**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**Living a Long Life**

An awkward moment punctuated Pharaoh’s meeting with Jacob.  Pharaoh asked the elderly Hebrew patriarch, “How many are the years of your life?” (Genesis 47:8)  Jacob’s response, in the succeeding verse, was both longwinded and seemingly off point: “The years of my sojourn are one hundred and thirty.  Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the lifespans of my fathers during their sojourns.”  According to Pseudo-Jonathan, Jacob told Pharaoh that his life had been an endless saga of involuntary wanderings, from the time he fled from his brother, Esau, until that very day, famine having forced him to spend his declining years in Egypt.  Rashi comments that Jacob used the word מגורי, meaning sojourn, to indicate that his life was, sadly, dominated by the frequent need to relocate, preventing him from enjoying a settled and tranquil existence in the land of his fathers.  Jacob had long hoped for that opportunity (Genesis Rabbah 84), but was denied it.

Torah Temimah notes that several of the medieval commentators were troubled by Jacob’s break from protocol in speaking to a monarch on matters about which he was not specifically asked. Pharaoh asked only for Jacob’s age.  Jacob instead addressed both the quantity and the quality of his years.  Rashbam and Ramban posit that Pharaoh was shocked by how old Jacob looked.  Jacob explained that he was not nearly as old as his haggard visage might indicate; many years of heartache had aged him.

For how many years could Jacob reasonably have expected to live?  His grandfather Abraham died at age 175 (Genesis 25:7).  His father, Isaac, died at 180 (35:29).  Scripture states that both men were satisfied in their longevity. According to the Midrash, in ancient days people believed that they would likely live to roughly the same age as did one of their parents (Genesis Rabbah 65). This explains why Isaac, at the age of 123 (nearing the 127 years reached by Sarah), felt the urgent need to bless Esau:  “I am old now and do not know how soon I may die.” (Genesis 27:2)

The Midrash asserts that Jacob would have lived to 180, but was punished by God for complaining to Pharaoh about his lot in life.  There are thirty-three words in Genesis 47:8-9.  Thus – and measure for measure -- Jacob’s life was shortened by thirty-three years.  He died at age 147 (Genesis Rabbah 95).  Interestingly, this commentary by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai claims that Jacob was punished not only for his own words, but also because Pharaoh even asked the question.  That is, feeling sorry for yourself, or thinking that God may have treated you unfairly, is bad not only in itself but because those feeling tend to be reflected in your demeanor such that others are induced to inquire about your emotional state – and, then, to listen to your feeling sorry for yourself.

To wish someone long life, it is customary to say “Until 120.”  In Yiddish, this is *biz hundert un tsvantsik*; in Hebrew, it is עד מאה ועשרים.  Popular Jewish belief is that nobody lives past that age.  Some found a source for that belief in God’s statement on the eve of the Flood: “My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.” (Genesis 6:3).  Assuming that the reference to 120 years relates to the lifespan of somewhat more modern humans, this verse serves to explain why the exaggerated life spans of the antediluvians gave way to more normal numbers in later generations.

Ibn Ezra rejects this view.  He notes, and a plain reading of Scripture confirms, that, even well after the Flood, people continued to live very substantially beyond 120 years.  This obtained throughout the Patriarchal and Mosaic eras.  Only when we read the Books of the Prophets do we find life spans conforming to more modern experience.  For Ibn Ezra, the correct interpretation of Genesis 6:3 is that God allowed the corrupt generation of the Flood to have 120 more years to repent (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 32).

Another indicator that, for Judaism, 120 symbolizes the notion of a long life is that Moses died at that age (Deuteronomy 34:7).  The Talmud finds a hint in Genesis 6:3 for Moses’ lifespan by noting that the numerical values of בשגם and משה are both 345 (Hullin 139b).  A late rabbinic homily suggests that God wanted to destroy all humanity but was persuaded by the angels to spare Noah because it had already been determined that, many years later, Moses would be allotted 120 years (Midrash Tannaim, Deuteronomy 34).  Thus, humanity perforce was spared so that, later on, the man Moses could and would exist and would live to 120.

The Frenchwoman Jeanne Calment (1875-1997) lived to be 122.  And, indeed, no classical rabbinic text ever explicitly states that it is impossible for a person to live beyond 120.  Rather, the Rabbis conveyed implicitly that 120 years is enough time to lead a full and productive life.  Rabbinic legend compares Moses with the giants of the Tannaitic period: Hillel, Yochanan ben Zakkai, and Akiba.  It is purported that each lived to 120.  Moses spent forty years in Egypt, forty years in Midian, and led Israel for forty years.  Hillel went up to the Holy Land from Babylonia at age forty, spent forty years studying, and led the Jews for forty years.  Yochanan ben Zakkai engaged in business for forty years, studied for forty years, and led the Jews for forty years.  Akiba was an illiterate goatherd for forty years, studied for forty years, and led the Jews for forty years (Sifre Deuteronomy 357).  Thus, even if one has a delayed start on the path to Torah scholarship and Jewish leadership, such heights may still be reached, in one lifetime, if a person is blessed by God with longevity.

But do we really want to live so long?  Psalm 90, whose authorship is, alone among the Psalms, attributed to Moses, says: “The days of our years are threescore years and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years.” (Psalms 90:10).  For much of history, humans lived only until their mid-twenties.  Even as recently as the mid-19th century, life expectancy was materially shorter than it is today.  The Mishnah teaches that, at ninety, one is likely to be hunched over בן תשעים לשוח(Avot 5:21).  Basic daily activities become extremely difficult.  At the age of one hundred, it is as though one has already passed from the world בן מאה כאילו מת ועבר ובטל מן העולם.  Loss of one’s mental faculties means that one is alive, but not fully living.  [The Yiddishism “*oyverbotl*,” meaning senility, is derived from this Mishnah.]

That longevity is not always desirable can be inferred from the legend of Honi the Circle Maker, the Rip Van Winkle of Judaism.  After awakening from a seventy-year slumber, he returned to his family.  They did not believe his claim to be the elder Honi.  He went to the study hall but again encountered disbelief about his claimed identity.  He was accorded no respect.  He became depressed, prayed for death, and quickly passed away.  Rava said that this story about Honi fits the then-popular saying, “Comradeship or deathאו חברותא או מיתותא  (Ta’anit 23a).”  We surely know that when a person outlives his or her spouse and contemporaries, the world often quickly becomes a very lonely place.

To return to Jacob:  He regarded his days as מעט ורעים “short and bad.”  In effect, he failed to appreciate the time that God had given him.  We should not make that same mistake, especially with regard to years of relative peace that we may be fortunate enough to enjoy.

A moving and beautiful highlight of the High Holiday liturgy is Ribono shel Olam, chanted by the cantor before the Torah scrolls are removed from the ark.  In that prayer, we petition God for חיים טובים וארוכים, a good long life.  Two aspects of goodness are implicated here: (a) the absence of illness, physical suffering, dislocation caused by war, pogrom, etc. and (b) the ability to lead a spiritually fulfilling life of Torah and righteousness.  For any of us sufficiently blessed to lead that kind of good life, any failure to achieve the numerical longevity of either Jacob or Moses is not cause for disappointment.  A life that is good in these ways need not last 120 years.