis 18:12, which we have already seen interpreted in a variety of ways. Here, it implies a sexual loss for Abraham, but the belief of Sarah that she was both potent and in possession of the signs of her youth. The fact that the Rabbis believed that Sarah was blessed with having the physical signs of her youth such as smooth skin and beauty restored, has already been amply demonstrated in this study.

What the Rabbis also did, was to derive lessons for everyday living from this episode of Abraham and Sarah, and to find the need to develop extensive stories of how they convinced their neighbors that the young child was in fact theirs.

Evidence of the lessons to be drawn from this incident are found in Genesis Rabbah 61:13. Here the Rabbis give counsel to those who would think that bearing children (a traditionally very important mitzvah, and the first explicated in the Bible according to the Rabbis), is only a matter for one's youth. They draw attention to the case of Abraham and Sarah, and draw their obvious lesson from them:

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.'

It seems that the Rabbis were also pushing the idea of a man having more than one wife, or at least finding one in his old age that was young enough to bear children. Whatever lessons there are to be learned from this suggestion for modern times, I will leave to the imagination of the reader.

The final example of how the Rabbis dwelt on the ability of Abraham and Sarah to give birth to Isaac at such an old age, is found in the quite fascinating description of how these two old people were able to prove to the satisfaction of their most unbelieving neighbors, that they had actually given birth at age 100 and 90. The story in question is found in Baba Metzia 87a, and is reproduced below:

"Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle her children?' (Gen. 18:12) How many children did Sarah suckle? Rabbi Levi said: 'That day on which Abraham weaned Isaac,

he made a great banquet; and his neighbors of all nations murmured, saying "Behold, an old man and an old woman took a child from the market saying he is their son. And this is not enough for them, but they are giving a banquet to convince the people that it is so." What did our father Abraham do? He invited all the great men of his generation, and Sarah our mother invited their wives, and everyone of them brought along her child without their nurses, and a miracle occurred to Sarah, and her breasts opened like two springs and she nursed all the children there. But it was still murmured and said: "Since Sarah was 90 years old, it is possible that she had borne a child; but Abraham who is over 100 years old, how is it possible that he should be able to beget children?" Then the face of Isaac at once changed and resembled the face of Abraham, so that everyone proclaimed: "Abraham begot Isaac." (Gen. 25:19)

From the above passage it is obvious, that the Rabbis of the Talmud were quite creative in their Biblical exegesis, and furthermore, that they were well aware that the normal circumstances of old age produce a loss of sexual arousal and impotence, from which the story of the birth of Isaac derives its force and power.

After looking at the wide range of negative characteristics that accompany old age, from physical decay, to mental decline, and from social undesireability to loss of sexual potency, we come to the final element in the bleak reality of the aged. Beyond the infirmities that effect the physical and mental capacities of an individual at the onset of old age, there is another possibly even more debilitating byproduct of old age which strikes directly at the individual's ability to sustain life. That additional problem, is the inability of the aged to earn a livelihood. Even in this day of pensions and social security, the maintenance of the aged is a constantly mounting problem for society. One can only imagine the possible

terror that confronted the old and incapacitated of a society two thousand years ago.

In Kiddushin 82b, the inability to earn a living when one gets old, is succinctly put: "Any profession in the world is of help to a man only in his youth, but in his old age he is exposed to hunger." The Rabbis were realists who recognized this as a universal problem of the aged. The picture that they paint of the end of one's life, is one of loss of faculties, and a struggle to survive. In Niddah 65a, we are told that from the Bible we learn that one of the signs of impending loss of livelihood is a person's teeth falling out:

Rabbi Hanina b. Sheleyma observed: 'As soon as a person's teeth fall out his means of a livelihood are reduced: for it is said: "And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places," (Amos 4:6)'

There is no doubt that the problem of earning a livelihood was a serious one. With old age came the ravages of time, both physical and spiritual; and along with the loss of physical dexterity and mobility came the fear of starvation, and the inability to remain in control of one's life-needs.

