



“Seniors”  
Rosh Hashanah Sermon  
Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe  
September 17, 2012/1 Tishrei, 5773

There's a midrash about three Jewish mothers, waiting for their fourth at the Canasta table in Fort Lauderdale. One lady says to the others, "My son loves me *so much*. Have I told you what he did? He paid for me to go on a luxury cruise to the Caribbean, airfare and everything." The second lady responds, "Well, you'll never believe this. For my birthday this year, my son flew all my friends down here from New York for this incredible party." The third mother shakes her head and says, "I can top both of you. My son loves me so much, he spends \$500 a month on this top-notch doctor, and you know what he and this doctor talk about during their sessions every single week? Me."

As I begin my third year as a parent, now with three children under the age of three, I wonder, what will be the subject of my children's future therapy sessions? But more than that, this joke highlights the role in our lives of the relationship between parents and children. No topic of conversation interests these three parents *more* than their children.

The Talmud shows us the centrality of this relationship in Jewish teaching when it assigns every parent the responsibility to teach his or her child to swim. We spent a lot of time this summer at the pool, and every minute is something new for them, getting their hair wet, getting water in their eyes, splashing around, swallowing the pool water. They love it one second and hate it the next. Learning to swim is both physical and emotional. It involves fear and trust, vulnerability and reassurance, discomfort and physical contact. It's the essence of how intimate and complete the task of parenthood is. Although I am now immersed in it in this one direction, I am aware that as life continues, the responsibility goes both ways. I share with Jaimee the experience of caring for our three small children. I watch Shoshana play at putting her parents to bed, giving us her blanket and Minnie Mouse, rubbing our backs, and yelling, "Go to sleep!" Then, I see my mother looking after my 97-year-old grandmother, Greta, who loves playing with her great grandchildren. But as I walked her back to her room during my last visit to California this year, it was the first time she hesitantly asked me who I was.

At the start of the new Jewish year 5773, I want to reflect with you on this aspect of our lives, both in our families and as a congregation. Two years ago, when the Temple held meetings to find out what was on the minds of

its members, the hardship of caring for aging parents was one of the primary answers. It inspired a group of members to action, compiling a web page of resources on services available to seniors in the area. People spoke of inviting their parents to live with them, finding another comfortable alternative, or helping them, as it's now called, "age in place." Many of these adult children are also working, putting their own children through college, or dealing with other significant life challenges. Perhaps the reason that honoring your mother and father is counted among the Ten Commandments is the surprising fact that for many, as we grow older, this commandment becomes not easier but harder to fulfill, and more central to our lives. It's one of the few commandments in the Torah that carries the promise that if we follow it, we will be granted a longer life – some have suggested that this reward might be in return for all the time we have spent earning it<sup>1</sup>: Even though my own grandmother lives in a residence that is set up to provide her with comprehensive care, my mother spends many hours acting as her advocate, checking to make sure her needs are met, looking through her mail and listening to her messages. She brings her friends to visit and keeps her mother company. She also spends a lot of time worrying about her mother, feeling guilty when she goes on vacation, and sad about the hardships of aging her mother has to go through, how upsetting it is to recognize you need help buttoning your shirt, talking to the doctor and making a telephone call. When I visit, I see my mother working so hard to make my grandmother comfortable and happy, and I have watched her go through a journey of her own feelings of anxiety and acceptance, frustration and empathy. Jewish tradition understands that this is an act of love, and it is not easy.

Rabbinic teachings resemble the joke I told at the beginning of this sermon, with competing stories of just how far each of them is willing to go to bring honor to their parents. They emphasize the level of sacrifice that is sometimes required of adult children of aging parents. They also describe the changes we face as we ourselves grow older. Some of us are farther away from this stage of life than others, but eventually it comes for everyone. We become more and more dependent on others to get through the day.

How do we meet this challenge in today's world? I believe the task of honoring our aging parents is fundamentally changing in our time – there are competing pressures like demanding careers and financial burdens – the fact that many of us are simply not free to be with our parents, paying attention to their needs, on a daily basis. But in addition to that, there are

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Yosef Sonnenfeld



two major changes going on in this generation that we as a community, and as a congregation, need to face. First, if you're like me and many others, the reason you can't do as much as you want to honor and help your parents is simple: your parents live hundreds, or thousands, of miles away. And the reverse is also true. There are many senior members of our congregation whose children don't live in the area. This gives new meaning to the verse from the Holiness Code in Leviticus, "Mipnei Seiva takum v'hadarta p'nei zakein, Rise in the presence of an older person and honor the presence of an elder." I try to make an effort to be attentive to my aging partners in community here in Northern Virginia. And as my own parents, who are still healthy and strong, age in the coming decades in their home near San Francisco, I will be hoping that their partners in community will be listening to them and seeking them out, offering them some of the nurturing that I would like to give.

