



“And Avraham was Old”: When Did Humanity Begin to Age and What is the Value of Aging?

Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@mechonhadar.org

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The Torah describes the exact moment when human beings learned how to distinguish between Good and Evil, the moment of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The Torah recounts the story of the Tower of Babel to account for the proliferation of different languages and cultures that we have in our world. Biblical stories which describe the creation of humanity and all of the natural world are in no small part a way of explaining and exploring certain features of human society and civilization as we know it. The stories of Creation and the Tower of Babel are paradigmatic of this type of biblical narrative, an attempt to provide a genealogy or explanation of phenomena that we all experience as humans, but often take for granted. Continuing in this tradition, a *midrash* looks at the story of Avraham as providing an etiology of the enduring human phenomenon of aging.

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Avraham and Sarah are the first biblical figures who are described as old. This appears in last week's *parashah* and is summarised again in this week's: “Avraham was old, advanced in age” (Genesis 24:1). In Talmud Bavli (Bava Metzia

87a), a *midrash* comes to the simultaneously logical and fascinating conclusion that since no one in the Bible is described as old, *zaken*, until this point, then “there was no old age until Avraham.” The *midrash* continues to make the claim that Avraham actually asked for aging. What does this tell us about the nature of aging and its importance to being human, like the

other etiologies in Genesis? How is old age portrayed, and what does the text come to suggest regarding how we should relate to aging ourselves? We will explore these questions through the lens of two parallel *midrashim* that describe Avraham's request for aging.

Bereishit Rabbah offers an account of Avraham's request for aging and the background to it:

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) כ"ו פרשת ויחי פרשה צז

אמר רבי יודה בי רבי סימון: אברהם תבע זקנה, אמר לפניו רבון העולמים: אב ובנו נכנסים למקום ואין אדם יודע למי יכבד, ומתוך שאת מעטרו לאב בזקנה אדם יודע למי יכבד. אמר לו הקב"ה: חייך דבר טוב תבעתה וממך אני מתחיל, מתחילת הספר ועד כאן אין כתיב זקנה, וכיון שעמד אבינו אברהם ניתן לו זקנה: "ואברהם זקן בא בימים" (בראשית כד, א).

Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) Parashat VaYehi #97

R. Yudah son of R. Simon said: Avraham demanded aging. He said before [God], "Master of the universe, a father and his son go into a place and no one knows whom to honor more. From Your crowning the father with aging, one can know who to honor more". The Holy One Blessed be He said to him, "By your life! you have asked for a good thing and I am starting it from you." From the beginning of the book until this point aging was not written, Avraham rose, and aging was given to him, "Avraham was old and advanced in years".

A fascinating implication of the world prior to aging becomes apparent in this version:

Fathers and sons who looked alike, including Avraham and Yitzḥak, were actually identical, indistinguishable. In other words, human physical development stopped at a certain point. Without aging, there was no outward indication of the passing of time, of life's experiences, or generational gaps. In this version of the story, Avraham makes his request in a straightforward, blunt, manner: Avraham wants the respect

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that comes with age. His reasoning reveals his longing for respect, status, and hierarchy. This also reveals an insight of Avraham's regarding aging: that people of age are worthy of status and honour.

In the Talmud (referred to above) there is a different version of the story. A careful look at the version found there indicates that Avraham's motivation for the request is quite different:

תלמוד בבלי בבא מציעא דף פ"ז עמוד א

עד אברהם לא היה זקנה, מאן דהוה בעי למשתעי בהדי אברהם - משתעי בהדי יצחק, בהדי יצחק - משתעי בהדי אברהם.
אתא אברהם, בעא רחמי והוה זקנה,
שנאמר 'ואברהם זקן בא בימים

Talmud Bavli Baba Metzia 87a

Until Avraham there was no old age. People who wanted to speak with Avraham [ended up] speaking with Yitzḥak; [people who wanted to speak] with Yitzḥak [ended up] speaking with Avraham.
Avraham came, requested mercy (i.e. prayed), and there was aging, as it says: "and Avraham was now old..." (Genesis 24:1).

