

LESSONS FROM SURGERY- Rabbi Bonnie Koppell, Kol Nidre,  
Temple Chai, 5772/2011

Unbeknownst to any of us, when I stood here a year ago, I had a torn rotator cuff which required surgery last Dec., followed by many months of physical therapy. It has been a humbling and educational experience, to say the least, and so, tonight, when we are all confronting our own mortality, I wanted to share with you some of what I learned through this process. And, by the way, even if you're under 40, I'm talking to you! Rebecca Goldstein put it well when she wrote that, "Getting older is not some sort of disease that only certain unfortunate people catch. . . Even you (emphasis added) will find yourself getting older some day. That is, if you're one of the lucky ones."

Have you seen that New Yorker cartoon, where a man is reading the obituary page and the headlines over each death notice read, "Two Years Younger Than You", "Twelve Years Older Than You", "Exactly Your Age." I think we can all relate! "The

really frightening thing about middle age", Doris Day accurately quipped, "is the knowledge that you'll grow out of it."

The encounter with death and the knowledge of our own mortality is not meant to be morbid, it is meant to be life enhancing, spurring us on to appreciate the precious, precious nature of the life we have been granted. Understanding that we cannot add years to our lives challenges us to add life to our years. We can't live our lives in fear of death, or the time will slip away without our ever truly having lived.

In his classic work, The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker suggests that "One of the crucial projects of a person's life, of true maturity, is to resign oneself to the process of aging."<sup>1</sup> I'm not sure that "resignation" is quite the right term. I do think that we maintain a responsibility for our physical and mental well being which transcends what I would think of as resignation, which somehow implies unchallenged acceptance. But there is also

---

<sup>1</sup> Becker, Ernest, The Denial of Death, NY: The Free Press, 1975, p. 215

an element of gracious understanding that many things do change as we age, and, while we can impact some of these, we certainly cannot impact all of them. We should not trivialize any of the challenges we face as we grow older, but we need to maintain perspective on our inevitable physical decline. As I contemplated my shoulder surgery, I was very aware how grateful I should be that this was simply a mechanical problem I faced, and not something life-threatening. And how blessed I am to live at a time where outstanding medical care can affect this particular problem. Let me tell you, it is also a deep lesson in faith to allow someone to cut into your body and move things around in there!

Letty Cottin Pogrebin writes that, "I'm not saying I relish each new sign of physical deterioration, but depression over one's ever-expanding waistline cannot compare with the existential angst brought on by contemplating one's incredibly shrinking

future.”<sup>2</sup> It has aptly been noted that the body is where mortality makes its intentions perfectly clear to anyone who’s paying attention.”<sup>3</sup> No one, I was reminded, is indispensable.

Granny D, that is, Doris Haddock, wrote an inspiring account of her walk across America at the age of 90. “After age forty”, she writes, “it’s always something. But after eighty-five, it’s always nearly everything.”<sup>4</sup> Now there’s a sobering thought, and a reminder to make the time to care for our bodies. Guarding and protecting our health is a mitzva unto itself. “It goes so fast, you know”, she reminds us. “One minute you are noticing odd changes in your young body, and the next thing children are popping out, running into the house with their high school and college friends and their husbands and wives and children, and you are suddenly wrinkled - your friends and family falling dead around you.

---

<sup>2</sup> Pogrebin, Letty Cottin, “Time is All There Is”, quoted in Berring, op. cit., p. 68

<sup>3</sup> Pogrebin, Letty, Getting Over Getting Older, op. cit., p. 157

<sup>4</sup> Haddock, Doris, with Burke, Dennis, Walking Across American in My 90<sup>th</sup> Year, NY: Villard Books, 2001, p. 84

Remarkable! Beautiful! And so horribly sad to be quickly gone forever.”<sup>5</sup>

“The secret to a happy life”, she concludes, “especially in your later years, is to help other people until you don’t notice your own needs and pains anymore.”<sup>6</sup> If Doris Haddock can have this attitude at the age of ninety, while literally walking across the United States, I think that each of us can look within and ask ourselves what more we can be doing to better our community, to move beyond our own needs and concerns. One thing we can do is to pray for each other- I was deeply touched by the many people who told me that they were praying for me, and I can attest to the fact that the sense of caring this expressed was highly therapeutic.