In this world in which families may live on opposite coasts, a global community requires us to honor our elders as if they were our own parents. Rosh Hashanah calls on us to begin our reflections on what kinds of Ma'asim Tovim, or acts of goodness, we should be adding to our lives. This year, I would suggest that we focus some of our attention on this area of our congregational life. Let's act as a Temple family in honoring *all* of our parents and all our elders. If you don't have a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother living nearby who needs your help, then lend a hand to someone else's. There are a number of older members who live right here in the neighborhood. Help one of them out with a ride to the Temple. There are others who need help getting to the doctor or the grocery store, or they could just use a visit. Spend some time at the Temple serving lunch at a program for our older seniors. If you're free more regularly, you can sign up at the Shepherd's Center, an interfaith volunteer organization that helps seniors with rides, paperwork or help around the house. The Shepherd's Center in our neighborhood currently has over 200 seniors who ask for services, and only 20 active volunteers. There is so much talent in this congregation that could add joy to the lives of our seniors – you name it: music, singing, art, blowing the shofar, leading discussions, juggling. I've led Shabbat, Passover and Chanukah services in elder residences, and it can really be inspiring. All of our help is needed, and this is an opportunity to make a real difference in someone's life, and perhaps even your own. I have been so moved by watching families adopt a new grandparent, or make a new friend, through fulfilling this mitzvah.

In addition to globalization, the second change this generation brings us is a senior population explosion of which we are in the midst. The baby boomers are coming of age, and according to estimates, by 2030, the number of



residents in this area who are over 65 is expected to double. Next September, for the first time, the number of people turning 65 in the Greater McLean area will be greater than the number entering Kindergarten. We can already see these changes at TRS. A third of the adult membership here is now over 60, and another third is between 50 and 60. This means that a huge proportion of our members have parents who have entered old age, here or elsewhere, or who are entering old age themselves.

Are we prepared for these changes, on a congregational and communal level? In many ways, I have no doubt that as a congregation, we will respond well. We will adjust as we begin to fill more and more needs of our older members. We will continue to develop our *programming* for seniors. Chesterbrook Residences next door, the affordable assisted living community which the Temple was instrumental in building, is offering more and more services to our aging members and those of nearby congregations. However, in some important ways, our larger community in Northern Virginia is *not* ready, and there are members of our congregation who have begun to do something about it. This has required them to do things that might be new for them. Being there for those who need you might mean you have to be loud, or make some noise.

A Jewish scholar offers the following example of honoring parents. He writes: "My teacher is one of the most brilliant and sophisticated Talmudic scholars in the world, yet he impressed me most when I watched him walk his aging father, who was nearly deaf, to the synagogue in our neighborhood in Jerusalem. He would stand next to his father and guide him through the service, shouting in his ear with tremendous energy and love – and absolutely no self-consciousness."

I find this story so touching. I imagine the scene around this man, the rolling of eyes and the shushing he might have gotten. But he refused to be quiet and let his father struggle, to let him feel alone and disconnected from the community to which, in his time, he had given so much.

This summer, 90 people gathered at the Temple, including Fairfax County officials and community leaders. One of our congregants, Sharon, who has been a member of the Temple for 30 years, recounted how she and others worked to build up this county's schools and soccer fields. Then she told us about her father, Henry, who is now almost 100 years old. He moved here to be closer to Sharon when he was 80, after he fell off a ladder at his home in Cincinnati and broke his arm. He wasn't ready to give up his independence, though, and one day, when Sharon and her husband Moe were away on vacation, Henry bought himself a house. Sharon had to drive



him everywhere he needed to go because there were no good transportation options available. She wanted her father to live where pleased, and she was willing to do this for him. But she shared her wish that she and Moe, along with others of their generation, could grow old more comfortably here, able to live and get around in the same community they worked so hard to build. Sharon's words meant a lot to those who were there to listen. Other Temple members shared their own stories. They talked about the need to address the problem of transportation as well as another important issue: the lack of local community programming for active and intellectually engaged seniors. This group, started by a team of TRS leaders and called AgingUP, continues to address these issues, building on the energy generated by members of our own congregation. They invite you to join them.

Temple Rodef Shalom is now 50 years old. It began as a tiny congregation and now includes over 1500 households. We owe so much to our founding and pioneer members, who worked to build not only this congregation, but the communal institutions and the tremendous success of Northern Virginia. Now we have a holy obligation to ensure those people can enjoy their retirement in the place they call home.

My 97-year-old grandmother Greta, who fled from Germany to San Francisco in 1938, has led a great life, full of struggle and joy. She is central to who I am as a person, a Jew and a rabbi. Whenever I visit her, I am uplifted by her and her friends, throwing dinner parties for each other in the dining room, fussing over each other's great grandchildren, and looking out for each other. I am moved by what these people have contributed to their community and the world. Back here, when I visit a member of *our congregation* in one of the *local* assisted living communities, I picture some guy just like me, far away, stopping to say hello to my grandmother as she sits waiting for the dining room to open for dinner. And that gives me tremendous comfort. *Mipnei Seiva takum v'hadarta p'nei zakein*. Rise in the presence of an older person and honor the presence of an elder.