

Aging: “Here I Am”

Rabbi Steven Sager
Director of Sicha

In Memory of Rabbi Rachel Cowan

Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon was a master of midrash, the ancient rabbinic art through which experience, imagination, and Scripture became one living text that is both timely and timeless. He could stand on the sacred ground of a sacred story—precisely where that text joined itself to personal life—as if to say, “Here I am,” ready to bring the Torah to my life and my life to the Torah; to illuminate the text and to be illuminated by it. “Here I am,” he declared through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, insisting through them that powerful dramas of aging—certainly on his mind—needed a more detailed, illuminated Torah:

Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon said: Abraham insisted on old age, saying before God: Master Of All Worlds, when a man and his son enter a place, no one knows which of them to honor. If you would adorn the father with old age, then one would know which one was worthy of respect. Said the Holy One to him: By your life, you are insisting on a good thing and from you it will begin! From the beginning of the Torah until here, there is no mention of age. But to Abraham, he gave zikna, age: “And Abraham grew old [zaken], coming along in days” (Genesis 24:1). (Genesis Rabbah 65:9)

Rabbi Yehuda incorrectly identified Genesis 24:1 as the first use of *zaken* in the Torah. Nevertheless, there was something unique about that verse drawing his attention and justifying his hyperbole; specifically, a two-fold description of Abraham’s age: “Abraham grew old [*zaken*],” followed by, “coming along in days,” the second phrase seemingly a poetic restatement of the first. Like all midrash masters, Rabbi Yehuda was certain that the Torah contained no ornamental repetitions. Each of the verse’s descriptions of Abraham’s aging must have independent meanings.

Rabbi Yehuda seized upon *zaken* as the remarkable contribution to the reality of aging, suggesting that its parallel, *coming along in days*, was a more conventional measuring of age by a tally of days and years. Perhaps he understood the verse as though it said, “Abraham grew old in addition to *coming along in days*.” Such a distinction was no small matter for Rabbi Yehuda.

The only description of age to this point in Torah was statistical. The personal records of progeny, life span, and death, constitute the main narratives connecting Adam to Noah, and Noah to Abraham. For example: *After the birth of Seth, Adam lived 800 years and begot sons and daughters. All the days that Adam lived came to 930 years; then he died.* (Genesis 5:4-5).

But statistics do not describe living experience. They do not offer insights into life’s seasons, or the seasoning that comes through living. The Torah’s deeper story of aging, Rabbi Yehuda insisted, resided in the word *zaken*, relating that *Abraham grew old* in a new and unprecedented way.

Ancient sources relate a backstory that explains the radical uniqueness of Abraham’s innovation of physical changes as a useful part of aging. Until Abraham, that story relates, there existed no physical signs of aging. Long-lived ancient ancestors were apparently vital, vigorous, and unchanging, until—one day—they died.

Rabbi Yehuda’s Abraham insisted that something critical was lacking in a world where seniors could not be distinguished from their juniors. Missing was a physical marker of the venerable past, a sign of the honorable future of life in which character grows. Absent before Abraham was a way of seeing and of being seen that would inspire and enrich human living. Signs of aging first appeared in the world as a concession won by the humanly intuitive and imaginative Abraham from a creator God who had simply never considered such a thing. The value and meaning of this creative partnership between the insistent patriarch and God continued to grow as Isaac took up the tradition of his father, standing up on behalf of aging in another way:

Isaac insisted upon impairments. He said before God: Master Of All Worlds, when a person dies without impairments, the measure of justice is drawn tight against him. But if you bring upon him impairments, then the measure of justice is not so tightly drawn. Said the Blessed Holy One: By your life! You have insisted upon a good thing, and it will begin with you. From the beginning of the book until here no mention is made of impairments. But when Isaac came up, God gave him impairments: “And it was when Isaac grew old that his eyes became too weak to see, etc.” (Genesis 26:35)

Rabbi Yehuda animated Isaac as he had Abraham, fashioning the second patriarch in his own rabbinic likeness and language, giving him a voice to express the sage's insights about aging from within the Torah. And so, Isaac, with the perspective of a third century sage, argued that impairments would be useful—even heartening—signs that divine justice for any transgressions was being exacted during a lifetime and not stored up for one coup de grace in the World To Come.

For a short while, we find ourselves traveling in easy company with Rabbi Yehuda, agreeing with him that we seek to make meaning out of our impairments. But we likely part company over the meaning of impairments as a partial payment against ultimate judgment.

If we no longer travel side-by-side with Rabbi Yehuda, he still leads the way, securing our right to imbue Isaac's story with renewed meaning. Impairment is neither a decree nor a verdict, says the Isaac who speaks for us. We aspire to living with our impairments from which we fashion meaningful life. Weakening vision is not a sign of divine punishment or of poetic justice. To construe impairment as an enactment of divine judgement is a sign of the all-too-human impulse to draw lines of fault and blame. To understand impairment as the ever-tightening grip of divine justice constitutes its own impairment of a life that might otherwise thrive.

As signs of aging appeared first with Abraham, impairments with Isaac, so did illness begin with Jacob:

Jacob insisted on illness. He said before God: Master Of All Worlds, one who dies without some preceding illness is unable to settle matters with the children. But one who was ill for two or three days could settle matters with the children. Said the Blessed Holy One: By your life! You have insisted upon a good thing, and it will begin with you! [As it is written concerning the end of Jacob's life: "A servant] said to Joseph: Look! Your father is ill." (Genesis 48:1)

In the case of Jacob, the Torah quickly recorded the outcome of his innovation. Jacob's end-of-life illness afforded him the opportunity to speak himself—for all to hear—into his family's story of journeys and blessings. Thus, he closed the era of the Patriarchs. In his death-bed blessing, Jacob addressed each of his twelve sons, and wisely blessed his grandsons, Ephraim and Menasseh, ending generations of biblical sibling rivalry that began with Cain and Abel. His request for burial in the ancestral grave joined his family to their inheritance of land. At the same time, knowing that his family would bury him and then return to Egypt made it clear that Jacob's legacy extended beyond territory.

Through the Torah's stories of the patriarchs, Rabbi Yehuda expressed his concerns about aging, finding and founding everyday life in the epic story. Through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Rabbi Yehuda insisted that no aspect of aging could proceed without meaning. The patriarchs became for him—and remain for us—not only heroes of aging but also partners in the creation of the human archetype.

"Let us make humankind in our image (Genesis 1:26)," said God in the beginning. In Rabbi Yehuda's midrash, the patriarchs petitioned the Creator based upon the deep insights born only of living experience: "Let us make humankind in our imagination." And God agreed, confirming as divine the truth that human imagination is a necessary partner in creating meaningful life.

God's agreement with the patriarchs constitutes Rabbi Yehuda's celebration of God as a gracious partner in creation. He refused to imagine a God who was capricious or indifferent; a God who decreed fate from behind a veil of distance and inscrutability. Aging, Rabbi Yehuda taught, is not a product of omniscient divine oversight, but of embodied human insight. God presides over time, but *passing through* time is an altogether human endeavor that invites and challenges us to say, time and again, "Here I am," in each new moment of life that invites new understanding.

Especially in our culture that is so fearful of aging, we can be inspired by Rabbi Yehuda. We can aspire to becoming patriarchs and matriarchs who are mindful of the riches and opportunities presented by the aging self; adding our voices to those of our ancestors, turning the whisper of the text into the shout and insistence for deeper meaning.