

Abstract

A global change in demographics has presented a new paradigm. The notion of 'retirement' is changing; people are working longer and living longer. For years efforts to support older generations has predominately concentrated on welfare services but as a result of a change in demographics we are faced with a new challenge. These new realities have prompted us to ask the question "How can we support and empower older people, those that are healthy, yet who in today's society feel isolated and undervalued?"

In this paper we seek to identify, traditional Judaic teachings, values and traditions that offer valuable practical and moral insights to help us answer this question. In doing so, we show how Judaism is able to contribute towards our understanding of how to enrich the lives of our elders.

This paper is by no means exhaustive. However, it offers an overview of key sources upon which further research can be based. This paper highlights the importance of the older generations and the value that Judaism places on them. It advocates that more time must be spent in developing awareness of and opportunities for our elders. Appropriate action research projects are suggested within the context of the sources.

**Tag Institute For
Jewish Social Values**

February 2012

By Rabbi David Sedley
Edited by Rabbi Yossi Ives

www.taginstitute.org

Contents Page

1. Introduction	3
2. Two types of ‘ageing’	3
3. Enriching Ageing	5
4. Valuing Elders	6
5. Continuing Life’s Path	12
6. Elders as a Repository of Knowledge and as Teachers	15
7. Preparing for Death.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
8. Suggested Action Research:	18
9. Conclusion.....	20

1. Introduction

'Elder' is used as a term of the highest respect by the Mishna and Talmud. The Rabbis are often referred to as '*zekeinim*' – elders. Even someone who is young, but is wise beyond their years, is given the title of 'elder.'

There are specific Jewish laws regarding the way the young relate to their elders. Most famously, "You must rise up before the aged, and honour the face of the older person; you must fear your G-d - I am the L-rd."¹

Ageing enrichment has the potential to prolong life and to increase meaning and happiness for older people by giving them the ability to continue in their traditional role as useful and productive members of society. Many of the ideas in this article show that older people are a resource to society and that creating opportunities for them to give to others can improve the lives of everyone.

We will first provide a number of traditional Jewish texts that discuss ageing and old age, and then we will attempt to distil from them universal messages which are relevant to ageing in the 21st century.

Many ideas and values have been said in the name of 'Judaism' or 'Traditional Judaism'. It is sometimes hard to differentiate between a traditional Jewish idea, and a modern idea that has been repackaged using traditional Jewish terminology. This document focuses on those areas which are typically Jewish, both in terms of traditional texts, and in the practice of Jewish communities for the past millennia. We attempt (recognising and acknowledging personal biases) to derive ideas from the texts, rather than reading the existing academic literature into the words of the Rabbis.

The following are some of the areas where Judaism can make a contribution to the existing discourse and literature on ageing enrichment:

- Judaic literature is replete with examples to suggest that the more a person's life is infused with meaning and purposeful activity the more it is likely to be enriched. There is no age limit for this process of enrichment.
- Judaism values elders, and views them as leaders and as a repository of knowledge. They must be held in high esteem and treated with respect. Older people have gained from their life experience and have much to share with the next generation. In return, older people are expected to act in a way that does not cause undue embarrassment or inconvenience to others.
- Old age is a continuation of the path that a person has chosen throughout their life until old age. A person does not change overnight - there is no sudden transition from 'young' to 'old', but rather each person continues along a single path from youth to old age. Preparation for old age should begin while young. The more a person is aware of their mortality, the more they will be able to make the most of every moment and build up the skills and attitudes that will give them a satisfying old age.
- Elders are leaders. As such they have a role to play as educators and teachers. They can advise and guide others, and act as a resource for younger generations.
- Old age is a warning to prepare for death. This takes many forms – physical, financial, emotional and spiritual. Preparing for death allows life to be lived to the fullest, without fear. It also creates the comfort and stability of planning for an afterlife, and living beyond the physical lifetime.

Even though this document is divided into separate areas there is overlap between them and the boundaries between ideas are not necessarily clearly marked. Furthermore, Jewish literature is vast, and this document only scratches the surface of the potential contribution of Judaism to the field of ageing enrichment.

2. Two types of 'ageing'

Ageing is not viewed in Judaic traditional texts as a unified construct. At a very basic level, there are two perspectives that are borne out of Judaic literature. The first recognises that growing older can be a difficult and problematic process, devoid of dignity. Conversely, Jewish thought highlights that a life of

development and learning results in a continued maturing of the character into old age irrespective of the typical enfeeblement of the physique.

The former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen asks in a paper he delivered: 'Is age a blessing or a curse?' Even though he answers that it is clearly a blessing, he also shows that the loneliness, dependency and loss of faculties associated with age were not lost on our sages, and they address these issues openly. He sums up the Judaic perspective on ageing that long life is a great blessing 'so long as' the person also enjoys clarity of mind and bodily health.²

At first glance, this seems to be a controversial statement. Doesn't Judaism teach that even a single moment of life, whether in health or not, has an infinite value? Shortening a life, even of someone who is at death's door is considered to be murder. How can he claim that only a life of mental and physical health is a blessing?

The answer we propose is that longevity, like everything else in the human condition, is not universally good. There are two types of old age, the first being someone who throughout his life has accumulated wisdom and noble traits. He serves as a model for the generation behind him and thereby serves a vital function in society. By contrast, old age can easily become a burden to the person and to his or her surroundings with few redeeming factors. The mystery of life is imbued with sacred value, traditional Jewish sources alert us to its sometimes problematic phenomenological experience.

In the Biblical book of Samuel, Barzilai Hagiladi bitterly sums up what ageing can be like: "I am now eighty years old. Can I tell the difference between what is good and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats and drinks? Can I still hear the voices of men and women singers? Why should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king?" Ecclesiastes (12:2-7) even more morosely portrayed this dim reality: "before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets."³

The Rabbis of the Talmud discuss this passage at length.⁴ It describes in unremitting honesty and vividness the physical and mental decline that can accompany old age. Reading this commentary leaves one with the impression that the Rabbis were not in the least bit interested in blurring the brutal realities that often accompany ageing.

The Talmud describes a town where people never die, but when the inhabitants grow tired of life they leave the walls of the city and meet the angel of death.⁵ We see that there can come a time when a person is ready to die, and no longer fights the angel of death. We find a similar idea expressed in the Midrash which describes a woman who grew very old and had become tired of life. When she asked her Rabbi what to do, he advised her to stop attending Synagogue every day, and three days later she passed away.⁶ These and other passages from Judaic classical texts are quite open about the travails of ageing.

These descriptions contrast sharply with the highly upbeat portrayals of old age as the 'crowning glory'⁷ and as a great blessing. However, there is no contradiction, as both portrayals are true for different individuals, or even within a single individual. There are two types of ageing. The Bible and rabbinic literature are painting a nuanced portrayal of the complexity of old age. But they also hint that we as individuals do have at least some impact of which of these scenes play themselves out in our lives, if not for everyone, then at least for most people.

There is an aphorism of our sages which states: "The elders of the sages, as they get older their mind becomes more settled; whereas the elders of the ignorant, as they get old their minds becomes ever more

² 'Old Age in Judaism' <http://www.medethics.org.il/articles/ASSIA/ASSIA6/R0061079.asp>

³ 2 Samuel 19:35

⁴ Shabbat 152a

⁵ Sotah 46b. See below **Error! Reference source not found.**page 25.

⁶ Yalkut Shimoni Mishlei 943. See below page 26

⁷ Proverbs 16:31

confused.”⁸ Whilst this sounds harsh, the rabbis were highlighting that old age itself is not always a positive experience, and that the more a person has prepared for old age the more positive it will be.

Religious texts can be interpreted in numerous ways, as they can sustain multiple levels of meaning. However, it seems from many biblical texts that there is a link between lifestyle and ageing. Proverbs states “Fear of God increases years”⁹, which could also be seen as a natural phenomenon, namely that a life of striving for a higher purpose infuses a person with a more meaningful old age, perhaps even increasing longevity. Similarly, when referring to Abraham (and Sarah) reaching old age, the Bible uses the expression “old, coming on in days”¹⁰, which many commentators interpret to mean that they were not merely old, but that their days were full and worthwhile.¹¹

There is a Chassidic tale that a legendary disciple of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi was offered a blessing for long life. His response: “But only if it is not crass (i.e. spiritually empty).” There is something worse than a short life – a meaningless one.