The Rabbinic world subscribed to a reality-based fear of the loss of one's ability to earn a livelihood, and the realization that no matter how skilled one became at a craft, his/her end would be the same; physical decay and mental decline, so the Rabbis turned to the one element of their lives that sustained itself through any and all adversity; the Torah, the well-spring of Jewish knowledge, values and culture, and centered their hopes upon it. In this final citation from Kiddushin 82b, the Torah is held up to the young as the only thing worth putting one's faith and trust in:

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 for the world to come. With all other crafts when a man comes to sickness or to old age or to troubles, and he is not able to engage in his occupation, then he dies of hunger. In the case of the Torah, however, it is not so; it protects him from all evil in youth, and it presents him with a future and a hope in his old age.'

The Rabbis are perhaps referring to both the rewards that Torah provides in the real world of here-and-now, and those that it provides in the metaphysical realm of the world-to-come, when they speak of the "future and a hope" that the Torah can provide. We have already seen, that for the scholar, old age brings with it a degree of respect and honor, that stands him in his old age to drink of his wisdom, culled from the long years of his experience. This then, can be the "hope" of one who dedicates his life to Torah in his youth. No matter how it may be interpreted, it is clear that from the Rabbinic frame of reference, only the Torah can offer sustenance, support and shelter against the ravages of old age.

SECTION V.

CONCLUSION

## REFLECTIONS

### Chapter XII.

Now that we have come to the end of this study, it is time once again to ask the question posed at the beginning: What indeed is the Appearance and what the Reality of the Jewish attitude towards the aged? As with many serious and complex problems that effect Jewish life, it is obvious from the vast quantity of differing sources presented here, that there is no one simple answer. Just as every aspect of our lives is filled with polarities and contradictions today, so too the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash were aware that old age was at least a two sided coin. It was filled with a sense of reverence and awe, as was certainly to be expected in a society where the majority of people probably died in infancy or early childhood, and the one who lived a long life by our standards most certainly must have been considered blessed by theirs, but was also filled with pain and the decline of body and spirit.

I believe the central factor which determines a particular society's attitudes towards old age is inexorably bound up in what might grandly be termed the "spirit of the age." This attribute of society which I call "spirit," is directly related to the physical and social realities of the times. For the ancient world, the average person was primarily and agrarian based individual, who worked on the land, spent his life toiling against the elements of nature, and looked forward at best to a much lower life expectancy than that enjoyed by modern civilizations. For such an individual, whose world was run as much by folk wisdom and superstition than by reason and rationality (let alone modern "scientific" understandings of the universe),

one can only speculate as to how totally miraculous reaching a ripe old age must have seemed. One who was blessed with such longevity, was naturally looked upon as possessing wisdom, for in such a world, 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.

Our world is different from that of the Rabbis. Today, the "miracles" that occur, are those that human beings create in laboratories, hospitals, and scientific workrooms. Length of life has become almost an assumption of our society, with the vital questions of medicine today reaching far beyond such elementary questions as preserving and lengthening life, to the agonizing problems of when to allow death to come. In such a world as ours, is it any wonder that old age has lost much of its mystique and awesomeness?

In the ancient world, the fear expressed by the Rabbis of being abandoned and left out on the street was a very real and terrifying one. When old age had brought with it the physical and mental decline that impaired the normal functioning of the individual, and he/she was no longer able to be self sufficient and earn a livelihood, who would take care of them? Out of a culture that faced this type of everyday real life terror, could naturally grow a strong set of injunctions and social mores that upheld the significance of honoring one's parents, as being equal if not greater than honoring God Himself. For the sake of survival, it was necessary for all to recognize the debilitating effects that old age had upon the individual, and to legislate either legally, socially, or both to protect the aged from the ravages of their human condition.

Today our lives are very different than they were for the Rabbis and their society. Today it is possible to avoid the personal pain and responsibility of caring for an aged parent. Today one can hire a surrogate to take one's



place, to shoulder the responsibility that was previously unescapable. No longer do our people (or any people) feel that it is up to them alone to maintain their parents in their old age. Today they can send them to an old age home, a public or private institution, and thereby eliminate this personal responsibility from their lives. What my own experiences have taught me is that this elimination of personal responsibility is never a totally successful process. The human condition is such, and perhaps the instilling of certain Jewish values is significant enough, that there is inevitably a residue of personal guilt and shame that plagues such individuals.

