

**Yom Kippur Day  
2015  
“Wise Aging”  
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

When I get older  
Losing my hair  
Many years from now  
Will you still be sending me a Valentine?  
Birthday greetings, bottle of wine?

If I'd been out  
Till quarter to three  
Would you lock the door?  
Will you still need me  
Will you still feed me  
When I'm sixty-four?

Here is a joke I was told by my good friend and colleague Rabbi Neil Kurshan:

Max Goldstein and Sam Schwartz grew up together and became the kind of friends whose lives take them in different directions, but who stay in touch and get together every ten years or so. When they are in their twenties and have not seen each other for a while they arrange to spend an evening together. “Where should we go?” Max asks Sam. “Let’s go to Joe’s Hamburgers.” Why should we go there?” Max says to Sam “Because they have a good juke box.”

Another decade goes by, and the next time they get together they are in their thirties: “Where should we go for dinner?” Max asks Sam. “Let’s go to Joe’s Hamburgers” Why should we go there?” Max says to Sam. “Because they have cute waitresses.”

Life gets more complicated with marriage, family, and jobs and they don’t see each other again until they are in their fifties. “Where should be go?” Max asks Sam. “Let’s go to Joe’s Hamburgers” “Why should we go there?” Max says to Sam. Because they have a large screen TV.

Another decade or two goes by; now they are in their early seventies when they see each other. “Where should we go to eat? Sam says to Max “Let’s to go to Joe’s Hamburgers. “Why should we go there?” Max says to Sam. Because they have an early bird special.”

Now Max and Sam are in their eighties and who knows, this may be the last time they will see each other. “Where should be go to eat?” Sam says to Max. “Let’s to Joe’s Hamburgers.” “Why should we go there?” Max asks Sam. Sam replies: “Because we’ve never been there before.”

We laugh, but this is precisely the reason most of us fear growing old. At least in this joke “old” is pushed off to the 80’s – and while that may make a 64 year old like me feel a little better – I’m sure it does not do much for the 80 year olds in our midst – not to mention the 90 year olds!

Why do we fear getting old? Because, as in the joke, we fear we will lose our memory, our identity. We fear the pains and limitations that come with advanced years. So, no matter where we sit – at 50, 60, 70, 80 or beyond we don’t want to see ourselves as “old,” and we worry about growing old.

“Will you still need me, will you still feed me when I’m 64.”

Back in 1967 when this song came out on the Beatles Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band album (some have called it the worst song on their best album)– like Paul McCartney – I too thought that 64 was – well VERY old – today, having turned 64 this past summer, I don’t know – it doesn’t seem that old.

I have this sense that all those in this sanctuary under 50 are now settling into their seats and thinking, “time for a snooze, as this sermon is clearly not for me!” News flash: We are all growing older. All of us are one year older than we were last Rosh Hashanah.

Or to paraphrase the retro band from the 90’s “They Might Be Giants” which my son Ari shared with me - something that was a part of his growing up as the Beatles was mine– “You’re older than you’ve ever been...and now you’re even older; And now you’re even older. You’re older than you’ve ever been ... and now you’re even older...and now you’re older still.” Ari tells me that the video for this song shows a ticking clock on the bottom of the screen as if to emphasize the relentless march of time. Ari says that when he first heard this song as a teenager he thought it was funny – now at 32, not so much.

Growing old is not something that begins at 64 and what I have to say about aging wisely depends as much on decisions we make in our twenties, thirties and forties as it does upon those decisions we make after 50.

To paraphrase the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “People are anxious to store up financial means for old age; they should also be anxious to prepare a spiritual income for old age. Wisdom, maturity, tranquility do not come all of a sudden when we retire from business ...Preparation for aging wisely is a life-long process.”

We know that what we do to keep our bodies in shape when we are young will help to determine the state of our bodies when we are old. If you smoke – stop. If you are overweight – do something about it. We know that the financial investments we make in our retirement funds when we are young will pay significant dividends when we are old. Well, the same is true of the soul. Investments made when young will determine whether we acquire a wise soul when old.

