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בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

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Walking with Life

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

AGEING AND RETIREMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The world is getting older; not just the cosmos, but also the people in it. In the West, at least, younger people are reproducing less and older people are living longer, so that in North America, Europe and Israel, the percentage of people over 65 is expected to rise markedly in the coming decades. It was recently projected that in Europe by 2025, there will be as many people over 65 as there will be in the workforce.

Jews, as usual, are part of these trends. The “senior” segment in Jewish communities (US, Israel and Europe) is about 20%, slightly higher than the general populations, and growing rapidly. Medical advances help life expectancies to rise, and with people settling all over the globe, leaving parents alone in their hometowns or in retirement areas or facilities, the care of the elderly has become both a big business and a big headache, for families, community organizations and governments.

The Bible presents pictures of old age both idyllic and starkly realistic. Leaving aside “mythical” characters like Methuselah, who lived 969 years,¹ we are told that Abraham lived till the ripe old age of 175, marrying another woman and having six more children after Sarah died.² The *zkenim* (“the elders”) were an important group for the social/political hierarchy³ and a source of guidance for the individual.⁴ Yet the infirmities of age were also well known.⁵ The Psalmist’s painful plea *Al tashlikheni v’et ziknah*..... (“Cast me not off in the time of old age; when my strength fails, forsake me not”⁶) is included in the Yom Kippur Liturgy five times. As appealing as it sounds, we Jews do not pray, like Bob Dylan:

May your hands always be busy,
May your feet always be swift...
May your song always be sung,
And may you stay forever young.

The human body does not work that way, and seeking to stop the natural processes would constitute a *tefillat shav*, a “useless prayer” - what psychologists might call denial.

Of course, such is not the approach of the modern society. There are people and industries, from branches of the medical profession to major pharmaceutical companies, which thrive on the desires of people to disguise grey hair, to remove wrinkles, and to keep bodily appearance and functions youthful. Interestingly, the Torah offers three prescriptions for long life – honoring one’s parents;⁷ not taking a bird’s eggs in the mother’s presence;⁸ and the use of honest weights and measures.⁹ The Torah is concerned more about how we *behave* towards others than how we *look* to them.

THE ORIGINS OF AGEING IN JUDAISM

If we take the Talmud literally (not always recommended!), we have only our own forefathers Abraham and Jacob to blame. “Before Abraham there was no old age and before Jacob there was no illness.”¹⁰ Until Abraham people simply lived their lives, features constant, until their time came. “People who saw Abraham thought he was Isaac,” the Talmud

¹ Genesis 5:27

² Genesis 25:1-2, 7

³ see eg Numbers 11:16-17

⁴ Deuteronomy 32:7

⁵ See eg 2 Samuel 19:35-36, Ecclesiastes 12:1-7

⁶ Psalms 71:9

⁷ Exodus 20:12

⁸ Deuteronomy 22:7

⁹ Deuteronomy 25:15

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 107b



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continues, “and people who saw Isaac thought he was Abraham, so Abraham prayed for old age, as it says, ‘and Abraham was old, advanced in years.’”¹¹ Abraham was doing *just the opposite* of trying to stay young. Looking old invited respect, age was a sign of wisdom:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations;
Ask your father and he will inform you, your elders and they will tell you.¹²

Jacob prayed for illness, the Talmud explains, because he wanted a period of notice before death to call his sons in and “bless” them. Little could Jacob have imagined that the few days that he requested could, by our time, extend to many years, with physical and mental deterioration, often accompanied by pain and misery, for the elderly themselves and those who love them. Modern medicine can take credit for many miracles, but for the incapacitated, often in nursing homes cared for by strangers, these advances have extended old age, not life.

THE STAGES OF AGE

In Greek mythology, the Sphinx sat outside of Thebes and asked passersby: “What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?” Many unfortunates died for not solving the riddle, until Oedipus gave the answer: “Man, who crawls on all fours as an infant, walks on two legs as an adult and with a cane in old age.” Life neatly divided, like Gaul, into three parts.

