

Fulfillment versus Fulfilling a Life's Mission: Aging in Psychosocial Theory and Judaism

Akiva Turner*

Department of Health Sciences, Nova Southeastern University, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Akiva Turner, Department of Health Sciences, Nova Southeastern University, USA.

Received: March 01, 2018; **Published:** April 28, 2018

Abstract

The author contrasts elderly stages of secular psychosocial theories with biblical and rabbinic texts. In doing so, the author concludes that psychosocial theory may be inconsistent with Jewish teachings because of its focus on earlier accomplishments, ego, fulfillment based upon past experiences, and/or physical or social contributions, instead of a continuous divinely infused activity in the world.

Keywords: *Psychosocial Theory, Judaism, Aging, Retirement, Spirituality, Wisdom*

Introduction

Two elderly ladies, Miriam and Naomi, meet for the first time for many, many years and decide to catch up on things over a coffee and a bagel. "So, Miriam," says Naomi, "it's been a long time. How have you been getting on?" "Oy, Naomi," replies Miriam, "you shouldn't have asked me that question. I think old age is terrible. I'm 75 years old and I'm 5 foot 3 inches tall. Yet when I was in my twenties, I was nearly 5 foot 6 inches tall." "I know exactly how you feel," says Naomi. "When I was twenty-one, I was 5 foot 5 inches tall. But now I'm nearing eighty, I'm only 5 foot 2 inches tall. Old age really stinks." Miriam and Naomi do not know that sitting right behind them is Rabbi Levy. As he gets up to leave, Rabbi Levy says to them, "Ladies, I wish you long life. Please G-d you should both live to 4 foot eleven inches tall" [1].

In some societies, the elderly are not respected, are expected to retire, are considered a burden on society, become socially isolated and/or rejected. Although some elderly Jews may share these experiences, particularly those living in secular societies, Judaism does not support such societal actions and norms. In Judaism, old age does indeed represent a diminishing of the physical. However, concurrent with a diminished physical condition, Judaism recognizes an increase in wisdom, as well as a spiritual expansion, and emphasizes a reverence and respect for the elderly. These meanings have biblical and rabbinic roots. In this article, I will explore the meaning of old age in Judaism relying upon these biblical and rabbinic roots and contrast this with elderly stages of psychosocial development found in some secular psychosocial theories.

Spiritual Expansion

On the surface, Jewish teachings seem to send a mixed message about aging. On the one hand, aging is disparaged in some texts. For example, the Talmud compares youth to a crown of roses and old age to a crown of willow rods [2]. King David implores the Divine "Do not cast me aside in old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails" [3]. On the other hand, aging is exalted in some texts. In the Talmud, old age is listed along with wealth, beauty, strength, honor, wisdom and children as befitting the righteous of the world [4]. In Proverbs, old age is described as a crown of glory found in the way of righteousness [5].

Part of this mixed messaging is reflected in the process of aging in which the physical body declines with time while there is a concurrent expansion of spirituality. In *Avot*, the aging process is delineated by divine service and physical aging. It states that Ben Hay Hay

used to say "At five years of age, the study of Scripture; at ten-the study of Mishnah; at thirteen-the *mitzvot* (religious obligations that connect with the Divine); at fifteen-the study of Gemara; at eighteen-marriage; at twenty-pursuit of a livelihood; at thirty-full strength; at forty-understanding; at fifty-counsel; at sixty- old age; at seventy- ripe old age; at eighty-a sign of special strength; at ninety- the body is stooped; at one hundred it is as if he is dead, passed away and deceased from the world" [6]. Some of Ben Hay Hay's later stages appear to represent a negative view of aging, ignoring spiritual ascendancy. However, the Lubavitcher Rebbe explained that at one hundred a person embodies ultimate spirituality, disengaged from the physical world [7]. This because as the body declines, the spiritual expands and expresses itself. According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, "(t)he soul never ages, it only becomes more vibrant" [8].

This spiritual expansion is part of the soul's mission, and that mission is to elevate the physical world with spirituality. In a Chabad essay entitled *Growing Old*, and based upon the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the authors express it as follows:

"Man was not created to dance for hours on end. Man was created to make life on earth purer, brighter and holier than it was before he came on the scene. Seen in this light, the spiritual maturity of the aged more than compensates for their lessened physical strength...If the soul is nothing more than an engine to drive the body's procurement of its needs and aims, then the body's physical weakening with age brings with it a spiritual deterioration as well- a descent into boredom, futility and despair. But when one regards the body as an accessory to the soul, the very opposite is true: The spiritual growth of old age invigorates the body, enabling one to lead a productive existence for as long as the Almighty grants one the gift of life" [9].

