

AGING GRACEFULLY

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"And it came to pass after these matters that [the messenger] said to Yosef (Joseph), 'Behold, your father is ill.'... (Beraishis/Genesis 48:1) This is the first time in the history of the world that someone became sick.

Yalkut Shimoni (1)(Chayai Sarah 105) narrates that Avraham requested from G-d the phenomenon of visible aging, for he feared that when father and son entered a room people would not know whom to give honor first, so G-d granted him his wish, with him as the first recipient. Yitzchak (Isaac) requested suffering before death, for he feared the result of the process of Divine judgment if one never had the warning to do teshuva (regret one's misdeeds and resolve to return to G-d's path), so G-d granted him his wish, with him as the first recipient. Yaakov (Jacob) requested illness, for he feared the consequences of not having a few days to resolve outstanding issues between one's children. G-d granted him his wish, with him as the first recipient.

Michtav Me'Eliyahu (2) explains that each of our saintly forefathers made requests consistent with his most pronounced character trait. Avraham, known for his acts of chesed (loving kindness), appreciated the need for giving genuine honor to his fellow human. G-d concurred to the great impediment this indistinguishability placed on one's Divine service through chesed. Yitzchak's focus was on justice, and he recognized the great tragedy in the afterlife that awaited one who did not do teshuva. Therefore, he beseeched a mechanism in this life that would awaken the consciousness to this inevitability so that the requisite correction could be made. Yaakov's pursuit was perfection and completion, seeking resolution between opposing forces. Prior to death, a simple declaration of one's will was insufficient; efforts needed to be made to ensure that the children accepted the determination. He understood that there would continue to be jealousy unless everyone genuinely felt his interests had been served, that there could be no peace (shalom) between parties without feeling a sense of wholeness (shleimus). This could not be accomplished with the suddenness that accompanied natural death at that time. G-d's accommodation was extended illness.

Rabbi Akiva taught us (Tractate Berachos 60b) that one should regularly remind himself that all that G-d does is for the good. There are tragedies that challenge our faith in this maxim, such as the difficulties that comes with aging. But our Sages remind us often that trials are given to us as growth opportunities (see Kol HaKollel Parshas Lech Lecha 5764), and G-d, in his infinite kindness and love for us, granted our forefathers' requests for the growth opportunities of aging. Our challenge is to maximize our utilization of them.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) most comprehensive Midrashic anthology, covering the entirety of the Tanach (Bible); attributed to Rabbi Shimon HaDarshan of Frankfurt of the thirteenth century

(2) collected writings and discourses of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1891-1954) of London and B'nai Brak, one of the outstanding personalities and thinkers of the Mussar movement

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