When does old age begin? Well – that is a tough question. For it seems that there is a sliding scale – and old age is always someone significantly older than you are now – however old you are now. My mother, may she rest in peace, died at the age of 96! For the last number of years she lived in a wonderful Assisted Living Facility in Cincinnati. A couple of times a week, when she was already in her 90’s, my mother volunteered in the Advanced Care Unit – playing cards

with the residents there. When she would come back to *her* room, she would remark to us, “Those old people are so sad...” To us, it seemed like a rather strange comment coming out of the mouth of a nonagenarian – but it was then and there that I realized that we never see ourselves as old.

On this Yom Kippur, as we confront our own mortality, we are forced to acknowledge that, “we are older than we’ve ever been...and now we’re even older, and now we’re even older. And that thought is, for most of us, *not* a source of comfort. For we worry, “will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m old – whenever that may be.

Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Scheinbaum. Israel Scheinbaum was the *Shamas* at the shul I grew up in, in Cincinnati Ohio. He was born in Poland, he spoke with a heavy accent. As a child coming to shul with my parents, one of the things I knew about Mr. Scheinbaum was that he was old, really old. Mr. Scheinbaum must be gone now some 40 or 45 years but I remember him well – because, well because he was a memorable character and a wonderful part of my growing up. And one of the things I remember about Mr. Scheinbaum is that he used to *daven Shacharit* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And the other thing I remember is that there was one prayer where Mr. Scheinbaum always used to break down and literally cry. As a young boy the sight of an old man crying was – well was very memorable and something I have never forgotten.

And he always cried at the same spot in the same prayer: *Al tashlichenu l’et zikna*. “Do not cast us away as we grow old; do not desert us as our energy wanes.” It comes from the *Shma Koleinu* prayer we recite many times today and it is one of my favorite prayers – maybe because of my memories of old Mr. Scheinbaum.

Every year we pray, *Shma Koleinu, Adonai Eloheynu, Chus V’racheym aleinu*  
“Hear our voice, *Adonai* our God, be kind, and have compassion for us.”

*V’kabeyl b’rachamim uv’ratzon et tefilateynu*

“Willingly and lovingly accept our prayers”

And then comes the line that always made poor old Mr. Scheinbaum cry:

*Al Tashlicheynu L’yet Zikna, Kichlot kocheynu, al-ta-azveynu*

“Do not cast us away as we grow old;  
Do not desert us as our energy wanes.”

I always wondered if, some day, I would start crying when I said those words? I think I am getting close: “will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m 64!”

The take away for me, as a kid, watching Mr. Scheinbaum cry while singing *Shma Koleynu* – was that growing old was something to be feared, something to be avoided at all costs – something – well something that could make you cry.

Today, I would like to offer a slightly different way to sing that prayer. With all due respect to Mr. Scheinbaum – may he rest in peace.

Look, – I know that there is a lot of frightening stuff associated with getting older: you can lose your mobility, you can lose your hearing and your eyesight, you can lose your independence and worst of all you can lose your mind. As one friend put it, “Old age is a continuous series of losses.” Or worse, as Philip Roth put it more bitterly in his novel “Everyman”: “Old age is not a battle. Old age is a massacre.

Not long ago – you lived a by and large healthy life – and then you died. But today there is a long time between “fine” and “dead!” Or as one woman said, “we live too long and die too slowly.”

I know that this old age thing is challenging, I know that the Golden Years are not always so golden. But in case you haven't noticed, old age is not the only time bad stuff can happen to you. Illness and suffering is an equal opportunity employer. I visit people of all ages who are struggling with physical and mental challenges. Life is not always a pretty picture and you don't have to be old to know this.

My question to you today is what are you going to do about the challenge of getting older? Are you just going to cry? Or is there something more, something better we can do?

Rachel Cowan and Linda Thal in their wonderful book titled, **Wise Aging – Living with Joy, Resilience and Spirit** suggest that there is an alternative. They write, “*et zikna* – traditionally translated as the time of weakness and abandonment – has morphed into the age of wisdom.” And then she goes on to say: When I pray this prayer I am reminding myself, “Do not let yourself grow spiritually old; do not abandon your spirit, your energies, your relationships, your love and compassion. Indeed every day, look for moments of renewal.”

Those who turn 60 these days have the prospect of living at least another 30 years with relatively good health and vitality. We are pioneers, entering a stage of life never experienced by previous generations. This is our “third chapter,” our “third act,” our time of “active aging.” Or to put it another way – this is our *et zikna* – our time to age wisely.