Rabbi Simon Jacobson adds:

"If we were to measure life solely in terms of material gain and productivity, then we would inevitably see the physical weakening of old age as a liability. But because man is primarily a spiritual being, whose true wealth is measured in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual gains, we recognize that the soul is the primary force in life. And the soul, unlike the body, never ages; it only grows" [8].

Wisdom and Honor

In addition to acknowledging a spiritual expansion with age, Judaism also partners old age with wisdom. In the Talmud, the sages point out that the term "*zaken*" or old stands for "*ze shekinah chochmah*" (one who has attained wisdom), and elsewhere state that old age is suited for study as is youth for martial arts [10,11]. Further, the Rabbis of the Talmud recognized that we could learn from the wisdom of our elders [12].

Along with this wisdom comes honor. In the Torah, Jews are instructed to "rise in the presence of an old person and you should honor the presence of a sage. You should fear your G-d. I am your G-d" [13]. In accordance with this instruction, the first row of seats on public buses in Israel is marked with a sign displaying the message "Honor the elderly".

Judaism teaches us to honor the elderly even if their mental faculties are diminished. The source for this is the writing of the Ten Commandments. When Moses returned from Mt. Sinai carrying the first set of tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, he found that the Israelites had made and were worshipping an idolatrous golden calf. When Moses saw this, he broke the tablets. After the creation of a second set of tablets, the whole unbroken second set was placed in the Ark alongside the first broken set. This teaches that even though the first set was broken, it was still given honor, and just as an elderly person with diminished capacity may be broken, honor is still due [14]. As we are reminded in the Talmud, we are to be careful with the honor of an elderly person who has involuntarily forgotten his teachings because it is said the broken tablets rested with the tablets in the Ark [15].

The above sources reference the elderly in general, but other parts of the Torah specifically emphasize parents as well as older siblings, regardless of age. The fifth commandment directs to "*kaved et avicha v'etimecha*" (honor one's mother and father). We are told in the Torah that not only must we honor our parents but every "person should fear (revere) his mother and father" [16]. *Kavod* (honor) includes supplying them as necessary with food and drink, clothing and shelter, as well as leading them in and out. However, if the child can no longer afford to support the parent, the child need not become a beggar [17]. Reverence or to fear means not sitting or standing in one's parents' place or contradicting them [18].

As brought in the Talmud, the fifth commandment (*kaved et avicha v'etimecha*) has an extra letter (the *v'* in *v'et*) meaning that one should also respect one's older brother [19]. It is debated if this brotherly respect requirement applies only while the parents are alive, but Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef rules one should be stringent and continue to honor an older brother after the parents' deaths [20]. The Birkei Yosef says that one should also respect one's older sister, and the Midrash says that Rachel was punished for speaking before her older sister Leah [21,22]. One of the explanations for the obligation to honor one's older sibling is that an older sibling is a spiritual generational connection for the younger sibling [21]. This does not mean that one has to revere siblings as one does one's parents, but one should act and speak respectfully toward the older sibling.

Retirement

In *halacha* (Jewish law), a person should not be dismissed from a job because of age unless one of the following conditions apply: 1) There was an agreement in advance to discontinue work at this age; 2) It is the custom of the town to stop work at this age; 3) The person's mental and/or physical capacity prevent the person from performing the work; or 4) The person behaved in an offensive manner and performed unsuitable work. However, in the cases where the person is hired with no age restriction but became unable to work due to age, the community must pay full wages and care for the person's needs [23].

According to Greenberger, Jewish sources encourage pursuits in old age even if one is "retired" from the workforce. She points out that "Communal responsibility is a pillar of Jewish tradition; participation in communal affairs is obligatory across the entire life span.... Retirement from the work force actually raises expectations as more leisure time is available for meaningful social activities" [7]. She cites the example of the Levites who served during temple times. The Levites retired at fifty yet continued on as members of the temple choir and sanctuary for the rest of their lives [7].

Rabbi Jacobson suggests that, "As one ages... one should not decrease his level of activity, for spiritually, he is growing stronger" [8]. Further, the Torah describes Abraham as one who "grew old and came along in days" [24]. What does it mean he "came along in days"? Why was this added instead of just saying Abraham grew old? The answer is that each of Abraham's days was filled with learning and deeds. As each day passed, "his worth increased" [9].

