

## Parashat Bechukotai

The veneration of the elderly is a consistent theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. According to Vayikra 19:32 we are to show respect by "Stand[ing] up in the presence of a person with grey hair." In fact, time and again in our Scriptures grey hair is lauded. Mishlei 16:21 therefore says that "White hair is a crown of honour obtained by righteous living," while Mishlei 20:29 says that "The dignity of the old is grey hair." Unsurprisingly this veneration of the elderly finds frequent expression in the Talmud. Of Rabbi Meir it is therefore told that he arose whenever he saw even an ignorant old man; for, said he, "the very fact that he has grown old must be due to some merit". Rabbi Yochanan always arose even before an aged heathen, because, as he said, of the sufferings the heathen must have endured in the course of a long life. "Respect even the old man who has lost his learning" is a commandment that is found in the Talmud, "for there were placed in the ark of the covenant not only the two perfect tablets of the law but also the fragments of the tablets that Moses shattered when he saw the people dancing before the Golden calf". Our tradition has much to say to a contemporary society which, while it is paradoxically ageing at a rapid rate, nevertheless venerates youth. It is commonly felt today that you are only fully alive when you are young and that after, say 40 or 50, everything goes down hill. Little wonder, with this prevailing attitude, people have mid-life crises! When middle aged people realise that they are no longer in the bloom of youth, and, beginning to feel the physical decline that comes with ageing, especially as women experience the menopause, they wonder whether there is anything in life to look forward to? 'Is that it?' might usefully summarise the predicament that middle age thrusts people into. The cliched response of middle aged men is to buy a leather jacket and sports car or to find a younger partner; while the cliched response of women is to hold on to their youthful looks by dyeing their hair, by botoxing or by dressing in the clothes of a younger generation. Older women in particular have a hard time as women are unquestionably judged more than men by how they look. This combination of ageism and sexism pushes women into the peripheries of society as they get older and we find this harsh reality echoed back to us by, for example, their relative absence from TV and movies. But thanks to people like Professor Mary Beard older women are fighting back. Beard, who is a pre-eminent Classical scholar, has suffered terrible abuse on social media from people who find her grey hair and wrinkles unpalatable. As Anouchka Grose has recently written in The Guardian newspaper, "Mary Beard's hair gets people going. Even her admirers refer to her "grey hair, wild as a witch" (Cristina Odone in the Telegraph). Internet bullies tell her to "get [her] hair fixed — cut, dyed and styled". Samantha Brick, in the Daily Mail last year, wrote of the "tragedy" of Beard's silver locks – apparently her producers should have tamed them before letting them loose on the airwaves. According to some rather vocal people, it simply isn't OK to have long grey hair. And not just if you're Mary Beard. This winter's Marks & Spencer TV ad featured Yasmina Rossi, a 56-year-old model. Scathing online comments mentioned her "mad person's long white hair" and, again, compared her to a witch.... The word "witch" comes up remarkably often in relation to this particular hairstyle... This probably shouldn't be surprising given that fairy books are full of wicked old women with unkempt locks straggling out from under their pointy hats. Perhaps the question is more why society

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should so often choose to portray older women in this way. Is the idea somehow that, once women have ceased to be objects of desire, they turn against the world and spend the rest of their days wishing evil on a populace that bypasses them?" This bypassing of older women proves my point about our contemporary veneration of youth. The common feeling is that there is nothing more attractive than youth and there is more attractive than a young women - thus beautiful young women are used everywhere to sell products. The sad economic reality is that in our contemporary world a young female model perhaps without significant education or life achievement can earn vastly more than an older woman who has lived a full life and is an expert in her academic field.

