

Hayyei Sarah 5778 **The Blessings of the Cane**

You may have seen one or more of the poems that go around on sites like facebook. They are often told in the voice of someone who is very old and they read something like this:

*What do you see, nurses, what do you see?
What are you thinking when you're looking at me?
A crabby old woman, not very wise,
Uncertain of habit, with faraway eyes?
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply
When you say in a loud voice, "I do wish you'd try!"
Who seems not to notice the things that you do,
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe.....*

The poem goes on to say that what the nurse is seeing is not 'me,' the author of the poem - that there is so much more to this person than their old exterior. Because we do often ignore those who are older and frailer than we are. In the busy craziness of our lives, we push and shove our way past them. As our parents age we may find ourselves not only concerned but also irritated and even challenged by their weaknesses.

It's a hard place to be. For everyone.

But this week's Torah portion has just a single sentence in it that might help us think a little differently about being old, if we read it in the company of some of the other voices from our tradition who have given it some thought. I'd like to share that sentence and some of those interpretations this morning; perhaps they will make us pause just a little next time we encounter that old person with a walker or a cane. It will involve a few detours on the way, but I promise we will get there. Shall we begin?

At the beginning of this week's Torah portion we read of the death of Sarah, Abraham's wife. We are told how Abraham mourned her and how he purchases a plot of land with a cave on it to serve as a burial place for her, and for the rest of his family in due course.

Immediately after this narrative, we are told:

Abraham was now old, well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham with everything...

The word for *everything* in Hebrew is *bakol*. And our tradition has a fine old time with this one word trying to figure out what exactly it means.

Some teach that it means material wealth, or land. Others get more creative. In the Talmud [Bava Batra 141a], Rabbi Meir teaches that *bakol* means that Abraham was blessed in that he didn't have a daughter - perhaps because it would have been even harder to find a husband for her than it was to find a wife for Isaac. And Rabbi Yehuda teaches that *bakol* means that Abraham really did have everything - and that Abraham had a daughter as well. A further group of anonymous commentators teach us that *bakol* was actually his daughter's name.

Now, not everyone in the tradition (and I would humbly include myself in that number) is happy with this interpretation. In another source [Midrash Rabbah], Rabbi Nehemiah rather tartly remarks that if Abraham had been blessed with a daughter, he would have been told beforehand, and perhaps we should have heard more about her!

So what else could that *bakol* mean? Enter Rabbi Levi from probably one of our earliest collections of sermons, the Midrash Rabbah. He comes up with three possible readings.

One is material - 'everything' means that Abraham's storehouse never lacked for anything. One is psychological - that 'everything' means that Abraham was able to rule over his desires. And one is a family reason - that Ishmael achieved reconciliation in Abraham's lifetime.

I think that we might want to hold these three readings in our minds as we encounter those around us who are older and as we think about our own aging.

We might want to think more deeply about that feeling of being well cushioned, well provided for. It's certainly not the case for everyone. This weekend our teen learning group will be going on a service project to make a meal for those in need, and then to wrap Hanukkah presents to go to Houston. Perhaps as we ourselves head to Kiddush today and to the lavish spread that will celebrate young Gabriel's Hebrew name on Sunday we can be thankful for the security that we do have.

We might admire the ability to rule over our desires. 'Who is a hero?' asks the second century Rabbi Shimon ben Zoma, and answers his own question, 'The one who can overcome his *yetzer* - his inclination or appetite.' Perhaps we know somebody older in our own lives who is outwardly frail and yet seems to have extraordinary psychological fortitude.

And we might ponder the third reading, that Ishmael achieved reconciliation in Abraham's lifetime. Never mind having a mythical daughter - Abraham's record with his own sons is chequered, to say the least. This is Ishmael, Hagar the handmaiden's child, whom he sent away because his wife, Sarah, was worried he might claim some part of Abraham's inheritance. We can imagine how good it must have felt to Abraham finally to have that wound healed, to have closure and reconciliation, perhaps to have Ishmael's own children playing around his old feet. We might ask ourselves: Is there an old person in our own lives with whom we might wish to seek reconciliation....?

And yet, wise as Rabbi Levi's teaching is, it's still not my favorite Torah on this verse.

The credit for that would have to go to the Hassidic teacher Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Lainer, known as the Ishbitzer Rebbe and also as the *mei HaShiloah*, which was the name under which he wrote his Torah commentaries. He asks - how could we understand Abraham to have been blessed with everything when the verse explicitly tells us how old he'd become? He answers his own question by first comparing this word, *bakol*, to a similar expression in a verse from Ecclesiastes. In the Talmud the famous pair of teachers Rav and Shmuel comment on this verse, describing how when Solomon became old, he became more and more helpless, his sphere of influence gradually contracting until he only had control over one object; one teaches it was his pitcher, and the other, his cane. And that, we might think, is as good as old age gets.

But the Ishbitzer Rebbe teaches that if we think that way, we're wrong. That's not just any old cane, he teaches. He brings a verse from the prophet Zechariah, describing the rebuilt Jerusalem, old people with their canes sitting in the gates, little children playing around their feet. A cane isn't a symbol of old age, he argues. It's a symbol of life - a life well lived.

And as for the pitcher: the Ishbitzer Rebbe teaches that a pitcher is hollow. What does it mean to be hollow? It means to be open to receiving. When the Torah tells us that Abraham was blessed *bakol*, it's really saying that in old age, Abraham became more and more thirsty for the essence of life that God continually poured into him. And the older Abraham got, the more hollow he became, and the more of that *hiyyut*, that essence of life, he was capable of receiving and holding.

I love this teaching because of the way it subverts all of our ideas about old age. *Bakol* turns out to be the blessing of old age itself. We might think of it as diminution, but in fact it's an increase. If we are lucky we might even ourselves know of an old person who makes us think of the way that Abraham is being described. They walk with a cane, but even as they wobble or totter, they seem to radiate strength. And although they are frail, and may even be bent over, those hollows are not only full of experience; they are constantly being filled with God's essence, the essence of life itself, which shines out of their eyes and into the world.

And we should remember that next time we see an old person with a walker.

Shabbat shalom.