The Bible states that Henoch “was taken by God.”¹² He lived a much shorter life than the others in those first ten generations after creation. As a pious man living in profoundly impious times, G-d decided that it would be better for him to leave the world, rather than succumb to the mores of those around him.¹³ This is also expressed in a Chassidic statement that one should eat in order to live, rather than live in order to eat.¹⁴

As noted, the Bible commands us to “rise up before the aged, and honour the face of the older person.” We suggest that there are two distinct imperatives found in this command: before those who are advanced in years there is a requirement to rise, in order to show a willingness to offer help and support if required and respect if it is not. However, the second segment extends the issue by calling for those who are classed as ‘elders’ (who have acquired wisdom¹⁵) to be accorded honour. This is enshrined in the various codes of Jewish law that view scholars and wise people as fitting most fully this Biblical imperative.¹⁶ Similarly, the Biblical Job states “In the aged there is wisdom, and those with long life have understanding.”¹⁷ The first half refers to ‘the aged’, whereas the second half refers to those who have merely experienced long life. We suggest that the former has become an embodiment of the virtues, which is why the higher term ‘wisdom’ is used, as opposed to ‘understanding’ which is used in the second part.¹⁸ Isaiah similarly distinguishes between these two categories – “Even to your old age I am He; and even to white hairs will I carry you.”¹⁹ – He refers to the latter type of aged as being carried as if a burden.²⁰

3. Enriching Ageing

Jewish literature paints old age in all its complexity, and in a nuanced manner. It challenges our existing Western value system in which older people often have only a limited role in society. Furthermore, the pervasive attitude from government and wider society is that older people are perceived to be ‘retired’; they have earned the right to sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labour. Researchers into ageing have noted that most scientists and members of the general public have accepted “negative age stereotypes as the norm” and that that even elderly people “take on negative

8 Mishna Kinim 3:6

9 Proverbs 10:27

10 Genesis 24:1. The phrase is also used in reference to Joshua in Joshua 13:1 and King David in I Kings 1:1

11 For example see Zohar Chayei Sarah 129:1; Tzelach on Yoma 86b; Degel Machane Efraim Parshat Chayei Sarah s.v. Oh. See also Rabbe Menachem Mendel Shneerson Likutei Sichot vol. 35 sicha 2

12 Genesis 5:24

13 Rashi ad loc. See also numerous Midrashim e.g. Midrash Agada (Buber) ad loc. and Zohar Genesis 56b

14 Hayom Yom, Shevat 10.

15 See Kiddushin 32b that Zaken refers to ‘one who has acquired wisdom

16 E.g. Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 144

17 Job 12:12

18 [[Description of chochma being higher than bina in kabbalah/chasidut]]

19 Isaiah 46:4

20 See commentary of Metzudat Zion ad loc.

stereotypes of themselves.”²¹ Additionally, as longevity continues apace this is no longer a minor issue, but now affects the lives of a significant percentage of society.

What this suggests for us is that the more an older person’s life is infused with meaning and purposeful activity, the more (as a rule) it is likely to be enriched. Achieving this through intellectual stimulation and brain activity is supported now by copious research suggesting that challenging one’s mind during older year lowers the risk of dementia and mental decline²².

The Five books of Moses mentions longevity several times (Exodus 20:12; Duet 6:2, 11:9, 11:21); invariably it is connected to the moral quality of the person’s lifestyle. Proverbs (3:16) states about Torah: “Long life at it right; at its left is wealth and honour.” The ‘it’ in this context is the Torah, and refers to both study of Torah and action through performing the commandments. This is perhaps the most famous, but certainly not the only biblical association of longevity and Torah (see also *ibid.* 3:2; 9:11). This traditional understanding is affirmed in the way this verse was included in the Synagogue liturgy in relation to the Reading of the Law.

Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen writes:

Our sages highly praised the virtue of longevity, to the extent that the Talmud reports a lengthy discussion in which the disciples of the great Mishnaic and Talmudic sages are their masters ‘On account of what did you merit longevity?’ Which commandments did you fulfil? What good deeds did you do? What his lifestyle that endowed you with long life? So we see that old age is a merit that someone should aspire to, pray for and be worthy of. As Proverbs (16:31) says “the crown of glory is old age, in the ways of charity it can be found”.

We find a strong sentiment within our literature to the effect that age is no barrier to achievement. One can and should be productive at every age. We are told that the great sage, Choni Ham’agel saw a man planting carob trees which take seventy years to produce fruit. Choni asked the man whether he thought he would still be alive to eat the fruit of the tree. The man replied that just as his forefathers planted trees for him, he is planting trees for future generations.²³ The Midrash tells a story of a man who at age one hundred was found planting trees, with evident approval.²⁴ In the Talmud (Moed Katan 9b) it is told that the wife of the elderly scholar Rav Chisda was applying cosmetics during the intermediate days of the festival. A disciple suggested that this was only permissible for a young woman, for whom presumably such things are important. Rav Chisda angrily rejected such prejudice: “I swear even your mother, even your grandmother, even if she is on the edge of her grave [is permitted to put on makeup.” This great sage objected to any disapproval of an older woman wanting to look good and having a youthful attitude to life.

4. Valuing Elders

Older people are viewed as an important segment of society. “The end of the matter is better than the beginning,” states Ecclesiastes.²⁵ The Midrash states that the exodus from Egypt (and thus the birth of the Jewish nation) was only possible because of the elders.²⁶

According to Jewish tradition, the concept of old age, and the physical signs and illnesses that accompany ageing were given to us in answer to prayers of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob.²⁷ Even in the Messianic era, when the world will be in its ideal state, there will still be older people. “The old men and the old women will still sit in the streets of Jerusalem.”²⁸

The Talmud tells us something interesting about the coins that Abraham manufactured:

21 Successful ageing: from cell to self (2004) Lupien, S. J. and Wan N., The Royal Society.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1693425/pdf/15347532.pdf>

22 The Lancet Neurology, Volume 3, Issue 6, Pages 343-353 L. Fratiglioni, S.Paillard-Borg, B. Winblad

<http://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S1474442204007677?via=sd&cc=y>

23 Taanit 23a

24 Tanchuma Kedoshim 8; Leviticus Rabba 25:5

25 Ecclesiastes 7:8

26 Midrash Shochar Tov Psalms 119 and Yalkut Reuveni Exodus (p. 13)

27 See footnotes **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

28 Zachariah 8:4

TAG-Institute: Jewish Perspective on Ageing

Our Rabbis taught: What was the coin of Jerusalem? The names David and Solomon were on one side and the word Jerusalem on the other. What was the coin of the patriarch Abraham? — An old man and an old woman on the one side, and a young man and a young woman on the other.²⁹

The Davidic dynasty and Jerusalem were the two most important things in the entire nation. It was appropriate that they should be represented on the coinage because they were central to the nation. But central for Abraham was to represent both the young and the old. Rashi³⁰ explains that the old man and woman represent Abraham and Sarah, while the young couple represent Isaac and Rebecca. This shows us the equal and central importance of both young and old.

Yet the value and meaning of old age is based on having some contribution to make to society. If society has no role for their elders, or if the older people have nothing to occupy their time and energies, then there is a breakdown of society and of the silver years of ageing. Wong³¹ defines successful ageing as “having a positive meaning and purpose in life, even when one’s physical health is failing.”

If the older person has no function or purpose in life they will hasten their own end. “Rabbi Yossi says: A person only ever dies from having nothing to do.” This is a restatement of the verse in Job that, “The old lion perishes for lack of prey, and the whelps of the lioness are scattered abroad.”³²

Furthermore, as one gets older, the words of Hillel from the Mishnah ring true more and more – “If not now – when?”³³ There is a sense of urgency and awareness that time is slipping away, and that every moment is precious. But time can only be valuable if there is some purpose with which to fill it.

a. Old age is a reward for performance of mitzvot.