The antidote to this veneration of youth is to be found in our Jewish culture of Scripture and tradition. Indeed, according to Scripture and tradition a culture that does not value the elderly is perverse. In Yeshayahu 3 we read that God would curse our people for disobedience by putting "children in authority; capriciousness will govern them. People will oppress each other—everyone his friend, everyone his neighbor. The young will be insolent toward their elders, the insignificant arrogant toward the respected." Indeed, in the Talmud it is stated that a sign of the troubled days preceding the coming of the Messiah will be the lack of respect and courtesy shown by the young toward their elders. Sotah 49b thus says that "In the footsteps of the Messiah insolence will increase and honour dwindle; the vine will yield its fruit abundantly but wine will be dear; the government will turn to heresy and there will be none to offer them reproof; the meeting place of scholars will be used for immorality; Galilee will be destroyed, Gablan desolated, and the dwellers on the frontier will go about begging from place to place without anyone to take pity on them; the wisdom of the learned will degenerate, fearers of sin will be despised, and the truth will be lacking; youths will put old men to shame, the old will stand up in the presence of the young, a son will revile his father, a daughter will rise against her mother, a daughter in law against her mother in law, and a man's enemies will be the members of his household; the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog, a son will not feel ashamed before his father. So upon whom is it for us to rely? Upon our father who is in Heaven." In fact this passage from the Talmud finds a remarkable parallel in the writings of Rabbi Shaul who wrote to Timothy concerning the Last Days that: "in the acharit-hayamim will come trying times. People will be self-loving, money-loving, proud, arrogant, insulting, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, uncontrolled, brutal, hateful of good, traitorous, headstrong, swollen with conceit, loving pleasure rather than God, as they retain the outer form of religion but deny its power. Stay away from these people!" (2Ti 3:1-5). It is hardly surprising in the light of this that Rabbi Shaul also instructed the Messianic community, as Judaism, to be aware of its obligations toward the elderly. 1 Timothy (5:8) therefore says that "anyone who does not provide for his own people, especially for his family, has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever", and he added moreover that the children or grandchildren of a widow had an obligation to "do their religious duty to their own family and thus repay some of the debt they owe their forebears, for this is what is acceptable in the sight of God." (1Ti 5:4). "Children," he wrote in Ephesians, "what you should do in union with the Lord is obey

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your parents, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" —this is the first commandment that embodies a promise— "so that it may go well with you, and you may live long in the Land." (Eph 6:1-3).

The reason for all this Jewish respect for the aged lay chiefly in fact that old people, by virtue of having passed through the trials of life, had necessarily acquired wisdom. Hence, the term *zaken* came to be used for wise man, and also for elder in the sense of ruler. Expressive of this is the definition of *zaken* that we find in the Talmud, "The *Zaken* is he who has acquired wisdom". The story is told of Eleazar ben Azariah, who, having been elected president of the Sanhedrin at the age of 18, was considered too young. But a wondrous thing happened: his beard turned white, so that he had the appearance of an old man. In accordance with this thought, there is a strain running throughout Jewish literature indicating that the experience of years is the best guide for deciding vexed questions. After the death of Shlomo, his son Rechavam, by disregarding the advice of the elders and following the counsel of young men, brought about the division of the kingdom. A similar incident is recorded in the Talmud. In the days of Hadrian, when the enthusiastic young men advised the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem, some wise men reminded the people of the event that occurred in Rechavam's time, and said, "if young people advise you to build the temple, and old men say destroy it, give ear to the latter: for the building of the young is destruction; and the tearing down of the old is construction".

Such then is the honour which the elderly are accorded within Jewish Scripture and tradition and it was expected that the young would increasingly support and respect people, particularly their parents, as they aged. This was especially important in a society which had no pensions or welfare state. It was therefore expected that when a person grew too old to work that their children would step in and provide and that's principally why people had large families. To put it bluntly your children were your pension! The Essene brotherhoods, Philo tells us, especially made it their object "to honour the old and provide for them; just as lawful children honoured and provided for their parents, so they offered the aged all possible comfort by personal care and wise forethought." For the Essenes therefore one's care for one's parents in old age was very essence and apogee of Torah observance. It was in this vein that Rav Shaul also declared that, "Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." It is in this context of reverent care for the elderly, particularly aged parents, as representing the apogee of Torah observance, that we need to read the text of Yeshua's dispute with the P'rushim. "You depart from God's command and hold onto human tradition" Yeshua declared. "For Moshe said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say, 'If someone says to his father or mother, "I have promised as a korban"" ""what I might have used to help you,"" then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus, with your tradition which you had handed down to you, you nullify the Word of God! And you do other things like this." (Mark 7:5-13)

