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Reflections on Old Age

I want to tell you about my grandmother, Margaret Hulter. Grandma was born on October 7th, 1929 in Los Angeles, a mere two weeks before the onset of the Great Depression. Her childhood was a tough one; her father couldn't hold down a job throughout the Depression, so she grew up scrimping and saving, without the comforts of presents, or toys, or friends. Despite these challenges, Grandma was incredibly bright and when she graduated high school, she enrolled at Stanford University.

At Stanford, Grandma really came into her own. She delighted in her classes, she attended all the football games, even though the Cardinal consistently had a losing record at the time, and she had an active social life. One of the highlights of that time was her on-again, off-again romance with Joe Coulombe, who many of you know as Trader Joe. Alas, the romance was not to be, but it always made for a good anecdote at cocktail parties.

During her second year, my grandma took a class in pre-law and was captivated by the material. So after three years of undergrad, she enrolled at Stanford Law School, one of only nine women in her class. She graduated in 1953, one class behind William Rehnquist and Sandra Day O'Connor, and like so many women lawyers at the time, she could only find work as a legal secretary, because of the rampant sexism in the legal world.

This roadblock might have discouraged some, but my grandma was tough as nails, and she fought her way for a place at the table in the legal world. She opened a family law practice here in San Diego and grew the business over a four-decade long career. She represented a lot of Navy wives whose marriages would often end when the men would deploy. One of grandma's cases made its way to the California Supreme Court and set

precedent when the Justices decided that military pensions have to be divided equally in a divorce.

In her late 50s, grandma found the love of her life, Robert Hulter, and when the two of them retired, they traveled the world together. They made their way to all seven continents, including Antarctica, going to places like China, Mongolia, Russia, Norway, Morocco, and Italy. Their favorite place to go was my Grandpa Bob's homeland, Sweden, where they marveled at the natural beauty of the fjords of Scandinavia.

Grandma was a truly remarkable person. She was brilliant, she was successful, she was stubborn, and she was persistent in the face of challenges, heartbreak, and tragedy. She was a person who committed herself to sucking all the juice out of life that she could. And growing up as her grandson, I was always in awe of her tenacity. That lawyer mind of hers was constantly working. She would send me newspaper clippings in the mail, and always call to discuss politics and the news of the day. She truly seemed indomitable.

Well into her 70s and 80s, I never thought of grandma as old. She was so active, so busy, and so vibrant, the thought never would have crossed my mind. But about ten years ago, I finally began to see the signs that old age was affecting grandma. It was subtle at first. It would take her longer to come up with the right word in a conversation. Her walking slowed considerably. Stairs became a formidable challenge. She lost some height, and her back became a bit hunched over. Getting in and out of a car became a significant ordeal, as she had to spend a great deal of time and effort to get herself into the seat, then get each leg into the car individually. A task that would take us two seconds became a three to five minute undertaking.

As her health changed, visits to the doctor and medical interventions became a regular part of her life. She had to have her knee replaced in order to keep herself mobile. A leaky valve in her heart required heart surgery, an ordeal that placed tremendous stress on her body and required a lengthy recovery period. Perhaps most troubling, during a trip to Mexico, she contracted shingles, and lived with a nearly unbearable amount of pain for years. And yet through all of this, she persevered, always fighting back to get as much out of life as she could.

About six years ago, the struggles of old age became much harder. Her beloved husband, Bob, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and grandma was suddenly thrust into the role of caretaker, as she watched the disease claim more and more of his mind and his very being. After several years, grandma realized that she could not care for him alone anymore, so she hired four women to provide 24-hour care in their home for Grandpa Bob. By the time he passed away in late 2017, it was obvious that the caregivers were no longer just for Grandpa Bob, as their primary role had shifted towards caring for her as well.

Grandma's balance was becoming an issue as she had more and more frequent falls. She transitioned to a cane but quickly thereafter had to use a walker to keep herself steady. Even so, she would still have falls when I would take her to the movies, and oftentimes, getting her back up was incredibly difficult. She totaled her car in a parking lot, bringing an end to her driving years. It was at this time that grandma's cognitive abilities began to dull as well. She still read the newspaper every day, but I could tell it was harder and harder for her to remember things and understand complex issues because she became confused more easily. And the past couple of years, health scares became more and more frequent, as infections would send her to the hospital. Each time, it seemed more and more likely

that this trip to the hospital would be her end. Antibiotics would bring her back to health, but the lingering infection in her heart and the emotional and physical toll that these hospitalizations put on Grandma showed us all that pretty soon we would have to make agonizing decisions about how we wanted Grandma cared for and at what point to stop treatment and let her go.

Witnessing my grandma navigate through the difficulties of old age was an eye-opening experience for me. As she became slower and feebler, I found myself having to foster more and more patience within myself around her. This was very hard for me, as I struggled to balance her needs with my own time constraints and commitments. But beyond this fact, it was often an emotional experience to reflect on the changes in her life. Grandma never complained, and always kept herself busy, but I could see the world that she occupied became smaller and smaller. She could not travel anymore, and unless she had someone to drive her, she was confined to her home. Just going about her day had become a struggle to hold onto her dignity. The experience of witnessing this was hard for me, not only because I could see how difficult everyday life had become for her, but also because I began to see for what old age could mean for myself.