“All the world’s a stage,” Jacques says in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, “...And one man in his time plays many parts/His acts being seven ages.” Man becomes elderly in the sixth, where he begins to lose his charm, both physical and mental, and shrinks in size and stature. “Last scene of all/That ends this strange eventful history/Is second childishness and mere oblivion/*Sans* teeth, *sans* eyes, *sans* taste, *sans* everything.”¹³

The rabbis predated Shakespeare by over a millennium. In *Pirkei Avot* they delineate fourteen stages, the last five devoted to the “Third Age” and reaching the finish line:

...at fifty [one can give] counsel [*etzah*]; at sixty [one is] elder/ly [*zikhnah*]; at seventy [one reaches] old age [*sevah*]; at eighty [one has] renewed vitality [*gevurah*]; at ninety [one has] a bent body; at one hundred [one is] as good as dead, having passed and ceased from the world.¹⁴

The numbers here are a literary device; the physical and mental states alluded to can happen at any age. In our world, insurance companies and social welfare agencies have “ADL (Activities of Daily Living) tests” to determine disability or who “needs assistance,” e.g. the ability to dress oneself, feed oneself, use the toilet, etc. The Talmud did, too. One is considered “young and healthy,” as opposed to “sick and old,” if he can “stand on one foot and put on and take off his shoes.”¹⁵

Aging, on the one hand, presents opportunities. “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, / The last of life, for which the first was made,” invites Robert Browning, in *Rabbi Ben Ezra* (about 1862). And many are able to finally pursue hobbies, learn new disciplines (or musical instruments neglected since childhood), as well as devote the time to family and travel they had long been too busy for.

But on the other hand, it presents many challenges. Matthew Arnold responded to Browning with a far more melancholy view of age: “Ah, ‘tis not what in youth we dreamed ‘twould be,” (*Growing Old*). Those who wish their friends “to 120,” as Jews commonly do, or “may you have a long life,” the words of consolation to mourners amongst English Jewry, might consider whether such is a fate they really want for those dear to them.

¹¹ *Genesis 24:1*

¹² *Deuteronomy 32:7*

¹³ *William Shakespeare As You Like It Act II sc. 7*

¹⁴ *Mishnah Avot 5:23*

¹⁵ *Babylonian Talmud Hullin 24b*



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RETIREMENT

Sooner or later in life nearly everyone needs to stop working for a salary, yet retirement is a trauma for many. There is still much debate about whether mandatory retirement is good – for institutions or for people. As people live longer, many remaining healthy and active into the 70s and sometimes beyond, the issue will stay with us. Interestingly, it arises in the Torah and was discussed by the rabbis in the Talmud and since.

Numbers 4:3 and 8:24-26 define the age span during which Levites are to perform their tasks in worship and in transporting the Tabernacle in the Sinai Desert, from age 25 (or 30, the difference is not relevant here) till age fifty. After that, according to verse 8:25-6, they may no longer perform the official functions but they may “assist their brethren,” meaning, effectively, they were kept on in a “consultant” capacity. The rabbis were troubled by this. They said the mandatory retirement age for Levites applied only in the desert, where heavy physical labor was involved; in the Temple in Jerusalem, where the Levites’ main jobs were to sing in the choir and guard the gates, they could continue to serve until they “lost their voices.”¹⁶ Maimonides was yet more concerned about forced retirement. He ruled that even after a Levite can no longer sing, he may still guard the Temple gates.¹⁷

Regarding the Priests (*Kohanim*) the Torah makes no mention of age; it speaks only of physical blemishes as disqualifying factors. The rabbis interpreted this to mean that the period of service ran from puberty *ad sheyazkeen* (“until old age”). In defining “old age” for this purpose, the rabbis chose a subjective standard rather than an arbitrary age limit – “*ad sheyiratet* - until he trembles”¹⁸ – “his hands and feet shake for lack of strength.”¹⁹

The question arose again in regard to judges, which, in many jurisdictions (eg, the US Supreme Court) is an appointment “for life.” The Talmud says that “an old man (*zaken*” may not serve on courts hearing capital offenses.²⁰ It does not define what “old” means here. Maimonides, again concerned about forced retirement, adds one key word in his codification of this law – *zaken muflag*, a *very* old man, which delays retirement.²¹ The standard explanation given for disqualifying the very old (and select other categories) from cases involving the death penalty is that they are not considered sympathetic to young people – the old person because he has forgotten what raising the young entails.²²

Over the generations, Jewish authorities generally followed the more flexible approach. Jewish professionals – eg, rabbis, cantors, ritual slaughterers – were to be employed until no longer competent, *not* until reaching some arbitrary age limit. In recent times the situation has changed somewhat, with a retirement age (eg, 65 or 70) being specified in the contracts of some Jewish professionals. In the State of Israel, too, such age limits are common, particularly in public service, including the justices on Israel’s Supreme Court (age 70).

