

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

AGING AND ITS AFFECTS ON OUR RELATIONSHIPS

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As we age, we must reconcile ourselves to the loss of certain abilities that we may well have taken for granted when we were young. This goes against the grain of today's culture in which we are urged to strive, through diet, exercise and surgery to maintain as much of our youthful energy, appearance and function as long as possible.

The sages, by contrast, while not embracing the losses that come with aging, did find a way to accept those losses. In this passage, we find that one sage must explain to his younger colleague what the aging process has done to him:

Rabbi Shimon bar Halafta was accustomed to visit our teacher [Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi] each month]. When he became old, he was unable to do so. Yet on one occasion he did pay this visit.

Said Rabbi to him [sarcastically, rebuking him for not having come previously], 'Why am I worthy to behold the master's face today?' He replied, ' Distant objects have become near and near objects have become distant, two have become three, and what used to bring peace has ceased.'

(The explanation is as follows: ' Distant objects have become near,' i.e. the eyes which used to see from afar cannot now [in old age] see even from near. '

Near objects have become distant,' i.e. the ears which used to catch a thing at the first or second hearing now cannot catch it even after a hundred hearings. '

Two have become three,' i.e. a stick in addition to the two legs.

'What used to bring peace in the house has ceased,' i.e. sexual desire which created love between man and wife.) (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:5)

Rabbi Shimon bar Halafta was one of the greatest sages of his era and a great story teller and aggadist (c. 170). Rabbi, who was younger, was insulted by Rabbi Shimon's failure to visit. It was then that Rabbi Shimon explained to him what aging involves: losses in vision, hearing, mobility and sexuality.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can generations more clearly communicate with each other about what's happening as they age? How can the young remind the old of what it was to be young? How can the aged sensitize the young about old age?
2. In rabbinic literature, age is an asset, not a detriment as it can be, so often, in contemporary society. Why do some cultures regard age as a positive and others as a negative? What ensues from these cultural assessments?
3. It is true that age does diminish some physical and cognitive functions. Can you speculate as to why aging must be this way? In other words, why has God put this aspect of aging into the system?