

SHABBAT SERMON
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Grow Old Along With Me ... and John McCain

Today is November 1st. In the Christian calendar, today is All Saints Day. And so, perhaps it should not come as a surprise that today is also my birthday. And today is also Zippy Schorr's birthday! And everybody knows that she's a saint! The truth of the matter is, there is nothing special about my birthday ... I am not turning 50, I am not turning 60 ... it's not one of those years that people sit up and take note of. And I, too, would not make special mention of this birthday because it is no different than any of the others that I have celebrated, and I've celebrated many by now. And yet, the age I am turning does have something special about it. I am turning 64. And anyone who was a fan of the Beatles, and anyone knowledgeable of pop culture, knows that the age of 64 has a special meaning to it.

In 1967, the Beatles released their album, "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." And it contained a love song sung by Paul McCartney entitled, "When I'm 64." It is a song by a young man to his lover, and it's about his plans of growing old together with her. And he expresses the concern of whether, when he is old, she will still love him. And what age does he consider "old?" 64! The first paragraph of the song says:

*When I get older losing my hair,
Many years from now,
Will you still be sending me a valentine
Birthday greeting, bottle of wine?
If I'd been out till quarter to three,
Would you lock the door?
Will you still need me, will you still feed me,
When I'm 64?*

The song expresses the natural concerns that one has as they get older ... will they still be needed, will they still be appreciated, will they still be considered useful? You know, there is a Hebrew version to this song. And most of you know the words! They ring out so powerfully during the High Holidays: "*Al tashlicheinu l'et ziknah kichlot Kochanu al taazveinu* – do not cast us away in old age, when our strength gives out, do not forsake us." I think the words of the Beatles and the words of our prayers are on the mind of John McCain these days.

I have spoken of what the nomination of Barack Obama means in the battle against racism, and I have spoken about what the nomination of Sarah Palin means in terms of the battle against chauvinism. But I don't think I have said enough about what John McCain's campaign for President represents in terms of "ageism." Yes, there is a special word we have for those who discriminate against people as they get older: Ageism. And the truth is, this Presidential campaign has shown how far our country has come in the battles against racism and chauvinism. Everyone was very careful not to make any reference to the color of Sen. Obama's skin, and everyone was careful not to ridicule Sarah Palin for being a woman. But no one held back in pointing out John McCain's age. Whether it was jokes about his eating Metamucil or code words like saying he was "confused" or has "lost his bearings" ... the fact of the matter is, McCain's age

was – and is – an issue. Anna Quindlen, writing for Newsweek, said that McCain’s age was an issue because, in her words, “Each year in office is roughly equivalent to seven years in the life of an ordinary citizen.” It seems to me like she was counting McCain’s age in dog years!

Which brings us to this morning’s Torah portion. Our Torah portion this morning focuses primarily on a man named Noah. But at the conclusion of the Torah portion we are introduced to, and the stage is set for another man, a man named Abraham. Abraham has started the journey – the journey that will immortalize him into history. At the conclusion of this morning’s Torah portion, we are told that Abraham has left his family home and has started the journey to Israel. How old was Abraham when he started this journey? 75 years old! Why did he do it? Why would a man of 75 leave his family, his birthplace and go to a place that he has never seen before? There is no way of knowing for sure. All I know is, win or lose, John McCain has done more than any other American in our lifetime to win respect for the aged. He never missed a day on the campaign, he never seemed to tire. He showed the world that the old are not worthless people to be put out in the junk heap, that the old are not antediluvians, hopelessly behind the times. The old are real, live human beings – one of whom was capable of running for President at the age of 72. The old still have something to say. Indeed, these days 72 is not really considered old. There was a wonderful article last week in the Wall Street Journal about measuring the longevity of the candidates’ lives. And the bottom line was: there is no way to know! Barack Obama is some 25 years younger than John McCain ... but he smoked cigarettes much longer. And who is to know which will take the quicker toll – the years or the smoking?

But it is more than this. You know, I pointed out in a lecture that I gave last Shabbat that I didn’t particularly like the way Jews – Republicans or Democrats – conducted themselves during this campaign. There was some racism, there was some chauvinism, there were some unfair attacks, even when it was meant to be humorous! A lot was made out of the Jewish comedian, Sara Silverman, for her on-line video called, “The Great Shlep,” where she urged young Jews to go down to Florida to visit their grandparents and tell them why they should vote for Sen. Obama in that crucial state. Not too many people took the video seriously, but there was something about the whole *shtick* that was very un-Jewish. The whole premise of the video is that the younger generation is better informed than the older generation; that the older generation doesn’t “get it,” and needs their children and grandchildren to explain it to them; that the younger generation is smarter and more “with it,” and really know what’s going on and they have to protect their grandparents from making fools of themselves.