Retirement itself can be a challenge, as was pointed out two centuries ago by the English writer, Charles Lamb, following thirty-six years as a clerk at the East India Company:

I am no longer clerk to the Firm. I am Retired Leisure. I am to be met with in trim gardens. I am already come to be known by my vacant face and careless gesture, perambulating at no fixed pace, nor with any settled purpose.²³

“Perambulating with no settled purpose” is the fear of many a person whose spouse or parent is about to retire. The modern Orthodox rabbi and thinker, Nathan Lopes Cardozo, warns against “taking it easy and falling into the pit of idleness.” Retirement, he points out, offers many opportunities for spiritual growth, but many challenges as well. He

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Maimonides *Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Klei Hamikdash* 3:8

¹⁸ *Babylonian Talmud Hullin* 24b

¹⁹ *Rashi, ibid.*

²⁰ *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* 36b

²¹ Maimonides *Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 2:3

²² *Rashi on Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* 36b

²³ Charles Lamb *The Superannuated Man*, 1825



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recalls the Talmudic insight that three measures of a person's character are *b'kiso* – “his pocket” (wallet), how he uses his money; *b'koso* – “his glass,” how he handles drink; and *b'ka'aso* – “his temper,” does he control it, or it him? The source²⁴ includes a fourth test offered by one of the sages – *b'sachako* – most often translated “his laughter,” but interpreted by Rabbi Cardozo as “his play,” – his leisure time. How one spends one's free time, during working life and in retirement, reveals a lot about a person.²⁵ The recent growth of stimulating activities and programs for retired people is an appropriate response to the needs and potential of the growing retired population.

WHAT WE OWE THE AGED IN GENERAL AND PARENTS IN PARTICULAR

Over the front rows of public buses in Israel are signs quoting the opening words of Leviticus 19:32:

You shall rise before the aged [and show deference to the old [*zaken*]; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.]

The Torah here imposes an obligation of respect for elders on the society in general, not just on the immediate family. Yet the rabbis in the Talmud debated to whom this deference is owed.²⁶ Several, using commonly accepted principles of interpretation, said the word *zaken* means only “a learned person,” which of course narrows the duty. But the definition accepted for halakhah extends to *all* old people, and it is noted that an important rabbi, Rabbi Yochanan, showed honor to non-Jewish elderly as well. The Talmud also limits the extent of this obligation – it does not require financial expense or even that one stop the work he's doing, assuming that such would cause a loss of wages or profit.

The burdens are greater, of course, when the elderly are one's parents. The duty to honor them appears on every statue or picture of the Ten Commandments.²⁷ Less prominent artistically, but no less important in rabbinic thinking, was Leviticus 19:3: “You shall each revere (*tira'u*) his mother and his father.” We owe parents both honor (*kavod*), which the Talmud defines as providing “food and drink, clothing and shelter, and leading them out and in,” and reverence (*yirah*), meaning “not sitting or standing in their place or contradicting them.”²⁸ The child must fulfill these even if it means taking time from work or business. The out-of-pocket costs fall on the parent, but if he or she does not have means, the children must pay them, as long as it does not prevent them from providing for their own needs. If the child can no longer afford to support the parent, “the child need not become a beggar to support his parent;”²⁹ the parent becomes the concern of the community's tzedakah organizations and institutions. Jewish communities have a long tradition of running homes for their elderly, some outstanding; but for most, this was clearly no enviable fate in olden days, nor is it now.

The Talmud has a wonderful psychological insight for anyone who cares for a parent, indeed for any elderly person. It is better to provide modestly in a friendly manner than to provide lavishly but begrudgingly; the attitude with which we offer the assistance is critical. Old people were pained and humiliated in Talmudic times when treated with condescension or insult. And, as a recent *New York Times* front-page article attests, the situation has not changed since.³¹

Throughout Jewish history the rabbis realized also that caring for parents can be very difficult, particularly if their mental faculties start failing. The duty of reverence (*yirah*) means that one is supposed to suffer public humiliation and even financial loss from a parent without losing one's temper, but this too has limits. “One whose parent has lost his/her mind should try to deal with them as best he can, but if he can no longer bear it, he may leave them and instruct

²⁴ *Babylonian Talmud Eruvin* 65b

²⁵ Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo *Thoughts To Ponder* 230, *Essays* Sept 5 2008

²⁶ *Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin* 32b-33a

²⁷ *Exodus* 20:12

²⁸ *Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin* 31b

²⁹ *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 240:5

³⁰ *Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin* 31a-31b

³¹ *New York Times* 7 October 2008



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others to take proper care of them.”³² So children must take part in the care of infirm parents, even paying for that care when the parents no longer can. Should the distance or emotional burden make it impossible to do so personally, the duty remains, but third parties may be engaged as providers. Yet the children should remain involved, and with patience, despite the difficulties.