Instead of buying into our culture's message that we are sliding down the slope of decline – a fate that anyone would want to flee – we can assert and demand that these be years of opportunity for discovery.

You know old age has not always been so feared and dreaded as it is today. In Jewish tradition, old is beautiful; old is honored.

Rashi suggests that the word *zaken*, which means an old person and is spelled *z*ion, *k*of, *n*un – is meant to be an acronym for **zeh she-kanah hokhmah** – one who has acquired wisdom. Rabbi Schachter Shlomi who passed away last year called this “sage-ing” instead of aging.

We know we are supposed to respect our elders, but we live in a society where youth is valorized and old age is mocked. We lie about our age. You know this lying about your age thing – it is a time honored tradition – except in Judaism it went in the opposite direction – people lied to make themselves *older!* You all know the quote from the Passover Haggadah, each year we tell the story of R. Elazar ben Azariah, the Talmudic sage who is quoted as saying: “*Harey Ani k'ben shivim shana* – behold I am like one who is 70 years old.” The commentators jump all over this – what do you mean you are *like* someone 70? Either you are or you aren't. And they say that R. Elazar was very young when he took over as head of the academy – so young he worried that he could garner the proper respect for such an exalted position – so he put powder in his hair to make himself look older and he lied about his age – but he added years instead of subtracting them, I am *like* someone who is 70!

My son, Ari is also delivering a sermon today on this same topic in his congregation in Los Angeles – we actually worked on this together, we thought it would be interesting to approach this subject from the perspective of a 32 year old and a 64 year old. He is using some of my

material and I am using some of his – can you imagine the *naches* to be able to do this with my son?! It was a fun process. I'm not sure if I should be surprised or not, but our message – written from two very different perspectives, turned out to be very similar – confront the aging process head on, don't lament it, cherish it, lean into it. Allow the wisdom of our tradition to guide us in how we might age wisely. Ari writes, "Like my tradition, I believe old is beautiful and old is honored. The wrinkle at the corner of your eyes, the graying of your hair. It's beautiful," he writes, "wear it with pride and distinction." I hope he means it – for the record this is not powder in *my* hair.

Atul Gawande in his wonderful new book, ***Mortal*** – a book I read this summer and was transformative about the way I think about old age, Dr. Gawande writes, "Scientific advances have turned the process of aging and dying into medical experiences, matters to be managed by health care professionals...and we in the medical world have proved alarmingly unprepared for it." Maybe it is time to seek guidance on aging from more than just our doctors. Like maybe from our rabbis old and young, ancient and contemporary. Maybe our tradition has something very important to say about aging.

There are a lot of fears associated with getting older. (Old Mr. Scheinbaum had good reason to cry) *but* it is also a time for hope and continued achievement and development. The challenge is that we each have to decide which will define *our* old age: hope or fear.

For Mr. Scheinbaum – old age was all about fear – and that is what he read into the *Shma Koleinu* prayer. But maybe there is a better way.

"Old man Cohen limped into the doctor's office and said, "Doc, my knee hurts so bad, I can hardly walk!" The doctor slowly eyed him from head to toe, paused and then said, "Mr. Cohen, just how old are you?" "98!" Cohen announced proudly. The doctor just sighed, and looked at him again. Finally he said, "Sir, I'm sorry. I mean just look at you. You're practically 100 years old, and you're complaining that your knee hurts? What do you expect? Old man Cohen replied, "Well, Doc, my other knee is 98 years old too, and it don't hurt!"

Old man Cohen, like my mother didn't stop demanding, expecting things from life just because they were old. Old age does not need to be a time of fears and tears, it is a time to fight and wrest every ounce of joy and wonder that life still has to offer.

Ari reminded me of our cousin living in Israel, in suburban Tel Aviv, who runs nursing homes. This is one of those things I love about Israel – he is by all measure a secular Israeli – but once while giving us a tour of one of his facilities he taught us some torah – and it stayed with Ari and he reminded me of it. It is a good piece of torah. Our cousin encounters the challenges of old age day in and day out. And he turns to us and says, "You know the verse from the Bible, the verse from Leviticus – *mipnay sayvah takum- Rise before the elderly?*" Of course we knew the verse – in fact every Israeli does as it is quoted on the buses as an admonition to give your seat to someone who might need it more than you. (What a country!) Then my cousin taught us his torah – he said, here is how I understand that verse – *mipney sayvah, TAKUM!* When faced with old age, get up! Stand up to the challenge. Face it head on.