The elderly are obligated to continue their Torah studies. Given this, the Lubavitcher Rebbe called for the establishment of Torah study centers for the aged. Hundreds have been founded in the world, called *Tiferet Zkeinim* (the glory of the aged) [9]. In addition to being required to study Torah, *halacha* also requires elderly men to continue to visit the sick and participate in the burial of the dead [23]. There are, however, a few limitations for the elderly. For example, an older man may not serve on a court that hears capital offenses [25]. Maimonides qualifies this to mean a very old man [26]. The reason for this is not directly related to age but to a concern that he would not be sympathetic to younger defendants as he has forgotten what it takes to raise a young person [27].

Rabbi Jacobson tells the story of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's response when he reached the age of 70 and some encouraged him to slow down and take time to rest since he had had many fruitful decades.

"The Rebbe, of course, had no such intention. On his seventieth birthday, after a busy day receiving such luminaries as Ytzhak Rabin and Herman Wouk, the Rebbe convened a special gathering....(At this gathering, the Rebbe) emphasized that the elderly must not succumb to conventional wisdom and cease to pursue a productive life. On the contrary, they must use their added years of wisdom and experience to go from strength to strength. To shunt the elderly aside is not only cruel, he added, but foolish, the faster our world changes, the more we need the experience and wisdom of our elderly friends and relatives" [8].

Psychosocial Theory

Although many psychological and behavioral change theories exist in, or are consistent with, Jewish teachings, some psychosocial development theories may be more grounded in secular culture and thought [28]. They may represent the cultural expectations of a modern secular society, and thus their application to religious groups, particularly religious Jews, may not be an exact fit. Erikson's psychosocial theory is one example of such a theory.

Erikson theorizes eight stages of psychosocial development. The focus here will be on the last or eighth stage, ego integrity versus despair. The eighth stage includes those who are in their sixties or older. In this stage, persons with ego integrity should feel a sense of fulfillment based upon accomplishments and experiences in previous years. They should feel a sense of contentment believing they lived their lives to the fullest. If they do not feel this contentment and fulfillment, they experience a sense of despair [29].

Being secularly based, this theory, and theories which focus on past experiences and ego, assume a more static, less productive, stage for the elderly. Although the focus on past experiences may cultivate wisdom and thus be consistent with Judaism, the goal of "fulfillment" in one's life assumes that there is not much more to do. This does not take into account the full range of spiritual and religious accomplishments expected in Judaism across the lifespan. Judaism is a complete way of life and impacts every daily activity. This includes how one dresses, bathroom etiquette, relationships between genders, what type of work is permitted and when, desired character traits such as humility and modesty, as well as study and learning requirements. These rules and activities apply across the life span and their purpose is to spiritualize the physical. Spiritually elevating the physical is the Jew's life mission which will continue into old age.

Given this mission, and based upon the religious sources cited above, when a Jew reaches his or her sixties, his or her life and accomplishments are not complete. True the material concerns contract as the spiritual ones expand, but no matter how much one has accomplished in one's younger years, one may not have yet fulfilled the entire reason why his or her Jewish soul was breathed into the body for a worldly existence. For this reason, one is expected to continue to be engaged in the activities discussed above: community, study, and the performance of certain activities like visiting the sick, etc. According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, not only should one not search for a sense of fulfillment in one's accomplishments or life, but to the contrary, one should never be satisfied [30].

Peck expanded Erickson's eighth stage by dividing the stage into two periods and by identifying developmental tasks [31]. Though this expansion on Erikson resolves some of the inconsistencies between developmental theory and Judaism, given its secular foundations, it still seems to neglect a spiritual expansion.

Peck identified three developmental tasks for the elderly [31]. The first, ego differentiation versus work-role preoccupation assumes retirement from work, something less stressed in Judaism. Here, individuals who have been closely tied with their careers must find different ways to confirm their self-worth. As already noted, in Judaism, those who do "retire" from making a living should increase in communal duties, Torah study and *mitzvot*. Therefore, this first task would fit nicely here except these duties are not done to serve the self, but are done to serve the Divine, ultimately fulfilling a divine mission. This does not mean that there is no benefit to the self from engaging in these activities, but the purpose is not for self-fulfillment or self-worth.

The second task identified by Peck is body transcendence versus body preoccupation. In this task, people who experience physical deterioration in aging may still enjoy life because of a value system in which self-respect, social pleasure, and mental pleasure transcend the physical [30]. This task seems to recognize some expansion in areas other than the physical, but still ignores spirituality and centers on the self.