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Here Yeshua is questioning the P'rushim's interpretation of Vayikra 27 which allowed Jews to dedicate their person, land, property, and or animals to Hashem. With regard to property, for instance, the Torah states, "If anyone consecrates his house to the LORD, the priest shall assess it. Whether high or low, as the priest assesses it, so it shall stand; and if he who has consecrated his house wishes to redeem it, he must add one-fifth to the sum at which it was assessed, and it shall be his." As the Jewish Study Bible explains, "The laws in this chapter prescribe how monetary and other dedications are made to the sanctuary, the values or method for determining them, and whether or not such dedications may be redeemed." The purpose of these mitzvot was to raise funds for the Temple. Indeed, so the Study Bible continues, "Besides constituting the most important source of revenue for the Temple, they allowed individual Israelites to achieve a sense that the regimen of public worship performed by the priests was being conducted on their behalf." To raise funds for the sanctuary by these means was naturally regarded as a sacred duty. I mean, what could be holier than the Temple service? And yet Yeshua had an issue with the way that the P'rushim understood and practiced these mitzvot. Not that there was anything wrong with supporting the fabric of the Temple - to the contrary, it is said that Yeshua was a man who was consumed with zeal for the Temple and you'll recall in this respect how when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and merchants he shouted, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market" - but for Yeshua there was something far more holy than the fabric of the Temple - and that was people! It appears that once a man or woman had dedicated themselves, their land, animals or property to Hashem the P'rushim would no longer let these be redeemed for personal use. This meant that elderly parents were no longer being provided for as they should be since their children's means of support them had been dedicated to the Temple. And this for Yeshua was a huge scandal since, as the fifth commandment states, "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." Indeed, as the Talmud asks, "What is honouring? Providing them food and drink, clothing and covers, and taking them in and out." Moreover, the critical nature of this commandment is evident in the subsequent promise that this would ensure the right of future generations of Israelites to inherit the Land of Israel. In others if the elderly were not cared for then the result would be exile. The clash between Yeshua and the P'rushim on this matter was a clash of perspectives. It all boiled down to what each considered most holy, and at the end of the day, for Yeshua, people were always more holy and important than either religious systems or their buildings. As grand and as sacred as the Temple was, and as dedicated to it as he was, for Yeshua, a single human life was still yet grander and more sacred! The sad truth, however, is that neither the P'rushim nor we think in this way do we? We are more apt to think of service to God and worship as what we do in synagogue rather than in terms of how we treat people - our relationships with and service to others - which is perhaps why most holier than thou religious people are simply obnoxious. For sure, you can be religiously pious, you can even blog and preach about how we must keep Torah, but unless you treat people with reverence and respect then your piety counts for absolutely nothing. This is especially true of the poor and marginalised in society - as the

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Torah frequently puts it, "the Levi ...the foreigner, the orphan and the widow." Little wonder then that Yaakov said, "The religious observance that God the Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being contaminated by the world." Let's be clear when it comes to Torah observance Hashem cares less about what you put in your mouth than about what comes out of it. And He cares less about how you celebrate the feasts or how passionately you daven than about how you revere and respect the human beings who are made in His image. And this especially includes the elderly. Instead of contributing to a culture in which the elderly are regarded as a burden we ought to help create a climate of reverence and respect for the elderly. For it is by this measure that God weighs a people and nation in the balance. Fundamentally then Torah observance and the love of God is all about people. A society that takes good care of people will live long in the Land.