

## Parashat Vaera

(Exodus 6:2-9:35)

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### Wisdom of the Ages

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Ten years ago, when my parents, z"l, were 82 and 89, they traveled from Chicago to Los Angeles to be with my partner Tracy and me as we stood together under the chuppah. At the celebration of her daughter's lesbian wedding, my mother was heard to say quite matter-of-factly: "I guess if you live long enough, you see everything."

Amazingly, two-thirds of all the people who have ever lived past the age of 65 in the history of the world are alive today, according to Ken Dychtwald, author of "The Power Years: A User's Guide to the Rest of Your Life." This suggests that our way-beyond octogenarians in the Bible were the exception, not the rule.

The Bible gives skeptics many things to be skeptical about, but perhaps nothing so much as a verse in this week's Torah portion: "Moses was 80 years old and Aaron 83 when they made their demand on Pharaoh" (Exodus 7:7).

Why would God call on octogenarians to lead the Israelites out from slavery and through 40 years in the wilderness? No wonder Moses was reticent, say the doubters (not a few of whom are octogenarians themselves, and know how it feels).

If the Torah mentioned Moses and Aaron's advanced ages because here was yet another one of God's miracles in redeeming us from slavery, then I'm beginning to think we've entered another age of miracles. For I have not only my parents (who lived to see, and even enjoy, ages 91 and 88), I also count myself blessed to have in my life a significant number of remarkable elders.

Last month at our synagogue, we heard a marvelous sermon from one of our oldest members, Harriet Perl, on the occasion of her 85th birthday. Her speech prompted us to embark on an oral history project at our synagogue (our recent newsletter profiled three of our elders, and includes Harriet's speech). Last weekend I went to Chicago to visit four relatives and friends I've known all my life — ages 82, 89, 95, 96. They move more slowly than they used to, but give few other clues about their age.

In fact, surprisingly few commentators take note of the simple statement of Moses and Aaron's ages in Parshat Vaera. But it should call out to us, reminding us that Moses is not the young man portrayed in the still-popular animated movie "The Prince of Egypt." Maybe the filmmakers' choice tells us something we need to know: God chose octogenarians to bring us out from slavery, while modern interpreters keep us enslaved to our worship of youth.

Fifty generations before ours, the Mishnah's collection of wisdom known as Pirke Avot provides a list of attributes that come to each human being with each new decade. Ben shmonim ligvurah (80 years is the age of greatness and strength). Surely Yehudah ben Tema, the sage who said this, knew how old Moses was when God called him to lead.

These days, life expectancies are on the rise, or perhaps just returning to biblical proportions. At the beginning of the 20th century, life expectancy was only 47 years, casting a different light on the 1880s choice to make 65 the "definition" of old age. Today "the United States' Jewish community is disproportionately elderly. Close to 20 percent of Jews are already over the age of 65, compared to less than 13 percent of the general population. A significant number are over the age of 85 and need help with activities of daily living like eating, dressing and walking," according to The Jewish Federation's Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities project.

Perhaps our Torah verse this week about the ages of Moses and Aaron is overshadowed by the more well-known verse at Torah's end about the death of Moses, 40 years later, at age 120, in which we are told: "his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated" (Deuteronomy 34:7). That one echoes God's decision in Genesis 6:3 to cut back on the centuries-long human life spans mentioned there (remember Methuselah?), and leads us to the popular Jewish birthday wish *ad meah v'esrim* (until 120). Tradition says that in wishing for this impossibility, we are simply saying that no matter at what age someone dies, they died too young.

I don't always offer that wish; I have seen people who have lived too long, and I'm not naive or removed from some of the traumas that come with aging. But more and more we are all also seeing some incredible septuagenarians, octogenarians, nonagenarians and centenarians.

And since we're talking about time, isn't it time we stop making assumptions about elders based on "old" prejudices? Instead — as God did so long ago in calling two octogenarians to lead us to freedom — isn't it time to appreciate the wisdom, the strength, the humor, the experience of people who have "lived long enough to see everything"? They are here to be seen and heard and known in our families, in our congregations, in our Jewish community, in our city, in our world. And all of us gain *gevurah* and countless blessings from their presence in our lives.

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