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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Vayiggash
December 15, 2018 - 7 Tevet 5779



By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff
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Gaining Meaning and Joy from Each Day

Torah Reading: Genesis 44:18 - 47:27

Haftarah Reading: Ezekiel 37:15 - 28

“Jacob answered Pharaoh: ‘The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns.’” (Genesis 47:9)

The Torah has made abundantly clear that Jacob was not exaggerating when he describes his life as “hard.” His troubled relationships with his father, brother, wives, and sons have all made that description of his life undoubtedly accurate. His own actions caused some of that difficulty, but there is no second-guessing his claim that his life was hard, lacking the warm and supportive family relationships that we all crave.

It is a bit ironic, then, that Jacob also complains that his life span has not reached that of his fathers. One would think that if his life were hard, he would not want to continue it much longer. The number of 130 years that he claims to have lived is clearly based on a different mode of calculating years than we use today, but however long that was did not

compare, he grumbles, to the life span of his fathers, and that too is a source of displeasure.

Some older people in our day are exactly like Jacob. They complain a lot, and sometimes there are good reasons for their complaints. Ill health, together with its accompanying pain and suffering, the death of family members and friends, and the sense that they cannot do what they used to be able to do combine to make them ornery. That is not only a problem for them, but also for anyone who visits them.

Another source in our tradition expresses some of the same emotions but has a markedly different outcome, one from which all of us – young, middle aged, and old – can learn. This is Psalm 90, a psalm we read every Shabbat and Festival morning as part of Pesurkei D'zimra, the "Verses of Song" at the beginning of the service that are intended to help us get into a prayer mind and heart. Psalm 90, whose title is "A prayer of Moses, the man of God," includes the verses that sound remarkably, like Jacob's remarks quoted above:

The span of our life is seventy years,
Or, given the strength, eighty years;
But the best of them are trouble and sorrow.
They pass by speedily and fly away. (Psalms 90:10-11, JPS translation)

Like Jacob, the psalmist complains about two things – the short span of life and its "trouble and sorrow."

The psalmist, though, does not leave it at that. He continues:
Teach us to count our days rightly,
That we may obtain a wise heart. (Psalms 90:12)

Precisely because life is short and often hard, the psalmist asks that God help us "count our days" so that we "obtain a wise heart." Put another way, he is praying that we can appreciate each day as it comes so that we gain as much joy and meaning out of it as we can. "Don't just sit there and complain," he effectively is saying; instead "Thank God for each day and use it wisely."

I am 75, and I am in reasonably good health. Still, I am keenly aware that I am not nearly as nimble as I once was and that I am not able to do many things that I once could. My wife, who is 74, has Parkinson's, and so her life is objectively very hard and much diminished in its quality. We have been married for over 52 years, and she is the love of my life, so her condition imposes physical and emotional burdens on me as well. Instead of complaining, though, my mantra for both of us has become what the Ma'ariv service has us say each evening, "*barukh ha-shem yom yom*," "Bless God for each and every day." With that attitude, I pray, along with Moses, that we can "count our days rightly" so that we use them wisely by seeking as much meaning and joy from each day as we can discover. May that be your mantra as well. Much better than complaining!

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, is Rector and Anne and Sol Dorff Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the American Jewish University, Visiting Professor at UCLA School of Law, and Chair of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Author of over 200 articles and 12 books on Jewish thought, law, and ethics, and editor of 14 more books on those topics, his most recent book is *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law*.



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