The fear and trepidation many of us hold for old age is painfully present in the liturgy of the High Holy Days. The issue of our mortality is brought front and center, as we consider the uncertainty of life, and the inevitability of its end. These themes wake us up like an alarm clock, demanding that we embrace life, live to our fullest potential while we can. But old age is highlighted in particular in our liturgy. In the Vidui, the confession to sin, we recite a prayer called *Shema Koleinu*, a prayer that asks God to hear our voice and not

deafen God's ears to our pleas for repentance. One line in the middle of the prayer highlights the intense vulnerability we can feel at this time. It says *al tashlicheinu l'eit zikna kich'lot koacheinu, al ta'azveinu*. "Do not cast us away from You in the time of our old age, when our strength has left us. Do not abandon us!" This desperate plea was written in the middle ages, when it was common practice for landlords to work their peasants to the bone and then callously evict them and cast them out when they became too old to work any more. This prayer reflects the insecurity that in our old age, in our time of need and vulnerability, that we would be abandoned. That God would cast us out of God's presence, that we would be seen as having no worth, as being irrelevant and burdensome.

The stark reality is that the fears this prayer expresses are very real and cut right to the bone. Many deal with devastating financial insecurity in old age, struggling just to get by in retirement. Some have a spouse that dies years or decades before they do, and they have difficulty redefining their lives without the companionship of their most intimate partner. Still others find themselves struggling to find the next meaningful project or to do list after transitioning out of their career. Many have to navigate losing physical capabilities and mental acuity. Perhaps most challenging is when people lose independence and become dependent on others. To put it bluntly, getting old is really hard. And it is for this reason that our society fears and loathes aging so intensely.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book of essays called *The Insecurity of Freedom*, wrote about this fear in an essay entitled "To Grow in Wisdom." He writes: "The typical attitude to old age is characterized by fear, confusion, absurdity, self-deception, and dishonesty. It is painful and bizarre... In enabling us to reach old age, medical science may think that it gave us a blessing; however, we continue to act as if it were a disease. More

money and time are spent on the art of concealing the signs of old age than on the art of dealing with heart disease or cancer... A white hair is an abomination. Being old is a defeat, something to be ashamed of. Authenticity and honesty of existence are readily exchanged for false luster, for camouflage, sham and deception.”

When we take a glance at our culture, these words of Heschel ring quite true. Our culture is singularly obsessed with youth. Actors and actresses who cross the threshold of 40, or even 35, stop getting roles. Once a person crosses the age of 30, it suddenly becomes gauche to speak of their age. Middle age is not a cause for celebration; it is a time of existential crisis and meltdown. We do anything we can to hold onto that precious, intangible quality of youth—eye cream, facemasks, liposuction, plastic surgery, expensive sports cars, the list goes on and on and on.

Now, there is nothing wrong with appreciating youth. The freshness and innovativeness of the young is admirable, and it is important for us to take young people seriously. But when our obsession with youth becomes an idolatry, an all-consuming obsession, we not only feed into hysteria over old age, we also contribute to a culture that devalues the old and inhibits them from living dignified lives.

Consider the fact that our San Diego Federation has been fundraising for almost a year for Holocaust survivors. In their ongoing work in helping seniors age in place and age in dignity, the Federation did a study about how the Holocaust survivors in San Diego county are living. What they found shocked them—seniors with dementia and physical disabilities who did not have the help they needed, unsustainable living situations, people whose financial resources had been depleted and who were struggling to make ends meet in a dignified way. The Federation’s Stand with Survivors effort is a necessary and noble

endeavor to give dignity to those who are so deserving of it. The fact that this campaign is necessary, however, is both a *schande* and tragically unsurprising. It is simply another symptom of a culture that has not figured out how to give the old their rightful place in society.

Heschel writes: “What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference, yet we do not even grant them equality... Perhaps this is the most distressing aspect of the situation. The care for the old is regarded as an act of charity rather than as a supreme privilege.” Atul Gawande in his book *Being Mortal* asserts that in the past, the old had a place of supreme importance in society. They held a special purpose as the guardians of tradition, knowledge, and history. “They tended to maintain their status and authority as heads of the household until death. In many societies, elders not only commanded respect and obedience but also led sacred rites and wielded political power.”

As we reflect on the role that the old occupied in the past, we have to raise the question of what it is that makes life worth living. We cannot only think about how we keep the old and feeble from falling or from hurting themselves, but we have to think about what gives their lives meaning. What gives us a reason to wake up in the morning?