CONCLUSION

The final stages of life can be trying and stressful, for the elderly and their families. The burdens of illness and infirmity – financial, social and personal – can be more than individuals and families can bear. No wonder that Moshe Rabbenu is portrayed as asking God to “die by a Divine kiss,” as his brother Aaron had, healthy and working till his dying day.³³

The Jewish tradition does not have illusions about these difficulties and burdens or the limits in people’s capacities to deal with them. But it makes clear that the elderly are entitled to respect and appreciation, and that much of this is determined by the way we treat them, not just by the material help we provide. Jewish tradition considers the treatment of the elderly an important indicator of the morality of the individual and the viability of the society.

³² *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah 240:10*

³³ *Rashi on Numbers 27:13 and 33:38*



AGEING AND RETIREMENT – TEXT 1

תהלים צב:טו

עוד ינובון בשִׁיבָה דְּשָׁנִים וְרַעֲנָנִים יְהוּי:

PSALM 92:15

They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness.

שמואל ב יט:לה-לו

לֵה וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּלִי אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ כַּמָּה יְמֵי שָׁנִי חַיִּי כִי־אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם: לו בְּר־שְׁמָנִים שָׁנָה אֲנִי הַיּוֹם הַאֲדַע | בֵּין־טוֹב לָרַע אִם־יִטְעַם עַבְדְּךָ אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֶכֶל וְאֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁתֶּה אִם־אֶשְׁמַע עוֹד בְּקוֹל שָׂרִים וְשָׁרוֹת וְלָמָּה יְהִיָה עַבְדְּךָ עוֹד לְמִשְׁאָא אֶל־אֲדֹנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ:

2 SAMUEL 19:35-36

Barzilai said to the king [David]: How many are the days of the years of my life, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am eighty years old today: can I discern between good and bad? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I hear any more the voices of singing men and women? Why, then, should your servant continue to be a burden to my lord the king?

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What images of ageing are presented by these two texts?
- Are these images accurate, in your view? Are they contradictory?
- Are there other images you would use to describe ageing?
- What are your own experiences of the ageing and the elderly?



AGEING AND RETIREMENT – TEXT 2

תלמוד ירושלמי פאה א:ה

יש שֶהוּא מְאָכִיל אֶת אָבִיו פְּטוּמוֹת וְיֹרֵשׁ גֵּיהֶנֶם וְיֵשׁ שֶהוּא כּוֹדֵנוּ בְּרִיחִים וְיֹרֵשׁ גֵּן עֵדֶן. כִּיצַד מְאָכִיל אֶת אָבִיו פְּטוּמוֹת וְיֹרֵשׁ גֵּיהֶנֶם? חַד בַּר נֶשׁ הָהוּא מֵיִכִיל לְאָבִיו תְּרַנְגוּלִין פְּטִימִין. חַד זְמַן אָמַר לִיה אָבִיו בְּרִי אֵילִין מִן לָךְ אָמַר לִיה סָבָא סָבָא אָכּוּל וְאָדִישׁ דְּכַלְבָּיָא אָכְלִין וּמְדַשִּׁין - נִמְצָא מְאָכִיל אֶת אָבִיו פְּטוּמוֹת וְיֹרֵשׁ גֵּיהֶנֶם. כִּיצַד כּוֹדֵנוּ לְרַחֲמֵיָא וְיֹרֵשׁ גֵּן עֵדֶן? חַד בַּר נֶשׁ הָהוּא אֵיטְחִין בְּרִיחֵיָא אֶת צִמּוֹת לְטָחוּנְיָא אָמַר לִיה אָבָא עוּל טָחוּן תְּחַתִּי אֵין מְטַת מְבַזֵּיָא טָב לִי אֲנָא וְלָא אֶתְ אֵין מְטוֹת מִיִּלְקִי טָב לִי אֲנָא וְלָא אֶתְ - נִמְצָא כּוֹדֵנוּ בְּרִיחִים וְיֹרֵשׁ גֵּן עֵדֶן.

JERUSALEM TALMUD *PEAH* 1:5

A person may feed their father on fattened chickens and yet inherit Gehinnom [Hell], while another may put their father to work in a mill and yet inherit the Garden of Eden [Paradise]. How can a person feed their father fattened chickens and yet inherit Gehinnom? Once there was a man who used to feed his father fattened chickens. One day his father asked him, “My son, where did you get these?” He answered, “Old man, old man, eat and be silent, like dogs eat and are silent!” Such a person feeds their father fattened chickens and yet inherits Gehinnom. And how can a person put their father to work in a mill and yet inherit the Garden of Eden? Once there was a man who used to work in a mill. The king passed a decree that his old father should come and work for him [the king]. He said to his father, “Father, go and work in the mill in my place. If the king’s workers are treated badly, it is better for that to happen to me than to you. And if the king’s workers are beaten, it is better for that to happen to me than to you.” Such a person puts their father to work in a mill and yet inherits the Garden of Eden.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Has the first child provided for his father’s needs? If so, why is he criticized?
- Do we know if and to what degree the second child provided for his father’s needs?
- What can we learn from this about how one should care for parents?
- Is this text relevant today? Can you give examples?