The Torah states several times that reward for performing mitzvot is old age. “That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which G-d swore to your fathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth.”³⁴

Old age is a blessing. It should not be perceived as a burden, and older person people should be held in the highest esteem for having earned this blessing. Similarly we should also try to understand what we can learn from the actions that led us to receive this blessing. The Talmud states that:

They said to Rabbi Yochanan that there are older people in Bavel. He was amazed and said, “The verse states, ‘In order that your days will be lengthened, and the days of your children, on the land [of Israel].’³⁵ But it doesn’t promise long life outside of Israel!” Then they said to him that in Bavel everyone comes early in the morning to the Synagogue and leaves late at night. Then he said, “That is what has enabled them to live a long life. This is like the statement of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi to his children, ‘Rise early and stay up late, and go to the Synagogue, so that you will have a long life.’”³⁶

Elsewhere in the Talmud we read of some students who asked their teacher in what merit he lived such a long life:

It was stated: The students asked Rav Adda bar Ahava, ‘in what merit did you live so long?’ He answered them, ‘in my entire life I was never strict with my family, and I never walked in front of someone who was more important than I....’³⁷

There is a custom in British Jewish communities that when someone is mourning for a close relative, those who comfort the mourner wish him or her ‘a long life.’ The intention is to bless the person with something valuable and meaningful.

29 Bava Kama 97b

30 Rabbi Solomon Yitzchaki 11th century French commentator on Bible and Talmud

31 Wong, P. (2000) ‘Meaning of life and meaning of death in successful ageing’ in A. Tomer (ed.), *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult*. New York: Brunner Mazel.

32 Job 4:11. Clearly the metaphor in the verse means that without purpose in their lives the elderly will perish, just as a lion that is no longer able to hunt his prey, or a lioness whose cubs have all left the den.

33 Ethics of the Fathers 1:14

34 For example Deuteronomy 11:21

35 Deuteronomy 11:9

36 Berachot 8a

37 Taanit 20b

b. Decline of the Generations

Underlying the entire concept of elders within Judaism is the idea that older people who have lived their lives well are inherently more valuable than younger people. The Talmud has King David asking G-d, “I have heard people say, ‘when will this old man die, so that his son Solomon can come and build the Temple....’ G-d replies, ‘I would rather have one day of your Torah learning... than a thousand sacrifices of Solomon....’”³⁸ Midrash Tanchuma describes how Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Avihu would walk along behind Moses and Aharon, and ask themselves, “when will these two old men die, so that we can take over and rule?”³⁹ Yet G-d decided that they would die first, leaving Moses and Aharon to lead the Jewish people for another 40 years.

The Talmud states that anything older is more valuable than something younger.⁴⁰ King David states, “I have become wise through contemplating the elders.”⁴¹

Furthermore, each earlier generation is viewed as being one step closer to the revelation of G-d at Mount Sinai, and therefore on a potentially higher spiritual level than every subsequent generation. Earlier generations are also viewed as being on a higher intellectual level. Both of these concepts are summed up in the phrase “*yeridat ha-dorot*” (decline of the generations).

The Talmud states that “If the earlier generations are like angels, then we are like people. But if the earlier generations are like people, then we are like donkeys.”⁴² Rabbi Yochanan says, “The hearts (minds) of the earlier generations was like the opening of a large hall; ours are like the eye of a needle.”⁴³ Rav Pappa asked Abaye⁴⁴, “Why did the earlier generations⁴⁵ have miracles performed for them, whereas we do not have miracles performed for us?”⁴⁶

The Mishna at the end of Sotah gives specific examples of the losses from one generation to the next:

When Rabbi Meir died, composers of fables ceased. When Ben Azzai died, the assiduous students of Torah ceased. When Ben Zoma died, the expositors ceased. When Rabbi Akiva died, the glory of the Torah ceased. When Rabbi Chanina ben Dossa died, men of deed ceased. When Rabbi Yossi Ketanta died, the pious men ceased; and why was his name called Ketanta (‘small’)? Because he was the least of the pious men. When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai died, the lustre of wisdom ceased. When Rabban Gamliel the Elder died, the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and abnegation perished. When Rabbi Yishmael ben Fabi died, the lustre of the Kehuna ceased. When Rebbi died, humility and fear of sin ceased.⁴⁷

Describing a time (before the arrival of the Messiah) when everything will be topsy-turvy, the Mishna says that “the youths will embarrass the face of the elderly, and the elderly will have to stand before the young.”⁴⁸ We see that normalcy calls for the young to respect their elders and stand before them.

From all of these sources we see that elders should be respected as an earlier link in the chain stretching back to Sinai, and a time when people were closer to G-d, Torah and spirituality.

The very basis of Jewish law and Torah study is to trace ideas and laws back to earlier generations, to understand how they viewed things. The most authoritative Jewish law in Judaism is one which can be traced right back to Moses— *Halacha leMoshe mi-Sinai*. There is a concept that a later Jewish Court may not contradict a ruling of an earlier Jewish Court.⁴⁹

38 Makkot 10a

39 Midrash Tanchuma parshat Acharei Mot

40 Bava Batra 91b. It is true that this is speaking specifically about grains and crops, but since it is an unqualified statement perhaps we can also learn from it the general applicability to older people.

41 Psalms 119:100. However there is another possible translation and explanation, which is that “I understand more than my elders.”

42 Sabbath 112b

43 Eruvin 53a

44 In Taanit 24a a similar statement is attributed to Rabba. And in Sanhedrin 106b a similar statement attributed to Rava.

45 He is referring not to ancient history, but to the generation immediately before his own.

46 Berachot 20a

47 Sotah 49a

48 Ibid.

49 See Mishneh Torah Hilchot Mamrim chapter 2 for details of this rule and exceptions to it.

In a sense this paper itself is continuing with this Jewish tradition, in looking to the earlier generations for guidance in the present generation.

Unfortunately, popular perception of elders, even in the Talmud, is not as the Jewish law and Jewish sources would want. The Talmud finds a biblical source for a popular saying:

Rabba again said to Rabba bar Mari: From where can we derive the popular saying: ‘When we were young we were treated as men, whereas now that we have grown old we are looked upon as babies?’ — He replied: It is first written: And the L-rd went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light” but subsequently it is written: “Behold I send an angel before you to keep you on the way.”⁵⁰

Even though there are several other interpretations of this piece of Talmud, the simple meaning is that older people are treated as babies and not given the respect that they deserve. G-d led the Jewish people in their infancy; an angel in their later years. Similarly, the young are given the greater respect and honour, and the elders are left to carers and not considered to be as important.

In days gone by Jewish leaders were elders. Moses⁵¹, Hillel⁵² and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai⁵³ and Rabbi Akiva all lived to be 120 and only began teaching Torah when they were octogenarians.

“And Moses was 120 years old” – He was one of four who died at the age of 120, and they are Moses, Hillel the Elder, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, and Rabbi Akiva. Moses was in Egypt for 40 years; in Midian for forty years; served and led Israel for 40 years. Hillel the Elder came up from Bavel at the age of 40; studied under the Sages for 40 years; served and led Israel for 40 years. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai engaged in business for 40 years; studied under the sages for 40 years; served and led Israel for 40 years. Rabbi Akiva began to learn Torah at the age of 40; studied under the Sages for 40 years; served and led Israel for 40 years.⁵⁴

Shkolnik et al. write that respect for elders no longer exists in modern secular Western society:

This concept of respect for the wisdom of the elders no longer exists, in the modern hi-tech era, among the secular population. The secular society respects its elderly at best out of politeness, as a moral obligation.