Part of the guilt that is felt when one shunts an aged parent off upon an institution, no matter how attractive the physical setting may be, is a result of an increasing alienation in our society, and an increasing search for meaning and value in our lives. The individual who in his/her own life is struggling to make sense out of the universe, is trying to understand the somewhat muted cries of loneliness within him/herself, is apt to feel a sense that somehow it is not right to contribute to those same feelings in another, especially one's parent. People are looking for meaning in today's society, and they are searching for a sense of connectedness. This search for connectedness takes the form of increased involvement in Havurot groups within and without of synagogue life. It takes the form of a tremendous increase in the numbers of people who participate in formal and informal therapies of all kinds, especially those which stress a sense of belonging to a group, and the importance of interpersonal relationships.

The need for a sense of connectedness lies at the heart of the issue of how to adequately deal with the problems of the aged, and of those who must be responsible for the aged. Perhaps it is time we once again looked

to the wisdom of our ancestors for a solution and guidelines. Perhaps the wisdom of Hillel in warning against separating oneself from the community can be seen as seminal to this issue. Each of us has a need to feel a sense of purpose to our existence, and a sense of connectedness to the world in which we live. Judaism has always tried to provide that sense of connectedness, both to the society at large, through the maintenance of social institutions and communal support of individuals, and through the stress upon the connectedness of the family unit.

It is to the family ultimately we must turn for an answer. The Jewish people is sustained by the strength of families, and by the values that are learned within them. Perhaps it is time we once again embraced the values of the family and of the central need for a sense of connectedness among people. Through such an avenue, we might be able to find our way back to the frame of being that produced a sense of awe and wonder at the miracles of our everyday lives. There are no simple answers to the problems that plague the aged in our society. But, if our hearts and minds are once again tuned to the need for reaching out to those around us, for experiencing an innate sense of personal responsibility for the emotional and physical wellbeing of our families both immediate and extended, and to the needs for each of us to experience that vital sense of connectedness to our past, our people, and our personal relationships, then we will at least have made a large step, on the road to personal and social wellbeing.

I leave this study with the wisdom of ben Sira, who summarized the essence of every individual's personal stake in the fate of the aged, when he said, "Don't shame the aged, for we shall all be numbered among them."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY BY CHAPTER

The following pages are designed to serve two purposes: first, they will provide an easy reference guide for the specific textual citations that relate to each chapter, and second they will provide a sequential bibliography, ending with the secondary sources that were used in this study.

### CHAPTER II. BIBLICAL ROOTS - POSITIVE STATEMENTS

1. Psalm 90:10
2. Genesis 15:15
3. Genesis 25:8
4. Judges 8:32
5. 1Chronicles 29:28
6. Genesis 44:29
7. Proverbs 16:31
8. Exodus 20:12
9. Deuteronomy 6:2
10. Deuteronomy 22:7
11. Deuteronomy 25:15
12. Ecclesiastes 8:13
13. Isaiah 65:20
14. Job 12:12
15. 1Kings 12:6
16. Ezra 10:8
17. Ezekiel 7:26
18. Psalm 119:100
19. Leviticus 19:32
20. Proverbs 20:29
21. Proverbs 23:22
22. Job 32:4-9
23. Deuteronomy 28:49-50
24. Lamentations 5:12
25. Isaiah 3:5
26. Psalm 92:15

### CHAPTER III. BIBLICAL ROOTS - NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

1. 2Samuel 19:35
2. Genesis 27:1
3. 1Kings 1:1
4. Ecclesiastes 12:1-5
5. Job 12:20
6. Ecclesiastes 4:13
7. Psalm 71:9
8. Psalm 71:18
9. Genesis 21:2-7
10. Genesis 18:12

## BIBLIOGRAPHY BY CHAPTER

### SECTION III. RABBINIC ATTITUDES-- POSITIVE STATEMENTS

#### CHAPTER IV. HONOR

1. Genesis Rabbah 65:9
2. Kiddushin 32b
3. Kiddushin 32b
4. Kiddushin 33a
5. Kiddushin 32b
6. Yerushalmi Bikkurim 3:3
7. Numbers Rabbah 16
8. Numbers Rabbah 15:17
9. Menahot 68b
10. Ruth Rabbah 6
11. Sotah 49b
12. Kiddushin 32b
13. Kiddushin 31b
14. Baba Metzia 30b
15. Bekorot 30b
16. Yerushalmi Peah 1:3
17. Baba Metzia 60b
18. Berahot 8b
19. Berahot 8b
20. Sanhedrin 96a
21. Yerushalmi Moed Katan 3
22. Numbers Rabbah 16
23. Exodus Rabbah 5
24. Leviticus Rabbah 11
25. Mehilta, Yetro 19
26. Baba Batra 10b
27. Genesis Rabbah 63:6