AGEING AND RETIREMENT – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי קדושין לא:ב

רב אסי הוה ליה ההיא אַמָּא זְקִינָה, אַמְרָה לִי: בְּעִינָא תְּכַשִּׁיטִין, עֲבַד לָהּ. בְּעִינָא גְבָרָא, נִייעִין לָךְ.
בְּעִינָא גְבָרָא דְשָׁפִיר כְּוַתְּךָ, שְׂבָקָה וְאַזְל לְאַרְעָא דִּישְׂרָאֵל.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *KIDDUSHIN* 31B

Rav Assi had an ageing mother. She said to him, “I want jewelry!” So he made it for her. [She said to him,] “I want a husband!” [He said,] “I will look to it for you.” [She said,] “I want a husband as handsome as you!” He left her and went to the land of Israel.

רמב"ם הלכות ממרים ו:י

מי שנטרפה דעתו של אביו או של אמו משתדל לנהוג עמָּהֶם כְּפִי דְעֵתָם עַד שְׁיִרוּחַם עֲלֵיהוֹ, וְאִם אֵי
אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ לְעֲמוֹד מִפְּנֵי שְׁנֵשְׁתִּטּוֹ בְּיוֹתֵר יִנְיָחַם וְיֵלֵךְ לוֹ וּיצוּהוּ אֲחֵרִים לְהַנְהִיגֵם כְּרְאוּי לָהֶם.

MAIMONIDES *MISHNEH TORAH* LAWS OF REBELS 6:10

One whose parent is deteriorating mentally should try to deal with them according to the parent’s mental state until s/he has been mercifully relieved. And if the child can no longer bear it when the parent becomes seriously demented, the child may leave the parent in the care of others, instructing them to treat him/her appropriately.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What prompted Rav Assi to change his behavior? Why?
- Would Maimonides have approved of Rav Assi’s behavior? Do you?
- What has Maimonides added in terms of a child’s obligation in trying circumstances?
- How might these teachings be relevant for us today?



AGEING AND RETIREMENT – TEXT 4

תלמוד בבלי מגילה כח:א

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי נחוניא בן הקנה: במה הארכת ימים? אמר להם: מימי לא נתכבדתי בקלון חברי, ולא עלתה על מטתי קללת חברי, וותרן בממוני הייתי.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *MEGILLAH* 28A

Rabbi Nehunia ben Hakana's students asked him: How have you managed to live so long? He replied: I never gloated over the downfall of my colleague; I forgave all those who cursed me; and I was generous with my money.

משנה אבות ב:יא

רבי יהושע אומר, עין הרע, ויצר הרע, ושנאת הבריות, מוציאין את האדם מן העולם:

MISHNAH *AVOT* 2:11

Rabbi Joshua said: an evil eye, the evil inclination and hatred for humankind put a person out of the world.

FOUR WAYS TO STAY YOUNG¹

1. Increase Brain Power
2. Avoid Isolation
3. Reduce Stress
4. Positive Thinking

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Does Rabbi Nehunia's response surprise you? Why?
- What does Rabbi Joshua mean by saying "[These things] put a person out of the world?"
- Are Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Nehunia talking about the same thing?
- Is there a connection between the two rabbis and the recommendations found on Google?

¹ The first response encountered on Google to the phrase 'How To Stay Young' – from http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/49327/antiaging_secrets_four_ways_to_stay.html?cat=5



AGEING AND RETIREMENT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in his hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

– Robert Browning, *Rabbi ben Ezra* (c.1862)

What is it to grow old?...
Ah, 'tis not what in youth we dreamed 'twould be!
'Tis not to have our life
Mellowed and softened as with sunset-glow,
A golden day's decline!

'Tis not to see the world
As from a height, with rapt, prophetic eyes
And heart profoundly stirred
And weep, and feel the fulness of the past,
The years that are no more!

It is to spend long days
And not once feel that we were ever young...

– Matthew Arnold, *Growing Old*

May I suggest that man's potential for change and growth is much greater than we are willing to admit and that old age be regarded, not as the age of stagnation, but as the age of opportunities for inner growth? The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we fail to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we have ignored. They are indeed formative years, rich in the possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through the inbred deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine a sense of fairness.

– Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1961 White House Conference on Ageing





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