This idea is echoed in Hernandez, who writes:

Nowadays, society tends to exclude the elderly. They are considered incompetent and are denied any responsibilities. This is far removed from previous societies in which, given their experience, the eldest members enjoyed a much higher status. They were considered wise, the teachers, and the guardians of customs and traditions. They were the transmitters of their peoples’ history.⁵⁵

Judaism teaches the opposite view – that elders are deserving of respect because they are closer to Sinai, and because they are leaders of the community. Unfortunately, often this is only theoretical and not put into practice, even with the Jewish community.

c. Dignity in Old Age

Older people are deserving of respect.. They are exempt from the mitzvah of returning a lost object, as it would be disrespectful to their honour to have to pick up lost items from the ground.⁵⁶

However, this right for respect needs to be used in a measured way. For example, while everyone is obligated to stand when an older person passes by, it is equally obligatory for an older person not to pass in front of people more than necessary, so as not to disrupt them too much.⁵⁷ Malbim⁵⁸ views this as an ethical obligation:

50 Bava Kama 92b

51 Deuteronomy 34:7

52 Sifre Deut. 357

53 Kuzari maamar shlishi

54 Sifre Deut. 357

55 Hernandez (2008) ‘Effects of Intergenerational Interaction on Ageing’ in Educational Gerontology, 34: 292–305,

56 Bava Metzia 30a

57 Sifra Kedoshim 7; Kiddushin 32b

TAG-Institute: Jewish Perspective on Ageing

If he does cause people to rise and sit for him constantly he will lose the splendour of old age, and cheapen the honour of being old. He will not appear to have favour or good counsel in the eyes of G-d or people.⁵⁹

The Talmud states that “there are four categories of people who the mind cannot bear... a philandering old man.”⁶⁰ This suggests that while an elder should command respect, with this comes an expectation of appropriately dignified conduct.

d. Elders as a Resource

Elders are viewed as a resource. In their old age, people have a valuable contribution to make, as King David says, “They will still bring forth fruit in old age; they will be lively and invigorated.”⁶¹

The Torah states, “Remember the days of old, consider the years of each generation; ask your father, and he will tell you, your elders, and they will say to you.”⁶² We always look to learn lessons for the future from stories of the past.

The verse states, “With old age comes wisdom, and understanding with length of days.”⁶³ Malbim explains that someone who has tested ideas repeatedly, throughout the years of life, gains a wisdom and knowledge which stands the test of time.⁶⁴

This is expressed in the Talmud “Even if the elders tell you to destroy, and the youngsters tell you to build, you should destroy and not build, for the ‘destruction’ of older people is really building, and the ‘building’ of young people is really destruction.”⁶⁵ This is referring specifically to the rebuilding of the Temple.⁶⁶ From the fact that the Talmud brings the quote without specifying the context we see that it is not only in matters of supreme political, spiritual importance that we must follow the advice of the elders, but we should take their advice into account in every area of life. The Midrash states this forcefully when it says “Anyone who takes advice from the elders will not stumble.”⁶⁷ The Midrash further says: “why did G-d command us to honour older people? Because they urge Israel to keep well away from idolatry.”⁶⁸ We find from the inception of the nation, when Moses stands at the Burning Bush, G-d tells him to “Go and gather the elders of Israel and say to them...”⁶⁹ Later in the Torah, when Moses says that he is unable to lead the people of Israel alone and provide for their physical needs, G-d says to him, “Gather for me seventy elders...”⁷⁰

*Yalkut Shimoni*⁷¹ states that the elders are the ones who establish and maintain Israel.⁷² Elders are the ‘eyes’ of the community⁷³ who lead and direct the congregation, and are held accountable for communal sins.⁷⁴

The Midrash⁷⁵ describes the People of Israel as a bird, and the elders as the wings. Without them the bird cannot fly. The same Midrash describes how G-d involves the elders in the redemption. G-d told

58 Meir Levush Malbim 19th century Bible commentator

59 Malbim commentary on Leviticus 19:32

60 Pesachim 113b

61 Psalms 92:15

62 Deuteronomy 32:7. See Commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra ad loc.

63 Job 12:12

64 Malbim's Commentary on Job 12:12

65 Megillah 31b

66 See Tosefta Avoda Zara 1:3. This is probably referring to the time of the Bar Kochba rebellion, when the rebels did try to rebuild the Temple (against the advice of the elders). This rebellion was eventually quashed with great loss of life and the destruction of the final remnants of the Temple in Jerusalem.

67 Exodus Rabba 3:6

68 Exodus Rabba 31:17

69 Exodus 3:16. Rashi (ad loc.) explains that this refers to the leaders, rather than all the older people, for it would have been impossible for Moses to gather all the aged from amongst the 600,000 Israelites.

70 Numbers 11:16

71 Collection of Midrashim probably early 13th century

72 Yalkut Simoni Joshua 8:33

73 Numbers 15:24. See also Leviticus 4:13 where the elders are called “the eyes of the congregation”

74 Deuteronomy 20:2. Rav Nachman of Breslav (Likutei Moharan Tanina 4(ve-et ha-orvim):8) blames the spiritual ills of society on the elders of the generation who are not constantly involved in increasing the spiritual light in the world.

Moses to speak first to the elders before going to Pharaoh, and at the End of Days G-d will also give honour to the elders, as the verse states, “G-d will rule from Mount Zion and Jerusalem, and will give honour to His elders.”⁷⁶ They will also sit in judgement with G-d at the End of Days, based on the verse, “G-d will come to judgement with the elders of His people.”⁷⁷

The elders are the representatives of the entire community. When the entire community sins a communal sin offering is brought. It is the elders who offer the sacrifice: “The elders will lean their hands on the head of the bull...”⁷⁸

The Talmud describes the order of prayer on a fast day. The fast was for lack of rain, and the day was dedicated to repentance and prayer:

The eldest amongst them says words of admonishment. It was taught: If there is an elder, he should speak. If not, the wisest amongst them should speak. And if not a person of stature should speak.⁷⁹

e. Representing the Divine

Older people personify an aspect of G-d in the world. Rashi, in his commentary on the first of the Ten Commandments explains that G-d appeared to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai as “an old man full of compassion”⁸⁰

The kabbalistic concept of the G-dhead (*Keter*) is described as *Atik Yomin* (Ancient of Days) based on the verse in the book of Daniel, describing Daniel’s dream of the four animals: “I saw in my night vision, and I saw with the clouds of the heavens, something like a man coming, and by the Ancient Days he arrived, and they [the animals] were brought before Him.”⁸¹

The word ‘*Atik*’ is also connected with the concept of removal from the world⁸² which applies both to G-d and to an older person. Withdrawal from the drives and desires of the physical world gives an older person a unique perspective and viewpoint. They thus represent this aspect of Divinity.

Older people also demonstrate G-d’s kindness and continual involvement in the world, as stated by Isaiah, “Until old age I am He, and until grey haired old age I will carry you. I made, I will bear, I will carry and I will deliver.”⁸³

The elders represent the connection with the previous generation and therefore with the miracles of G-d that occurred in the past. This is explicit in the verse, “Israel served G-d all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, and had known all the work of G-d, that He did for Israel.”⁸⁴ Abarbanel⁸⁵ explains that the elders showed the younger generation the correct path to serve G-d, because they had witnessed the miracles that G-d had performed, and therefore had a stronger connection to G-d than the following generation.⁸⁶

⁷⁵ Exodus Rabba 5:16

⁷⁶ Isaiah 24:23

⁷⁷ Ibid. 3:14

⁷⁸ Leviticus 4:15

⁷⁹ Taanit 16a

⁸⁰ Rashi to Exodus 20:2. This is in contrast to how G-d appeared to the Israelites at the Red Sea as a ‘mighty warrior’. These two descriptions are both included in the *Anim Zemiro* hymn recited at the end of Sabbath morning services, which describes G-d as having, “Old age on the day of judgement and youthfulness on the day of war.” See also *Mishneh Torah* *Hilchot Sanhedrin* 2:3 where Maimonides rules that an extremely old man may not sit on the Sanhedrin because he has cruelty within him. This is not the place for the much longer and fuller discussion that this idea deserves.

⁸¹ Daniel 7:13

⁸² See Rabbi Elijah Kramer (18th century), also known as the Vilna Gaon *Asarah Klalim* chapters 6-7. *Sefer Hamamarim* 5666 pp 112-114.

⁸³ Isaiah 46:4

⁸⁴ Joshua 24:31

⁸⁵ Don Isaac Abarbanel, 15th century Spanish/Portuguese statesman, philosopher, Bible commentator

⁸⁶ Ad loc.

