
AT MY AGE?

Rabbi Alan Lurie
February 21, 2009

At My Age?

We live in a culture that idolizes youth. Movies, advertisements, sports, and even business and politics present images that glorify youth, and imply that our best years are over when our smooth skin begins to wrinkle and our hair thins; or, at least, that we better be on track before then if we expect to have value and to make an impact. This might be because it can be difficult to look at old age and the inevitable end of life, and so we avoid the reality that we are mortal, hoping to extend youth as long as possible and to deny that we are no longer the agile, shapely, and thick-haired person that we used to be. Having recently turned 50, I am aware that—most likely—there is more life behind me than ahead of me, and the finite nature of my physical being is becoming very real. I feel the pressure of time, and in my darker moments feel that younger people are passing me, and I wonder if enough time is left for me to do what I am meant to do. Recently, though, while preparing a sermon about the life of Moses, I found comfort and encouragement in a teaching that assures us that the last part of our lives can be our most fruitful and productive time. This teaching comes from an unexpected place—the Sabbath.

The meaning of the Sabbath has several different traditional interpretations that have been developed over thousands of years. The first interpretation informs us that the Sabbath is a remembrance

At My Age?

of the work of creation. This interpretation comes from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, where we read the story of the six days of creation, followed by a day of completion and rest. Because God rested on the Sabbath, the Bible tells us, so should we. Of course God does not “rest” in any way that we can understand, but in remembering the Sabbath, we recognize that God’s solitary act of creation has ceased and that we are now partners in creating the future together. The Sabbath, then, is a day in which we can rest from the physical act of creating so that we can reenter the week renewed.

The second interpretation is that the Sabbath is a day to remember the redemption from slavery. This interpretation is found throughout the next four books of the Bible, beginning with the exodus from Egypt, leading to the 10 commandments (where “remember” and “keep” the Sabbath is the Fourth Commandment), and finally the entrance into the Promised Land. By remembering that we are free, we learn that our lives are in our own hands, and that we are responsible for our actions and their consequences. We also note that many are not free, which leads to action on behalf of others and gratitude for our freedom.

A third interpretation of the Sabbath, which comes from the Prophets and later writings, is that it is a day of joy—a time set aside where we can be simply happy, free from the day-to-day worries of

At My Age?

our jobs and other obligations. On the Sabbath we can focus solely on joyful activities, such as meals with friends and families, conversations, singing, or (hopefully) romantic time with our spouses.

A fourth interpretation says that Shabbat is a taste of “the World to Come” (*Olam HaBah*). This interpretation, which is found in the Talmud and later mystical writings, is less clear than the others and can easily be misunderstood because “the World to Come” is often thought of as a place that one goes to after death—a version of Heaven. This is a misleading interpretation. The World to Come is *this* world as it will eventually be when all humanity lives in peace, consciously aware of our true nature and our highest potential. This is a world that we work to create together through our actions, and the Sabbath is a preview of this great vision.

In addition to a collective World to Come, we also each have an individual World to Come. In this individual World to Come, we will live our own life’s purpose, which is ours to discover and is the reasons that we are here. The good news is that we can come to our life’s purpose at any time; at any age. The Bible demonstrates this message in the life of Moses, who, the text tells us, did not begin his mission to free the Hebrew slaves from centuries of brutal slavery until he was 80 years old. Moses lived to be 120, so even if we assume that this lifespan is an exaggeration, he still did not begin his life’s

At My Age?

purpose until he was two thirds into his life, (if we assume a realistic lifespan of 90, Moses answered the call to his life's purpose at the age of 60), and he devoted the last third of his life to this difficult mission. Moses grew tremendously during this period, beginning as a tentative, inarticulate shepherd and ending as a great leader and orator.

The Psalm for Sabbath—Psalm 92—informs us:

*How great are Your deeds, God,
Very deep are Your thoughts.
An immature person can not know, nor can
one who is insensitive understand.*

God's "deeds" and "thoughts" are the working of the world, the complexities of our lives, and the hidden purpose that lies behind our experiences. Only one who has known the challenges of life and struggled to understand and grow can see this. And only such a person can be prepared to commit with honesty and humility to a meaningful purpose that it beyond physical gratification and social status. To live a life of conscious purpose requires this maturity and wisdom.

Our own personal World to Come lies right in front of us. The mystics tell us that this call to growth and purpose was sent out for each of us at the moment of the Big Bang, reverberating through creation, waiting for the moment when we will have the maturity to say "Here I am," to listen and to act. The closing words of the Psalm for the Sabbath

At My Age?

assure us that those who consciously search for meaning and purpose (the “righteous”) will be sustained throughout our life, to live the promise of the World to Come:

*The righteous will flourish like a date tree,
like the cedar of Lebanon will grow.
Planted in the house of the Divine they will
flourish in God's courtyard.
Still they will be fruitful in old age; they will
be vigorous and fresh,
To tell that God is just; my Rock in Whom
there is no wrong.*

Wishing you well,
Alan