This short text has three components. The first is a description of the status quo, what the world looked like before Avraham. Old age did, of course, exist, but it left no physical impression; there was advanced age, but there were no signs of aging. One of the most basic human phenomena was not part of the human experience in the period predating Avraham. This opening establishes, as we mentioned, the very brief verse about Avraham's age as a hint to one of the great foundational myths that serve as an explanation of the human condition as we recognize it today.

The second part is Avraham’s request, a request that leads to a change in reality: He prayed for aging and there was aging. Since the request is preceded by Avraham praying for it, we can assume that it is perceived by Avraham as an experience that he wants, or at least as having implications that he desires.

The last component of the *midrash* is the quotation of the verse from Genesis which reads: “Abraham was now old, advanced in age, and God had blessed Avraham with everything” (Genesis 24:1). The story that the *midrash* tells explains the repetition of the descriptive words “old” and “advanced in age” (זקן, בא בימים). One of these adjectives describes how many years Avraham has lived, his chronological age, and the other describes his physical state: that of aging. The *midrash* may also be trying to account for the statement in the verse that God blessed Avraham with “everything.” Beyond the usual—happiness, money, property and so on—God also blessed Abraham with his own idiosyncratic wish: to age. Not only does Avraham not try to escape from old age, he requests it.

This account reveals an understanding regarding the meaning of aging and its implications which may offer an explanation for Avraham’s request. This is revealed in the way reality is portrayed in the era prior to aging. One who wanted to talk to Avraham ended up talking to Yitzḥak, and vice versa, because they were identical. In the Talmudic version Avraham’s request for aging is actually a longing for distinction and uniqueness. This is so also according to Rashi’s interpretation (on the Talmud there), “In order that people would recognize the difference between him and his son”.

Avraham wants to be recognized for who he is—Avraham. The lack of physical manifestation of age is a loss of a part of himself, enabling only a partial recognition of who he is when the passing of time is not manifest.

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In both versions of the request, both in Bereishit Rabbah and in the Talmud, Avraham longs for a world in which he will be differentiated from his son, a world in which parents and their offspring are different versions of one another, rather than replicas. But there is a difference between the two requests: In Bereishit Rabbah, Avraham wants to be *more* distinguished *than* his son, whereas in the Bavli, Avraham wants to simply *be* distinguished *from* his son.

In the context of parent-child relationships, the request for distinction can be loaded. It seems that Avraham got what so many parents dream of and long for—a child who is an exact replica, a descendant who can help him overcome his mortality. But this dream has a downside. If Yitzḥak is a true replica, then Avraham's existence can feel redundant. As Yitzḥak becomes a repetition of Avraham and is treated as such, Avraham realizes that his own presence loses value. In a world where people cannot distinguish between the generations, the existence of an older generation loses its meaning. At a certain point in development this can inhibit innovation; development has no meaning since we can't distinguish between the old and the new.

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Old age is often perceived as a stage of stagnation, a stage of life in which one slows down or even stops moving entirely. This short Talmudic passage explains that in truth, there is no

growing up without growing old. Without aging, the next generation can hope only to walk its predecessors' footsteps. Aging is what enables the shift from past to present and from present to future; it is what enables the continuity of change and development. Avraham's request allows people to see him as experienced, so they can learn from his life's journey. And Avraham's request allows people to see him as old, so that they can depart from his path.

It seems that In the Bavli Avraham's request is not a request solely for self respect, as apparent in Bereishit Rabbah, but rather it has a philanthropic side. The request for dissimilarity is not only a request for oneself but also for one's offspring. It is in fact a universal request regarding progress. Avraham is asking to be able to change the future, a future he will not be a part of, and God's response is to bless Avraham "with everything".