When Rebecca, the matriarch, went to seek G-d, to inquire about the twins she was carrying, the Midrash tells us that she went to the elders who represent G-d.⁸⁷ “Anyone who greets an older person is considered as if they have greeted the face of G-d.”⁸⁸

Simon the Righteous was the High Priest in the Second Temple, and every year when he entered the Holy of Holies (the innermost sanctum of the Temple) he was accompanied by G-d in the guise of an old man:

It was taught: The year that Simon the Righteous died he said to them, ‘This is the year that I will die.’ They asked him, ‘How do you know?’ He replied, ‘Every year on Yom Kippur I was accompanied by an old man dressed in white and wrapped in white. He would enter with me and come out with me. Today I was accompanied by an old man dressed in black and wrapped in black. He entered with me, but he did not leave with me.’ After Sukkot he was ill for seven days, and then he died.⁸⁹

These ideas of the importance of older people, and the respect and honour which they deserve underlay the Jewish perspective on ageing. Older people are a resource of knowledge and practical experience, who must be treated not only with polite respect, but valued for who they are and what they have to contribute. The problem is that often younger people have a tendency not to recognise the value of their elders. Therefore, ageing enrichment programmes should facilitate interaction between generations, with an emphasis on enabling older people to fulfil their roles as elders and mentors to the younger generations.

5. Continuing Life’s Path

One of the ideas which is repeated multiple times in Jewish texts is that life for older people is built upon the life they have created for themselves throughout their years. It is not a new beginning, nor do they become new people. Just as there is virtually no concept of retirement in Judaism,⁹⁰ so there is no sudden change when reaching old age, from the path that a person has chosen for himself. This is true in the physical realm, though in the spiritual realm Judaism says that there is always time for repentance.

The Talmud asks why the *erech*⁹¹ value of a woman is reduced by less in her old age than the *erech* value of a man. It answers “an old man in the house is a burden on the house. An old woman in the house is a treasure in the house.”⁹² Rashi explains that an old woman is still able to continue with her work in her old age, whereas an old man is unable to do so. We must ask, if so, why does the old man simply not do the tasks of an old woman, and thus also become a treasure in the house? The answer seems to be that in the era of the Talmud there were certain jobs performed solely (or predominantly) by women, and certain tasks performed by men. Changing from one set of tasks to the other would have been difficult and traumatic. In that period a man would not have been able to get meaning from life if he had to change from his normal activities and tasks late in life. In a similar vein, the Talmud tells us that the harshness of the labour that Pharaoh made the Israelites perform was that he gave women’s tasks to men.⁹³ Maharal⁹⁴ explains⁹⁵ that a person finds it oppressive to perform tasks that go against his or her nature. While such notions of fixed gender roles jar our postmodern sensibilities, we may nevertheless tentatively derive from this that it may not always be easy for people to change their roles late in life and that people should be enabled to find a way of functioning meaningfully in the roles to which they have become accustomed.

⁸⁷ Genesis Rabba 63:6

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Yoma 39b

⁹⁰ With the exception of the Levi’im who had to retire from their work in the Temple at the age of fifty.

⁹¹ A promise to bring a donation to the Temple based on the value of a person. Unlike other kinds of donations based on value, the Torah lists specific values for *erech* based on age and gender. See Leviticus 27:1-8

⁹² Arachin 19a

⁹³ Sotah 11b

⁹⁴ Rabbi Judah Loew 1520-1609

⁹⁵ Chidushei Agadot ad loc. s.v. vayimareru et chayeihem

TAG-Institute: Jewish Perspective on Ageing

In his translation of the verse in Zachariah, “The old men and old women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each person with his cane in his hand because of old age”⁹⁶ Jonathan ben Uzziel writes, “The old men and old women will again sit in the markets of Jerusalem and each person will have his actions with him to protect him from old age.” In other words, it is how he has lived his life that will determine the best path for his old age.

The Talmud makes the distinction between Torah, which will stand by a person in old age, and physical labour, which will abandon him:

When a person becomes sick or old or suffers, and is no longer able to be involved in his work, he will die of starvation. But the Torah is not so, rather it protects a person from all evil in his youth, and it gives him a good end and hope in his old age.... Similarly it says regarding Abraham, “And Abraham was old, and G-d blessed him with everything.” We find that Abraham kept the entire Torah before it was given....”⁹⁷

This seems to parallel the Mishna⁹⁸ in Kinim⁹⁹ which says:

Rabbi Simon ben Akashia says: The elders of the ignoramuses – the older they get, the more their minds become confused, as the verse states, “He removes the speech of men of trust, and takes away the sense of the elders.”¹⁰⁰ But the elders of Torah are not so. Rather, the older they get the more their minds become sensible, as the verse states, “Wisdom is with the aged men, and understanding in length of days.”¹⁰¹

Although it contrasts Torah study with every other kind of activity, it is perhaps reasonable to broaden the category which protects in old age. Abraham lived before the Torah was given and is nevertheless used as a proof text; we may therefore conclude that this is a universal idea advocating for one’s latter years to be filled with meaningful activity and continued growth.

Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschütz¹⁰² writes at length about the importance of a person preparing for old age while still in their youth. He says:

In truth, while a person is young, the physical energies rule a person, and the spiritual energies are subjugated to the physical.... But when he grows old the physical energies become weaker, and the energies of the soul and the spirit rule, they have the strength and the power.... Therefore the wicked, who are not accustomed to be ruled by their souls, when they reach old age and no longer have physical energies and desires, become weak and despondent, they are considered as if they are worthless, because everything has changed for them. They do not want to follow the desires of the soul.... But the house of the righteous, which is the body of the righteous person, which has been accustomed to this from youth, even when the physical energies were strong, and who does not follow his desires too much... and overcame his nature to listen to the energies of his soul even while the physical energies had the upper hand... then in his old age when the physical energies have gone and the spiritual energies come, he is easily able to bear it, because he has been accustomed to this his whole life.... Therefore while we are still young we should minimise our physical energies...

Rabbi Eybeschütz’s ideas find modern idiom in the work of Flood:

Flood (2005) offers an alternate view of successful ageing that focuses on the individual’s perspective, encompassing physical, functional, and psychosocial health while adding the existential or spiritual domain. Using the process of concept analysis, Flood (2003) defines successful ageing as “the individual’s perceived satisfaction in adapting to the physical and functional changes of ageing, while experiencing spiritual connectedness and a sense of meaning or purpose in life” (p. 34). Flood’s multidimensional definition recognizes the importance of the

⁹⁶ Zachariah 8:4

⁹⁷ Kiddushin 82a

⁹⁸ Although it is included with the Mishna, most commentators understand that it is actually a Baraita which was added later

⁹⁹ Kinim 3:6 and (slightly differently) Sabbath 152a

¹⁰⁰ Job 12:20

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 12:12

¹⁰² Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz *Ye’arot Devash Drush 3 Tochachat Mussar*

individual's personal values and beliefs and considers all four domains of life within nursing's sphere - physical, functional, psychosocial, and spiritual.¹⁰³

This choice of life-path is nowhere truer than in intellectual pursuits. While a person is young they can develop either their physical capabilities or their intellectual and spiritual abilities (or both). The more they have prepared themselves for a stage of life when their physical abilities begin to wane, the more they will have a successful transition into old age.