I love that. Most of us shrink from the challenge of old age rather than facing it head on. Let me tell you the biggest mistake most of us make in confronting old age – certainly it is the biggest mistake that younger people make in dealing with their aging parents.

Too many people assume that the biggest worry in confronting old age is the danger of sickness and death. Older people who buy into this assumption spend too much of their time worrying about their health. They don't go out for fear they will fall and begin the slow but steady process of deterioration that leads to death. Children who buy into this assumption do everything within their power to keep their parents safe. "Maybe it is time to move dad to a home – I worry he is not safe in his home any longer."

But many people, as they age, come to realize that they have priorities beyond being safe and living longer. When parents fight to stay in their own home, they know how dangerous it is and they are aware of the risks – but maybe, just maybe what they are saying is that I value my independence *more* than I value my safety. Maybe they are saying that I have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer – that the chance to shape their own story is essential to sustaining meaning in life.

Children need to talk to their parents and ask, "mom, dad, what are your biggest fears and concerns? What goals and hopes are most important to *you*?" And then listen. Listen to what they have to say. *Shma Koleinu* – "Hear our voice, *Adonai* our God – for we each have our hopes and our dreams – and we do not stop hoping and dreaming no matter how old we may be.

Speaking to the White House Conference on aging in 1961, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel – ahead of his time, taught:

"One ought to enter old age the way one enters the senior year at a university, in exciting anticipation of consummation...[Our] potential for change and growth is much greater than we are willing to admit and old age should be regarded not as the age of stagnation but as the age of opportunities for inner growth. The years of old age may enable us to attain high values we failed to sense, the insights we have missed, and the wisdom we ignored."

It has taken our society more than 50 years to begin to catch up with Heschel's insights. One of the suggestions that Rabbi Cowan and Dr. Thal make in their book, ***Wise Aging***, is that we form a "Wise Aging Group." I am taking this suggestion very seriously – I will be sending out a flyer after Yom Kippur with the details of a class that will meet on Sunday mornings beginning November 1 and each week we will explore one of the chapters of their thought provoking book.

I am 64 and I look forward to exploring this new stage of life – my *et zikna* – I look forward to exploring it with curiosity, enthusiasm and spirit. In this brave new world, there is a lot to learn, and to try: choices to make, risks to take, grief and loss to feel, but fun and joy to experience as well.

I am 64 and I don't know whether I have 30 years, or 1 day left in my life. I know there are people I loved very much – some members of this congregation – who were here last year and are not this year. I know some who sit here today will not be here next year and I don't know who they will be or whether I will be one of them. But I do know how I will live each and every day that God grants me with curiosity, enthusiasm and joy. *Mipney Sayva Takum*. When faced with old age, I intend to stand up to the challenge and face it head on!

Now that I am 64, am I old? I don't know – it is just a number. What is the traditional wish that

we Jews have? *Bis hundert und zvanzig* - may you live to see a full life of 120 years – that was the ripe old age that *Moshe Rabeinu* lived. So according to that, I still have half my life left! But the truth is we really don't know the number--how many will be the years of our lives.

Many of you have already heard me tell one of my favorite stories about the rabbi who each year makes visits to the nursing home just before the holidays. He goes to visit Mrs. Cohen, greets her and asks: How old are you Mrs. Cohen? "Eighty," she replies to which the rabbi appropriately responds: "Mrs. Cohen, *bis hundert und zvanzig* - may the next forty years be filled with health and happiness. He then walks into Mrs. Schwartz's room: A warm hello and the same question: "Mrs. Schwartz how old are you?" She replies "I'm 100." The rabbi responds: Mrs. Schwartz, *bis hundert und zvanzig* - may the next twenty years be filled with health and happiness. Finally the rabbi knocks on Mrs. Goldstein's door: "And Mrs. Goldstein how old are you?" Mrs. Goldstein responds: "Rabbi. As a matter of fact, today is my birthday. I am 120 years old." To which the rabbi responds: "Mrs. Goldstein. Have a really great day." That is *my* hope and that is my prayer on this sacred day - that is my hope for each and every one of you – whether you are 20, 40, 60, 80 or 120 ---- Have a really great day.