Peck's last task is ego transcendence versus ego preoccupation. In this task, there is a movement away from ego focus when knowing death is not so far away [31]. This is consistent with Judaism but Peck still seems to focus on worldly contributions without a spiritual connection. For example, Peck suggests there is a desire to contribute more broadly through children and cultural contributions. Certainly these contributions could be infused with spirituality and divinity, but the theory does not incorporate this infusion. Peck does move beyond Erickson's sense of fulfillment, but this task still lacks the divine mission of infusing the material with spirituality, as well as the spiritual expansion accompanying aging; and as demonstrated here, this mission and expansion are inherent in Jewish views on aging. Put in purely Jewish terms, "Because man was created to spiritualize the material world, the only way to reach true happiness is through spiritual growth and achievement. And that means giving to others, loving and sharing, finding a deeper meaning in everything that you do, and recognize G-d in all your ways" [8].

Conclusion

Judaism acknowledges a physical decline in old age but also downplays more stagnant life stages such as “retirement”. It focuses on a spiritual expansion, an increase in wisdom, and continued activities. Less self-focus is emphasized across the life span in Judaism than in some secular value systems, but in Judaism, self-focus may decrease even more during aging. Further, the aging individual has not become unproductive as he or she may have not yet fulfilled his or her life mission, or his or her main reason for being created. Thus old age is as important a productive stage as are earlier years, though the types of productive activities may change.

Psychosocial theories may be inconsistent with Jewish teachings about the elderly to the extent that they weigh heavily upon earlier accomplishments, ego, fulfillment based upon past experiences, and/or physical or social contributions, instead of a continuous divinely infused activity in the world. However, Peck's three developmental tasks could be consistent with Judaism if they were transformed by these Jewish teachings. Absent this transformation, their application to elderly religious Jews may not be as fruitful.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

Bibliography

1. <http://www.awordinyoureye.com/jokes103rdset.html>
2. Talmud, Shabbat, Shottstein Edition 152b.
3. Tehillim, Ohel Yosef Yitzchak, Psalms 71:9.
4. Talmud, Avot, Shottstein Edition, 6:8.
5. Mishlei - Proverbs - Chapter 16: 31.
6. Talmud, Avot, Shottstein Edition, 5:22.
7. Greenberger C. “Gerotranscendence through Jewish eyes”. *Journal of Religion and Health* 51.2 (2012): 281-292.
8. Jacobson S. “Toward a meaningful life: The wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson”. New York: Harper (2004).
9. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1168/jewish/Growing-Old.htm
10. Talmud, Kiddushin, Shottstein Edition 32b.
11. Talmud, Chagigah, Shottstein Edition 14a.
12. Talmud, Kiddushin, Shottstein Edition 32b.
13. Vayikra, Torah-The Five Books of Moses, 19:32. Brooklyn: Lifestyle Books.
14. <http://www.aish.com/atr/Elderly.html>
15. Talmud, Brachot, Shottstein Edition 8b.
16. Vayikra, Torah-The Five Books of Moses, 19:3. Brooklyn: Lifestyle Books.
17. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 240:5.

18. Talmud, Kiddushin, Shottstein Edition 31b.
19. Talmud, Ketuba , Shottstein Edition 103a.
20. Yalkut Yosef vol. 2 on Kibbud Av Va'em 14:17.
21. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 240:17.
22. Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 74:4.
23. Steinberg A. "Encyclopedia of Jewish medical ethics". Jerusalem, Israel: Feldheim Publishers (2003).
24. Bereshis. The Gutnick Edition, 24:1.-note check quote
25. Talmud, Sanhedrin, Shottstein Edition 36b.
26. Mishnah Torah hilchos Sanhedrin 2:3.
27. Rashi on Talmud Sanhedrin 36b.
28. Turner A. "Chassidic teachings in modern psychology: Toward a more unified approach". *Journal of Religion and Health* 55.3 (2015): 973-985.
29. Erikson E. "Identity and the Life Cycle". New York: International Universities Press (1959).
30. Kalmenson M. "Seeds of wisdom". New York: Jewish Educational Media (2013).
31. Peck R. "Psychological developments in the second half of life". In Anderson J. (ed.) *Psychological aspects of aging*. Washington DC.: American Psychological Association (1956): 42-53.

Volume 7 Issue 5 May 2018

©All rights reserved by Akiva Turner.