Judaism stresses that a person must keep learning their entire life. There is never a time when the obligation to learn Torah no longer exists. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneerson writes:

The concept of retirement simply does not exist in the Torah. From birth till his last moment, the Jew is permanently enlisted in the "Armies of G-d," for he is "created to serve his Master" and cannot resign his post.¹⁰⁴

The Mishna in Ethics of the Fathers states, "Elisha ben Avuya said: Someone who learns when he is young, to what can he be compared? To ink written on new paper. Someone who learns when he is old, to what can he be compared? To ink written on erased paper."¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, Judaism claims that there a constant obligation to learn, which never leaves, even in old age. Rabbi Tarfon says, "It is not your obligation to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."¹⁰⁶

Russell writes that learning in old age becomes even more urgent and important, as there is a much greater awareness of the clock ticking and time running out:

Maslow's (1970)¹⁰⁷ notion that self-actualization can only be realized in older adulthood means that learners may decide it is "now or never." In Maslow's terms, faced with the realization that they have a limited number of years of life left, humans may seek to reach the pinnacle of their abilities in order to achieve self-actualization. The Being recognizes that this may be the last opportunity to accomplish a sense of self-worth. In relation to later-life learning, time as a dimension of influence is recognized by a number of authors who have engaged in extensive research related to later-life learning (Beatty & Wolf, 1996¹⁰⁸; Findsen, 2005¹⁰⁹; Jarvis, 2001a,¹¹⁰ 2001c¹¹¹; Wolf, 1991¹¹², 1992¹¹³, 1998¹¹⁴). All authors alluded to the significance and uniqueness of time as interpreted in later-life and the relationship with the ontological and existential need to learn.¹¹⁵

In other words, discussion of meaningful old age should begin while people are still young, and able to invest in their personal development for old age. However we define 'righteousness' in modern terms, the idea of ageing enrichment should begin as early as possible, to make the transition from 'young' to 'old' as

103 McCarthy, Valerie Lander (2011) 'A New Look at Successful Ageing: Exploring a Mid-range Nursing Theory Among Older Adults in a Low-income Retirement Community' in *Journal of Theory Construction & Testing*

104 <http://www.sichosinenglish.org/essays/67.htm>. Based upon the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, at the Farbrengens (Chassidic gatherings -- of Shabbos Parshas Eikev, 20 Av; Motzaei Shabbos Eikev; Shabbos Parshas Re'eh; Rosh Chodesh Elul

105 Ethics of the Fathers 4:20, Avot de-Rebbi Natan elaborates: He [Elisha ben Avuya] used to say: Someone who learns in his youth – the words of Torah are absorbed in his blood and come out clearly from his mouth. Someone who learns Torah in his old age – the words of Torah are not absorbed in his blood, and do not come out from his mouth clearly (Pirkei de-Rebbi Natan 24:4).

106 Ethics of the Fathers 2:19

107 Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper and Row.

108 Beatty, P. & Wolf, M. (1996) *Connecting with older adults: Educational responses and approaches*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing.

109 Findsen, B. (2005) *Learning later*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.

110 Jarvis, P. (2001a) *Learning in laterlife: An introduction for educators & carers*. London: Kogan Page.

111 Jarvis, P. (2001c) 'Questioning the learning society' In P. Jarvis (Ed.), *The age of learning: Education and the knowledge society* (pp. 194–204). London: Kogan Page.

112 Wolf, M. A. (April, 1991) 'The older learner'. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Northeastern Gerontological Society, Albany, NY

113 Wolf, M. A. (1992) 'Personal development through learning in later life' In L. A. Cavaliere & A. Sgroi (Eds.), *Learning for personal development: New directions for adult and continuing education* (No. 53.) (pp. 73–84). New York: Jossey-Bass.

114 Wolf, M. A. (1998) 'New approaches to the education of older adults' in J. C. Fisher & M. A. Wolf (Eds.), *Using learning to meet the challenges of older adulthood* (pp. 20–36). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

115 Russell, H. (2008) 'Later Life: A Time to Learn' in *Educational Gerontology* Mar 2008, Vol. 34 Issue 3, pp.206-224

smooth and successful as possible. Waking up to the issue of enrichment late in life when is a missed opportunity and poses additional difficulties; the earlier it is raised the better.

Summary:

Limited academic research has been done in the field of proactive coping for ageing. It is believed that Judaism, with thousands of years of tradition, has the potential to make a huge contribution to this discourse. Not only can discussion and preparation for ageing have a big impact on satisfaction in old age, but putting life choices in the context of ageing can also enhance a person's later years. Further research is required into lifespan of ageing and education on this matter.¹¹⁶

6. Elders as a Repository of Knowledge and as Teachers

In traditional Jewish texts elders are first and foremost the wise people who learn and develop Torah. In this sense it is a synonym for Sage, or (in the modern sense of the word) Rabbi. At Mount Sinai, it was the seventy elders of Israel who ascended the mountain along with Moses.¹¹⁷ The term for elder is *Zaken*. Both the *Sifra*¹¹⁸ and the Talmud¹¹⁹ interpret this word to mean "someone who has acquired wisdom." Gersonides¹²⁰ writes simply that *zakeinim* (older people) means *chachamim* (wise people).¹²¹ One of the requirements for eligibility to the Sanhedrin, the final arbiter of Jewish law, is that the candidate has to be 'aged' (*baalei ziknah*).¹²²

It is true that someone who dedicates him/herself to intensive study/learning is called '*zaken*', regardless of their biological age.¹²³ Rabbi Jossi HaGelili in *Yalkut Simoni* states explicitly that there can be *zekeinim* who are old and *zekeinim* who are young. "How great is *ziknah* (old age) – if they are old then *ziknah* is great because the Torah praises them with it. If they are young then *ziknah* is great because they also have their youth."¹²⁴ Nevertheless, wisdom is usually enhanced by old age. In the Talmud Rabbi Abahu asks Rabbi Jeremiah, 'Like who is the Jewish law [in this matter], us or you?' Rabbi Jeremiah replies, 'Obviously the Jewish law is like us, because we are older than you!'¹²⁵ The discussion then continues as to who has the better logic to support their position, but we see that in the absence of superior reasoning, it is the elders who are best able to determine Jewish law and practice.

Elders are the transmitters of Torah. The Mishna in *Ethics of the Fathers* lists the transmission of the Torah from Sinai to the time of the Mishna. It states that "Moses received Torah at Sinai. He passed it to Joshua; and Joshua to the Elders...."¹²⁶ King David declares "G-d, You have taught me from my youth; and until now I proclaim Your wonders. Until old age and grey hairs do not abandon me, G-d; until I have proclaimed Your might until the next generation, Your strength to everyone that is to come."¹²⁷

In *Ethics of the Fathers* we learn of the benefits of learning from the elders:

Rabbi Yossi ben Judah of Kefar ha-Babi said: He that learns from the young, to what is he like? To one who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine from his winepress. And he who learns from the aged, to what is he like? To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks old wine."¹²⁸

There are exceptional young people who can teach mature Torah, and vice versa, as Rabbi Judah says, "Look not on the jar but on what is in it; there may be a new jar that is full of old wine or an old one in

116 Quote Nuland's book and Address himself.

117 Exodus 23:9-10.

118 2nd century legal commentary on Leviticus. Kedoshim 7:11

119 Kiddushin 30a

120 Rabbi Levi ben Gershon 1288–1344

121 Commentary to Job 12:20

122 Sanhedrin 17a. Maimonides nevertheless excludes people of advanced old age from the Sanhedrin – see below.

123 See Maimonides's Commentary to Mishna: Berachot 1:9 where he elaborates on this. Also the point of argument between Tana Kama and Rabbi Yossi

HaGelili in Kedushin 32b

124 Yalkut Shimoni 12:21

125 in Bava Batra,

126 Ethics of the Fathers 1:1

127 Psalms 71:17-18

128 Ethics of the Fathers 4:20

which is not even new wine.”¹²⁹ However the default position is that age comes with the ability to transmit Torah in the best manner.

This point is made clear by the statement of the Talmud that Ezra did not come to Israel to rebuild the Temple until his teacher, Baruch ben Neriah, had passed away.¹³⁰ The reason that Baruch did not come back to Israel is because he was too old to travel, and therefore this source shows that learning from a teacher of the previous generation is qualitatively different Torah study than learning with a younger teacher.

Rabbi Jochanan, of the first generation of Amoraim, proudly states that when he was young he said a Jewish law, and found that the old Rabbis had been asked the same question and given the same answer.¹³¹ The Talmud says that G-d values the Torah learning of an older person, and in the future He will build for Himself a Yeshiva of older people.¹³²

Judaism specifically stresses the importance of grandparents learning with their grandchildren. “Rabbi Joshua ben Levi says that if someone teaches his grandson Torah the verse considers it as if he heard it from Mount Sinai...”¹³³ The concept of hearing something from Sinai means that there are some values and concepts which transcend time and in our modern era of transiency it is essential to also know that there are some things which remain permanent.

Nowadays this message is perhaps even more valid and important than ever before. In many families both parents work, and a share of the child-rearing falls on the shoulders of the grandparents. Conversely, encouraging intergenerational intra-family learning is important as families live further apart from the previous generation.