I believe that when we ask these questions, we realize that giving the old a life of dignity means that we must give them a life filled with purpose. I want to share two examples of what this might look like. My grandma always kept herself busy well into her 80s. And one of her favorite things to do were the Osher seminars offered in La Jolla. These seminars were classes offered by professors at UCSD and other academic institutions in the area,

mostly aimed for seniors in the community. My grandma would go to ones about current events and international relations. Probably her favorite ones to go to were the Supreme Court lectures that would pontificate on the significant cases at the end of each Supreme Court term. It was always good for her to engage her lawyer brain, after all. Grandma not only enjoyed going to these classes but also found a great deal of meaning and purpose in them. Grandma took life-long learning incredibly seriously, because she truly lived the life of the mind. She was an avid reader, she went to her Stanford reunions every year, and she always went to the public lectures at UCSD. Grandma shows us that just because we are old, does not mean that we stop learning. In fact, just the opposite. Learning has the power to engage us in personal growth and keep us connected to the world throughout our lifespan. Because learning is a delight to the mind and nourishment for the soul.

The second example of a purposeful life comes from the LA Museum of the Holocaust. The museum was founded in 1961 by survivors living in the Los Angeles area. The survivors felt a particular obligation to educate and inform others so that they could bear witness to such an important aspect of our history as Jews. The survivors who founded the museum became its curators and docents, as they took the role of educating others very seriously. These survivors continued to give tours, lecture groups, and educate youngsters into their old age. The museum speaks about 90 and 100 year old survivors who continued to give tours and found great meaning and purpose in this endeavor. I believe that this is an example of what it means to give the aged a dignified existence. These survivors had a purpose, and by continuing to work at the museum, they connected themselves to others and made themselves such an important part of the fabric of the community and a part of the transmission of history to the next generation. It is important for us to consider where

we might create similar institutions. Because if we can make the old feel that they are playing a role and that they are needed, that can be spiritually transformative.

Our society has a problem with old age. Shakespeare wrote: "Age, I do abhor thee; Youth, I do adore thee." Philip Roth wrote that old age is a massacre. And the Roman philosopher Seneca called aging an "incurable disease." As it turns out, though, when we can turn old age into a dignified existence, it might actually be the sweetest time of life.

Consider the work of Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen. She and her team tracked the emotional experiences of nearly 200 people over the years of their lives. The subjects were given a beeper to carry around with them 24 hours a day for one week. They were randomly paged and asked to indicate what emotions they were experiencing at the moment. Carstensen found that as people aged, they reported more positive emotions. They became less prone to anxiety, depression, and anger. Despite the trials and tribulations of old age, they fundamentally found living to be a more emotionally satisfying experience.

On April 3, 2009, Rabbi Joshua Haberman of Washington Hebrew Congregation gave a sermon on the occasion of his 90th birthday. He wrote: "A friend asked, 'how do you feel being 90?' I answered, 'Very surprised!' I thank God for the milestone, but I realize that I must now count my future years in single digits. This thought does not depress me, nor does death frighten me. Although the majority opinion about old age is grim and repellent, I have some good things to say about it. I find that in my old age, I have found a great deal of tranquility. All the important decisions have been made in earlier years. I have wrestled with my vocational choice, searched for a suitable spouse, created a home, raised children,

established myself in my career, and have no more need to prove myself. I have walked the walk, had my successes and failures. All the pressures have eased. I am more relaxed than ever. I take my afternoon naps, and what a joy to find on my calendar empty pages with nothing I have to do! I also find in old age that I am able to foster gratitude. I have become more attentive to old and new friends. In response to all the bad news in the world, I make an effort to be thankful for small favors, the courteous driver, the bank teller's cheerful greeting, the mail carrier's conscientiousness, the kindness of good neighbors, and my doctor's unfailingly prompt response to my call. Earlier in my life, with many years to look forward to, I felt like a millionaire in time, freely spending and wasting it. Now, that my supply of time has shrunk, I appreciate far more each day, each hour, every bit of knowledge and every moment with people I love. More than ever I am amazed. My dominant mood is a sense of wonder at existence." Rabbi Haberman died in September of 2017 at the age of 98. In the words of Rabbi Janet Marder, Rabbi Haberman left us with a portrait of how age can bring us to the heart of wisdom. Because if we believe that the best is yet to come, then perhaps it can truly be so.

My grandma's time on earth ended on February 3rd, Super Bowl Sunday. She was in her beloved home in La Jolla, surrounded by family and those who cared for her. Up until the day she died, she was engaged in the world, she was working on her projects, and she gave generously to the causes she cared about. My grandma showed me that despite the challenges of old age, we never have to see ourselves as stale or irrelevant. Our lives can and must be filled with holiness, and meaning, and purpose right to the very end.

As I close tonight I want to reflect on a poem written by Yehuda Amichai, called “A Man in His Life”:

A man doesn't have time in his life
to have time for everything.
He doesn't have seasons enough to have
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes
Was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love.
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history
takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.
When he loses he seeks, when he finds
he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves
he begins to forget.

And his soul is seasoned, his soul
is very professional.
Only his body remains forever
an amateur. It tries and it misses,
gets muddled, doesn't learn a thing,
drunk and blind in its pleasures
and its pains.

He will die as figs die in autumn,
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,
the leaves growing dry on the ground,
the bare branches pointing to the place
where there's time for everything.

I hope that if each of us is blessed to live into old age, that it will be as this poem says—that we will die like that fig in autumn, shriveled and full of ourselves and sweet with the intense sweetness of overly ripe fruit. I hope that old age will bring us that sweetness—that we will be content, tasting the very best of what life has to offer.