

Becoming Old, Becoming Wise: Toward a Torah of Evolving Expectations

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A FRIEND OF MINE TOLD ME ABOUT AN ARTICLE SHE HAD READ BY AN EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SOPHOMORE, WHO ANNOUNCED TO HER PARENTS THAT SHE WAS ENGAGED, AND intended to marry in two years, at 20.

With a fiance who was Jewish, emotionally stable, financially solvent, and a graduate of Harvard Business School, the young woman had expected her parents to be overjoyed by her news. Instead, to her shock, her mother burst into tears, pleading with her daughter to wait.

The author of the essay expressed dismay at her parents' close-minded shortsightedness. First of all, she explained, it had been clear to her from the moment she met him that she and her fiance were perfectly suited to one another. So why wait? Second, she saw her parents' insistence on acquiring a profession and independence before settling down as "an old-fashioned notion." On the contrary, she asserted, her life plan was ideal: getting married at 20 would provide stability and security in one important area of her life, while she worked to develop family and career goals. Who would quarrel with such an elegant way to set up one's life?

Hearing about this young woman's plans, I suddenly felt old. It became crystal-clear to me that somewhere out there is a dividing line that separates young from old, a fault line as deep and as consequential as the

Great Rift Valley or the San Andreas Fault. Just as clearly, I understood what side of that line I am on.

I'm 38, but I know I'm old because hearing about this woman's radiant faith in her plans and her future mainly made me uneasy. It reminded me of an observation a friend of mine made recently: Your thirties is when all the plans you made in your twenties blow up in your face.

Now, I wish this young woman and her fiance 120 years of happy marriage together. Nevertheless, I share the concerns raised by her parents. Most people my age have learned all too well by now, from our own experience, from the lives of our friends and families, how radically, sometimes painfully different our lives can turn out from the glorious plans we made with such confidence and certainty when we were 18 or 20.

When I was a child, it bothered me that one of the Hebrew words for a learned person is *zaken*, which means "old." It seemed unfair, maybe even completely wrong. Couldn't you be smart and wise and an authority on law and life without being old? What did age have to do with it?

Now I realize that wisdom does not come merely from living the years of one's life; neither is it absent among the young. But for many of us, the subtle wisdom of the *zaken* comes gradually from experience and observation. And the deep value of lived experience is embedded in the Torah.

HOW DOES THE TORAH DEPICT RECEIVING THE LAW AT SINAI? THE STUNNING majestic revelation, with thunder and lightning and fireworks and sound effects—pow! pow! pow! Here it comes, blazing its way through the clouds: the Torah! It's the passion and fireworks of an eighteen-year-old's love story. But the Torah itself is old, so when it tells us about the revelation of God's law, it tells us not only the story of Sinai but also the story of *Mattot-Mas'ei* [Numbers 30:2-36:13].

At Sinai, in one spectacular and glorious moment, God gives us rules to live by. In *Mattot-Mas'ei*, we hear the voice of life experience. Here we struggle, case by case, story by story, with applying the Torah from Sinai to an imperfect world, a world that contains people and situations that are exceptions to those rules. What happens to property if only sons may be heirs but a father only has daughters? What should happen to someone who accidentally causes

the death of another? What happens when a vow is made by a wife—who has no independent legal standing—and is overruled by her husband? What happens when a tribe wishes to settle *outside* the Promised Land?

What happens, we discover in *Mattot-Mas'ei*, is that you find a way to strengthen both the law and the community by assembling a solution that has room in it for God and the Torah and the rules—and for the exceptions, too.

In Chapter 32, in *Mattot*, the first half of the double portion, Moses is approached by delegates representing the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and half the members of the tribe of Menashe. These are shepherd tribes, so rather than crossing the Jordan from the east bank to the west and entering the Land of Israel with all the other tribes, they respectfully submit a petition to settle down right where they are, in the rich pasturelands east of the Jordan. Moses responds to this request with remarkable anger and vehemence. For this God took us out of Egypt? For this we sent spies into the land to scout it out? Where is your loyalty to God, to the people? You're as bad as that evil generation that turned its back on Joshua's favorable report, the generation that was punished by dying out in the desert! For your disloyalty, for breaking the patterns of God's plan, you deserve to die, just like they did!

This harangue does not discourage the tribal representatives. Instead, they respond with a counter-proposal. Then, together, they and Moses work out a compromise, in which they obtain the desired pastureland and also commit themselves to participate in the conquest of the land on the west side of the Jordan, along with everyone else. Thus, rather than weakening the nation as a whole, they work out an agreement which will strengthen it.

The plan works! Just two chapters later, the narrative, in meticulous and somewhat boring detail, lays out the borders of the land, tribe by tribe. The territory of Reuben, Gad, and half of Menashe is matter-of-factly described as lying on the east bank of the Jordan. Without anger, without histrionics, a resolution has been achieved.

That's the strength of the Torah we receive in *Mattot-Mas'ei*. Not as flashy as the Torah we see at Sinai, it's the Torah we live by still: the Torah of evolving expectations, which is able to accommodate changed circumstances, to make room for exceptions, and to incorporate deviations

from the beautiful, elegant blueprints at the beginning of our journey.

In a sense *Mattot-Mas'ei* draws the fault line of age and wisdom. How can we become *zekenim*, elders who are truly wise? By taking the lessons of *Mattot-Mas'ei* to our hearts.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, A RABBI SPOKE TO ME ABOUT SOME OF THE CHALLENGES facing the contemporary rabbinate. Among the most trying problems, he mentioned divorce and single-parent families. I specifically remember his assertion that single-parent families cause socially awkward situations and “wreak havoc on dues collections.”

As far as this rabbi was concerned, his divorced and single constituencies weakened and undermined his community. Instead of feeling compassion or understanding for the beleaguered single moms who went to the trouble of affiliating with a synagogue, this rabbi scorned them—and even worse: *blamed* them!—for wrecking the orderly pattern of a shul membership roster made up exclusively of nice, normal, nuclear families. This rabbi, although grown older (*zaken*) has not become a *zaken*, a wise man. Each of us becomes a *zaken* when we act with compassion and wisdom because of what life has taught us about how things work out, and don't work out.

When we work as a society to create a culture that has room for the exceptions, for people who disrupt the patterns that we think of as normal—the childless and the single parents; the widows and widowers; the converts and the gay people and the unmarried people and so many others—then we will have truly learned the lesson of *Mattot-Mas'ei*. We will have grown old not so much in years, but in vision, in compassion. And then we will indeed be worthy of the blessing we wish on ourselves when we stand at the end of the Torah reading of *Mattot-Mas'ei*, completing the book of Numbers, and recite together the words *Hazak hazak ve-nit'hazek*: Be strong; let us all be strong; and let us have strength: the strength to build and nurture a community strong enough to hold us all and in which we all sustain and strengthen each other.

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