Of course, the Talmud¹³⁴ does not intend to exclude non-biological descendants. Students are considered in some respects as children, and therefore intergenerational teaching must not be limited to blood relatives. The Talmud¹³⁵ tells us that just as there is never a time to stop learning, there is never a time to quit teaching:

Rabbi Akiva says: Even though a man learnt Torah in his youth he must still learn Torah in his old age. Even though a man had students in his youth he must also have students in his old age.

The benefits of facilitating intergenerational learning and teaching are many. Older people are productive and useful, thus giving greater meaning to their lives. They are also investing in the future, creating knowledge that will live beyond them. The Talmud learns from a verse: “What do I learn from the verse, “You shall make it known to your children and your children’s children”? To teach you that anyone who teaches Torah to his child is considered as if he has taught it to his children and his children’s children and so on for all generations!”¹³⁶ Furthermore, The Talmud says that when someone says Torah in the name of their late teacher, the lips of the deceased move in the grave.¹³⁷ In other words, passing down knowledge creates a lasting legacy.

For the young student it gives them a chance to value older people, and to benefit from their wisdom and positive role model, in addition to the learning itself. Strom and Strom write that:

For students the benefits are receiving individual attention, getting to know people outside their age group, and learning that older people care about them.... Students who had been tutored by elder volunteers made significant greater gains [in national examination results] than did their peers who did not receive assistance.¹³⁸

129 Ibid.

130 Megillah 16b

131 Megillah 5b-6a

132 Yerushalmi Megillah chapter 2 (which is missing from the standard text) cited in Yalkut Isaiah 427

133 Kiddushin 30a

134 Sanhedrin 19b.

135 Yevamot 62b

136 Kiddushin 30a

137 Bechorot 31b

138 Strom and Strom (1995) ‘Intergenerational Learning: Grandparents in the Schools’ in Educational Gerontology p. 329

Hernandez¹³⁹ writes that:

The elderly people interacting with the young people reap greater benefit, both in the reduction of stereotypes and in the improvement of their well-being, than those interacting with the professional trainer, is related to the benefit in itself of intergenerational relations with young people (Gigliotti, Morris, Smock, Jarrot, & Graham, 2005¹⁴⁰; Herrmann, Sipsas-Herrmann, Safford, & Herrmann, 2005¹⁴¹). One of the reasons for this type of contact having such a positive influence is that the elderly feel useful (Burgess, 1960¹⁴²): those in our study knew that their participation in this service-learning program was aiding the students' university studies. These results are confirmed by other service-learning pedagogical projects (Marx et al., 2004¹⁴³; O'Quin, Bulot, & Johnson, 2005¹⁴⁴; Shaw, 2005¹⁴⁵). This type of contact has also been related to higher scores in life satisfaction among elderly people (Philip Tan, Zhang, & Fan, 2004).¹⁴⁶

Similarly, Peacock and O'Quin write:

Many benefits have been documented for older volunteers as well. Among the benefits is a sense of altruism, which has been noted to contribute to positive affect among older participants (Dulin & Hill, 2003). Also, those who engage in community service for altruistic reasons report higher life satisfaction (Dulin, Hill, Anderson, & Rasmussen, 2001). Indeed, increasing ties to the community—in particular, relationship ties to younger members of the community—can decrease loneliness, foster the development of new roles, and provide purpose and meaning in a life stage where limited opportunities for such may exist.¹⁴⁷

There has been limited research done into grandparents volunteering in schools, and also into grandparent-grandchild relationships.

One of the things which makes Torah learning unique is that it is not learning to achieve results, but learning for the sake of knowledge. It would seem that this is an area in which there has still not been research. All of the studies so far have been of grandparents learning with or teaching grandchildren within a formal educational setting. It is within the non-formal realm that, we suggest, Judaism has tremendous potential to add to the field of ageing enrichment.

Elders are those who have accumulated wisdom through experience. There is a discussion in the Talmud about whether the laws of standing up when an older person passes applies only to Torah scholars, or even to unlearned and non-Jewish¹⁴⁸ people. The conclusion (which is brought as the Jewish law) is the opinion of Issi ben Judah who says that the requirement to stand before an older person applies to all older people. He explains his reason, "because how many events has he experienced in his life."¹⁴⁹

Of course, the sources also recognise the reality that sometimes even the wisest of elders can make mistakes. There is a verse in Job which states, "He will remove reason from the elders."¹⁵⁰ The Midrash

139 'Effects of Intergenerational Interaction on Ageing' in *Educational Gerontology*; Apr 2008, Vol. 34 Issue 4, pp. 292-305.

140 Gigliotti, C., Morris, M., Smock, S., Jarrot, S., & Graham, B. (2005). 'An intergenerational summer program involving persons with dementia and preschool children' in *Educational Gerontology*, 31, 425-442.

141 Herrmann, D. S., Sipsas-Herrmann, A., Safford, M., & Herrmann, N. (2005). 'Program participation by senior citizens' in *Educational Gerontology*, 31, 123-139.

142 Burgess, E. W. (1960). *Ageing in western societies* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago

143 Marx, M. S., Pannell, A. R., Parpura-Gill, A., & Cohen-Mansfield, E. (2004). 'Direct observations of children at risk for academic failure: Benefits of an intergenerational visiting program' in *Educational Gerontology*, 30, 663-176.

144 O'Quin, J. A., Bulot, J., & Johnson, C. (2005). 'Sustaining intergenerational servicelearning in gerontology education' in *Educational Gerontology*, 31, 41-50.

145 Shaw, S. (2005). 'Grandparent involvement in the communication development of children who are deafblind' in *Educational Gerontology*, 31, 51-72.

146 Philip Tan, P., Zhang, N., & Fan, L. (2004). 'Students' attitudes toward the older person in the People's Republic of China' in *Educational Gerontology*, 30, 305-315.

147 Peacock and O'Quin (2006) 'Higher Education and Foster Grandparent Programs' in *Educational Gerontology* vol. 32 num. 5 pp. 367-378 May 2006

148 See argument there between Rashi and Tosefot as to whether the Talmud is referring to unlearned Jews, wicked Jews, or to non-Jews. In terms of Jewish law both are included. See also Yerushalmi Bikkurim 3:3 (11b) which states that the mitzvah even includes unlearned Jews. See also Sefer HaChinuch Kedoshim 257 which limits this law to sages and unlearned Jews.

149 Kiddushin 32b. Sefer HaChinuch explains that the reason for honouring even older people who are not Torah scholars is because through their life experience they have come to see some of the wonders of G-d.

150 Job 12:20

interprets this as referring to Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aharon, who all made bad decisions in their old age.¹⁵¹

Each person has an accumulated lifetime of experience, thoughts, feelings and history. When a person dies, all of that disappears from existence. If there was a way of storing that information, in written, electronic or digital form, it would be equivalent to saving entire worlds. Most people are not able to write an autobiography, and perhaps will not think that they have an interesting story to tell. The Mishna¹⁵² states: The reason that Adam was created alone in the world is to teach that anyone who destroys a single soul is considered as if he has destroyed an entire world. And anyone who saves a single soul is considered as if he has saved an entire world. Enabling and facilitating writing will allow each individual to leave a heritage for eternity, and allow their soul to live on after their physical body leaves this world.

9. Suggested Action Research:

The following are ideas that serve as a springboard for further discussion and research. Our suggestions are based around the following three areas of Jewish thought which we feel characterise the themes borne out of our research.

- a) Continual learning – As is often articulated in Judaic sources, learning is what keeps the mind open and the person growing. Scholarship of the wise, we quoted from the Talmud, is what grants them a life on continued development. It is not far-fetched to ask whether ordinary people could also benefit from on-going learning and acquisition of knowledge.
- b) Continual giving – The Judaic heritage is replete with the life-nourishing aspects of contributing to the lives of others and to one's community. The giver, we are repeatedly told, gets more from the experience than the receiver. Being able to give, we cited earlier from the Talmud, is what confers on an older person a greater sense of worth.
- c) Continual meaning – Often it is the ending of the rhythm of life that darkens the life of the older person, as so eloquently stated in the aforementioned passage from Ecclesiastes. When due to weakening strength and growing isolation, an older person feels trapped in his or her home, in the words of Rashi (Genesis 28:13), it is almost like death. Helping older people to mark time, to enrich their day with meaningful acts could be a powerful lever for fulfilment. Judaism has at its very heart the concept of 'mitzvah', that an ordinary act can have overriding worth through it becoming a 'good deed'.