#### CHAPTER V. INTRINSIC WORTH - REWARD FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

1. Genesis Rabbah 58:9
2. Genesis Rabbah 59:6
3. Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:2
4. Avot 6:8
5. Taanit 20b
6. Baba Batra 121b
7. Berahot 8a
8. Berahot 8b
9. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 2:20
10. Genesis Rabbah 62:2
11. Genesis Rabbah 62:2
12. Moed Katan 28a
13. Kinnim 3:15
14. Yalkut Shimoni, Isaiah 526
15. Exodus Rabbah 15
16. Exodus Rabbah 16
17. Sukah 53a

## BIBLIOGRAPHY BY CHAPTER

### CHAPTER VI. WISDOM

1. Berahot 39a
2. Ben Sira 25:6
3. Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:3
4. Kiddushin 32b
5. Kiddushin 32b
6. Deuteronomy Rabbah 6
7. Exodus Rabbah 3
8. Avot 4:26
9. Hagigah 14a
10. Sanhedrin 17a
11. Berahot 28a
12. Genesis Rabbah 59:3
13. Rosh Hashanah 25a
14. Shabbat 152a
15. Megillah 31b

### CHAPTER VII DIGNITY AND AUTHORITY

1. Genesis Rabbah 69:6
2. Genesis Rabbah 59:6
3. Baba Metzia 30a
4. Sanhedrin 18b
5. Berahot 19b
6. Baba Batra 119b-120a
7. Baba Metzia 27a
8. Berahot 30a
9. Baba Batra 142b-143a

### SECTION IV. RABBINIC ATTITUDES - NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

### CHAPTER VIII. PHYSICAL DECAY

1. Avot 5:21
2. Hullin 24b
3. Hullin 24a
4. Tanhuma Miketz:10
5. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3
6. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:1
7. Shabbat 151b
8. Shabbat 152a
9. Shabbat 152a
10. Shabbat 52a
11. Shabbat 152a
12. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:5
13. Avoda Zara 17b
14. Erubin 56a
15. Yerushalmi Baitzah 1
16. Leviticus Rabbah 18:1
17. Nazir 39b
18. Nazir 59a
19. Shabbat 152a
20. Yoma 75b

## BIBLIOGRAPHY BY CHAPTER

### CHAPTER VIII. PHYSICAL DECAY

21. Ketubah 111b
22. Shabbat 152a
23. Shabbat 152a
24. Gittin 28a
25. Baba Kamma 117a
26. Shabbat 152a
27. Shabbat 152a
28. Baba Metzia 87a
29. Baba Batra 119b-120a
30. Yalkut Shimoni, Beha'alothea 736

### CHAPTER IX. SOCIAL UNDESIREABILITY

1. Baba Kamma 92b
2. Kiddushin 31b, Rashi
3. Arakin 19a
4. Sanhedrin 76a
5. Sanhedrin 76a
6. Ruth Rabbah 6:4
7. Pesahim 113b
8. Kiddushin 32b

### CHAPTER X. MENTAL DECLINE, INTRINSICALLY SAD

1. Shabbat 89b
2. Deuteronomy Rabbah 8:6
3. Avot 4:25
4. Shabbat 152a
5. Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlay 1160
6. Avot 4:27
7. Yerushalmi Peah 7:4
8. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10
9. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10
10. Tanhuma, Ha'yay Sarah
11. Midrash Ma'seh Torah
12. Shabbat 152a

### CHAPTER XI. SEXUAL LOSS - LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD

1. Shabbat 152a
2. Genesis Rabbah 47:4
3. Genesis Rabbah 48:17
4. Genesis Rabbah 61:13
5. Baba Metzia 87a
6. Kiddushin 82b
7. Niddah 65a
8. Kiddushin 72b

### CHAPTER XII. CONCLUSION

1. Ben Sira 8:6