Our Rabbis were very aware of the debilitating physical and mental aspects of aging, drawing on the examples in the Bible - of King David, who was confined to his bed at the end of his days,

---

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 231

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39

unaware of the plotting of those around him; of Jacob, who, on meeting Pharaoh reports that "Few and hard have been the years of my life", as well as the Rabbis' own experience and observations.

The mind has been called, "the Bermuda Triangle of aging."<sup>7</sup> Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was once asked for his ticket on a train and couldn't find it. The conductor, recognizing him, said reassuringly, "Never mind, sir, I'm sure you have it somewhere." "Mr. Conductor," replied Holmes, "the question is not where is my ticket, but where am I going?"<sup>8</sup> That, indeed, is the question each of us must ask ourselves this evening - where, indeed, are we going?

I have come to admire those who achieve a degree of acceptance, which enables them to be examples of ongoing spiritual development even as their physical capabilities wane. Self-discipline, I have learned, is important - but it can only take

---

<sup>7</sup> Haddock and Burke, op. cit., p. 98

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99

you so far. The contemporary Israeli feminist, Alice Shalvi, writes that, "What I have lost in longevity, I have redeemed by profundity. Compelled by failing physical strength, I sit more, recline more, rest more frequently. But in those moments of physical nonaction and bodily passivity, the spirit can soar if I unleash it from everyday concerns."<sup>9</sup> Her words give me great comfort in suggesting that we can continue to grow as spiritual beings even as our bodies begin to wear out. As the sense of limitations increases, many people report that their patience begins to wane for what is perceived as meaningless or trivial, and they experience a greater sense of urgency to focus on "the more creative, artistic and spiritual aspects of (themselves)."<sup>10</sup> This re-ordering of priorities sounds like a good thing to me!

The great wisdom is to reach that place of understanding while one still has the physical and mental capability to enjoy doing the things one chooses. Here are some encouraging words,

---

<sup>9</sup> Shalvi, Alice, "My Body, My Self: Waning and Waxing", quoted in Berrin, op. cit., p. 181

<sup>10</sup> Gendler, Mary, "Cycling and Recycling", quoted in Berrin, op. cit., p. 92

again, from Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "I had assumed that from fifty on, everything would change for the worse, but . . . acceptance of my children's independence, renewed commitment to friendship, finding pleasure in spirituality and solitude, heightened perceptions of the natural world - all have been life-enhancing changes."<sup>11</sup> It's nice to know that it's not necessarily all downhill! One of the elders of our own community assures me that life begins at fifty!

Remaining active and involved in a supportive religious community is critical as we age. When my grandfather Hyman and my grandmother Ruth retired to Florida, they did not join a shul, because, frankly, they expected to die rather soon, so who needed it? As they aged, they came to acknowledge that this was a mistake.

As Jews, we have always understood that the community is incomplete when any element is excluded. When Pharaoh asked

---

<sup>11</sup> Pogrebin, op. cit., p. 265

Moses who was to leave Egypt, Moses answered, "We will go with our young and with our old". A religious festival without everyone present would not feel right. Religious life cannot and should not end as we age. We need our elders to be part of the community, and our elders need us. "The quintessential Jewish dance", it has been noted, "the *hora*, is not a couple's dance, it is a dance of community."<sup>12</sup>

We cannot impact the number of our days, but we can impact their breadth and depth. That is the challenge of these High Holy Days. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that, "When I was young I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people." As we age, as we embrace the gift of this Holiday season, we might ask ourselves - are we becoming the kind of people we admire?

---

<sup>12</sup> Moskowitz, Steven Henson, "For the Sake of Heaven: The Lines of Community", American Rabbi, High Holy Days 2006, p.74

"Life", it has been said, "is three words: anticipation, realization, and memories."<sup>13</sup> As we contemplate our vulnerability at this holy season, understanding our weakness and our frailty, we renew our commitment to live with the deepest appreciation for the days we have been granted, to continue to grow in mind and spirit, and to understand that each day is a precious treasure and a holy gift. May we all be blessed with wonderful events to plan, the realization of our dreams, and treasured memories to sustain us at the end of our days.

©Rabbi Bonnie Koppell  
Temple Chai  
4645 E. Marilyn Rd.  
Phoenix, AZ 85032  
(602) 971-1234  
rabbikoppell@templechai.com

---

<sup>13</sup> Engelman, Ben, "Until God Says "Come," I'll Make the Best of My Life", quoted in Berrin, Susan, A Heart of Wisdom, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997, p. 191