Based on these three themes, the following ideas are suggestions that we believe based on Judaic literature, will propel successful and enriched forms of ageing, rather than the more desperate and negative experience we so often are exposed to.

- I. Grandparents teaching grandchildren an acquired skill: Many people have knowledge that they can pass on to others. This may be specific skills (for example, a retired plumber or electrician, businessman or doctor has years of experience in their field, and may be able to help others starting out); or a foreign language (possibly to act as conversation partner, rather than as teacher, unless they also have a teaching background); knowledge of local history, or of a hobby. Teaching requires preparing the teacher and the student before the learning session. Yet with supervision, guidance and training this can be made meaningful and successful. The action research would be to interview elders who have such skills, and train them to be able to teach this information. Then advertising for youngsters who wish to learn these skills. This concept is similar to the 'Gilde' project in the Netherlands.

The Gilde projects go against the trend which sees voluntary work as the province of young people, by providing an opportunity for older people to gain a role again in society. They do this by acting as a mediator between offers by older people to make their skills and advice available and the demand for this from the population at large. They provide the opportunity for older

¹⁵¹ Genesis Rabba 99:5. Moses and Aharon spoke improperly to the people of Israel when, at the end of their lives, they hit the rock and said "Listen, you rebels!" Isaac erred when, in his old age, he favoured Esav over Yaakov. And Yaakov erred when he attempted, on his deathbed, to reveal the secrets of the End of Days to his children.

¹⁵² Sanhedrin 4:5

people to act as a resource, using the skills and experiences they have accumulated during a lifetime of work, and to make these available to a wider community.¹⁵³

This project would focus specifically on intergenerational learning, and ideally on grandparent-grandchild interaction.

One study shows how mentoring a grandchild can significantly change the relationship between the grandparent and grandchild. However, this study on mentoring was limited to ethical beliefs and social practices, and this seems to taper off after adolescence.

Grandchildren's perceptions of their closest grandparent as a mentor... showed significance for predicting intergenerational relationship satisfaction.... The teaching a grandparent performed as a mentor may have been significant at a grandchild's earlier stage when he/she was learning skills, values, or religious beliefs during childhood. However, after adolescence, young adults may already possess well-defined beliefs and social practices systems, making the mentor role less significant.¹⁵⁴

The action research could focus on whether this mentoring can continue beyond adolescence, given a syllabus, and clear guidance, along with activities building on the strengths of both partners.

- II. Grandparent and grandchild learning something new together: Just as Rabbi Akiva says, a person must continue to learn for his or her whole life. The motivation for a grandparent learning something new will be the chance to spend time with a grandchild. It seems that often, intergenerational interaction is forced, or limited to superficial discussions. To give a new depth and meaning to the grandparent-grandchild relationship we would create a syllabus which builds on the strengths of each of them and allows them to learn together and from each other. The interaction between the generations will contribute new ideas, and forge strong bonds.
- III. Online intergenerational learning: Building on the previous two ideas, and recognising that often distance and other obstacles can impede any organised learning, this action research will use the power of the internet and technology to facilitate intergenerational learning. Major advantage – removes obstacles to learning due to distance. Creates strong relationships between families who live distant from each other. Disadvantage – requires access to, and knowledge of, the internet and associated technologies. Part of the training for this program will have to include familiarity with the technology. This disadvantage quickly becomes an advantage as it part of the intergenerational learning can be related to use of technology, and this will allow grandparents to access the World Wide Web.
- IV. Set up a program where the elders become the counsellors and guides. Hospital stays can be terrifying and bewildering for patients. Understanding what is going on, what treatment is being given and what the prognosis is can improve health and alleviate some of the terror of hospital. Visiting the sick is one of the most valuable and basic mitzvot in Judaism. "These are the things for which a person 'enjoys the fruit' in this world, while the 'principal' awaits him in the World to Come... visiting the sick." There are two vital components to this mitzvah – praying for the person to recover, and performing any task necessary to help them recover.¹⁵⁵ [Continual giving, Continual meaning]

Similarly, set up a Council of Elders to inform medical staff (perhaps student doctors and nurses) of how best to treat older patients. This has been tried in USA with remarkable success. One student wrote:

¹⁵³ Pilley, C. (1993) 'Adult education, community development and older people' in Edwards, R., Sieminski, S. and Zeldin, D. (eds.) *Adult Learners, Education and Training*. Routledge p. 267

¹⁵⁴ Alan C. Taylor, Mihaela Robila, and Hae Seung Lee (2005) 'Distance, Contact, and Intergenerational Relationships: Grandparents and Adult Grandchildren from an International Perspective' in *Journal of Adult Development*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 2005

¹⁵⁵ Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 335:4

TAG-Institute: Jewish Perspective on Ageing

“The Council of Elders provided a new and refreshing insight on the geriatric patient. Not only did they alert us to their concerns, but they helped us visualize some of our own. I feel this session will help me in future interactions with patients.”¹⁵⁶

This Council of Elders could advise not only on matters of ageing, but of culture and religion also. Furthermore, if successful, similar focus groups could be set up to advise local authority on issues such as transport, accessibility, mobility. Public institutions could be advised similarly.

- V. Tour Guides: Elders have perhaps greater knowledge of local events and history, and can develop a tour around the city/street/Synagogue/museum which plays to their first-hand knowledge and story-telling ability. This could be a free tour planned and delivered by people who have lived there for decades. The tour could be aimed at tourists, or at school pupils, or to other older people.
- VI. Facilitate setting up a database of charities, run and researched by older people. This will not only have contact details and descriptions of charities, but ranking based on such factors as transparency of charity, efficacy of getting funds to the needy etc.
- VII. Living history: Each elder is a living history book. Steven Spielberg captured a small part of this in his holocaust archive.

The Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is a major repository for moving images pertaining to the Holocaust and related topics in European history. The collection currently comprises 1,005 hours of archival footage. Additional materials are regularly acquired from sources throughout the world. The majority of the materials originated between 1930 and 1945.¹⁵⁷

Why should such a record be only about the holocaust period of history? Each person has a story to tell, and facilitating that story-telling is a tremendous gift to that person.

Older people can be encouraged to tell their life story (or an episode from it). This can be recorded either in writing, or audio/video. They can also volunteer to speak to school-children, giving them a unique and personal perspective on history. To a certain degree this could be done within the guidelines of the National Core Curriculum. Ultimately this will create a library of biographies which will not only be valuable for those writing them and their immediate family, but (if catalogued well, and searchable) will also provide a resource for historical study, and will create a living historical record. [Continual giving, Continual meaning]

- VIII. Create a proactive reorienting learning program to inform younger people about old age, understand life in all its phases, and encourage them to think about what it means to be old, and what lifestyle changes they can make while still young in order to enjoy their old age. Greater interaction between young and old (e.g. through intergenerational learning – see below) will also give the opportunity to think about age related issues while still young.

10. Conclusion

This brief document has highlighted some areas where Judaism can make an impact on the dialogue of ageing, to enhance and enrich the lives of older people. Each of these ideas is only a suggested outline. More research is required in both Jewish and academic sources before implementing any of these ideas. There are also many other possible ideas for ageing enrichment which are not covered in this document.

All of these have sources in academic literature, but are also stressed in, and derived from, Jewish sources. They all have the potential to enhance and enrich old age, and specifically in the areas of continual giving, continual learning and continual meaning. Judaism has, in these areas, a contribution to make to the current literature and practice

¹⁵⁶ Westmoreland, Glenda R.; Counsell, Steven R.; Sennour, Youcef; Schubert, Cathy C.; Frank, Kathryn I.; Wu, Jingwei; Frankel, Richard M.; Litzelman, Debra K.; Bogdewic, Stephen P. and Inui, Thomas S. 'Improving Medical Student Attitudes Toward Older Patients Through a "Council of Elders" and Reflective Writing Experience' in *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*; Feb 2009, Vol. 57 Issue 2, pp. 315-320

¹⁵⁷ <http://www.ushmm.org/research/collections/filmvideo/>