That whole premise is so un-Jewish! It is in The Book of Deuteronomy we are told: “Remember the days of old, reflect upon the years of other generations, ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will inform you.” Yes, it is the elders who are supposed to teach *you* ... not you teach the elders! Do you know that according to Jewish law, you are not only not allowed to tell your parents that they are wrong; it is considered disrespectful to tell your parents that they are right! Who are you – little shnook – to offer your approval of your parents’ opinion? What do you know? According to our tradition, it is the Jewish grandparents who should have come up North from Florida to tell their children and grandchildren how to vote. According to our tradition, it is the elders’ opinion that is supposed to be listened to; that age and wrinkles are not a sign of senility but a badge of experience and courage.

And you know who was the first who taught us this all important lesson about the aged? It was a man named Abraham! Our Sages in the Midrash make a rather remarkable comment about Abraham when they tell us, “*ad Avrohom lo hevei ziknah* - From the time of creation until Abraham, no one grew old.” Now certainly, this can’t possibly mean that Abraham was the first

man to live to a ripe old age. Adam, we know, lived to 930! What our Sages are telling us is that Abraham was the first human being to feel the aches and pains and witness the physical change that comes with the passing of time. Abraham was the first human being to *look* old. And our Sages tell us that that's just what he wanted – that's what he asked from God.

According to the Midrash, Abraham came before God with a plea, “Master of the Universe,” he said, “If young and old look alike, when a man and his son walk together, no one knows on to whom to give honor. I beg of you, make a distinction between us.”

Imagine that! In the Jewish tradition, Abraham asked God for plastic surgery, not to *remove* wrinkles, but to put them on. The wrinkles answered a need. How else would people know whom to honor? It is God's gift of a visible badge of identification to those who deserve the honor age ought to inspire. The manifestations of turning old, rather than presenting a problem, were meant as indicators of worth and status. Wrinkles were to be viewed as the rewards of experience.

We Jews have since time immemorial prided ourselves on our attitude toward the elderly. The Torah commands us, “*m'pnei seivah tokum* – rise before the elderly as a sign of respect.” In our Hagadah, every year at the Seder, we read the story of Reb Eleazer Ben Azaryah, who says “*harei ani k'ven shivim shana* – I am like a 70 year old.” What does this mean, “I am like a 70 year old?” . . . ask our commentators! And they answer that Reb Eleazer Ben Azaryah was only 18 years old, but he asked God to allow him to grow a beard and to look old so that he could assume the position of head of the Sanhedrin. Because the people would only respect the judgment of somebody in their 70's. Indeed, the word for old, “*zakein*” is read by our Sages as being “*zeh shkenah chochma* – he who has acquired wisdom.”

You know, those haunting words, “*Al Taslicheinu L'eis Ziknah* – do not cast me off in old age, when my strength weakens me, do not abandon me.” You know the basis for those words in that prayer? In every other ancient culture, that's what they did with the elderly. The Spartans, the Celtics – they abandoned the old by casting them off a cliff. And so our people always prayed that never be the fate of our elderly.

So along comes a John McCain and reminds all of us that people like Adenauer, Churchill, DeGaul and Ben Gurion led their countries at an age when most men are dead and buried. That George Bernard Shaw was still writing in his 90's. Verdi created his operas “Otello” and “Falstaff” at the ages of 74 and 80 respectively. Toscanini was conducting in his 80's, Grandma Moses became a painter when most are retired, and Pope John the Twenty Third ascended the Vatican throne in his 78th year and became the most dynamic Pontiff in centuries. John McCain is one more reminder that the elderly have much to contribute, and must play an important role in our community.

There is a wonderful Midrash about Abraham. The Midrash says that when Abraham arrived in Canaan, he made coins to demonstrate that he was now the sovereign of this new place. And on these coins there were two sides: on one side was a picture of a young man and a young woman; and on the other side was a picture of an old man and an old woman. With these words the Midrash was telling us that a healthy society reveres and respects both: youth and age. It respects youth because without the young there is no future, and it respects the aged because without them there is no civilized life.

John McCain has taught us what that Midrash means and therefore, just as I told you in regard to Barack Obama, don't vote for or against him because of his race . . . and just as I told

you about Sarah Palin, don't vote for or against her because of her gender ... I tell you about John McCain ... don't for or against him because of his age. In regard to Barack Obama, there are reasons to vote for him, and reasons to vote against him that have nothing to do with the color of his skin. And similarly, in regard to John McCain, there are reasons to vote for him and reasons to vote against him that have nothing to do with the wrinkles on his skin.

And as for me ... will you still need me, will you still feed me when I'm 64? You better! I've got a long-term contract, and I intend to be your rabbi past the age of John McCain! So let me echo the words of the poet: "Grow old along with me ... the best is yet to be!" And let it someday be said of all of us what the Bible says of Abraham: "*V'Avrohom zakein . . . v'Hashem beraich et Avrohom bakol*" – as Abraham and we grow old, may God bless us with everything." Amen.

** Rabbi Wohlberg's new book, *Pulpit Power* is available online:
www.bethfiloh.com/Register.

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