

May You Stay Forever Young – *Shabbat Vayetze 5782*

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November 12, 2021

Every year around this time, when the leaves are turning and falling in their downward dance of death, I find myself meditating on the theme of getting older. And these thoughts make me sigh. Especially when, as happened, yet again, at a wedding last Saturday night, three separate individuals came up to me, and mentioned that, in their opinion, I did not look old enough to be a rabbi.

Looking “too young” is, of course, the textbook definition of a “good problem to have,” and it’s one to which I am so long accustomed that it hardly registers anymore. After conducting my first ever Bar Mitzvah as a rabbi, twenty-one years ago, at Temple Beth-El in Providence, when I actually *was* a baby rabbi, I stopped by the reception in the social hall, still wearing my *tallit* and the somber black clerical robe which is the custom of that congregation, ordered a glass of wine, and was promptly carded by the bartender.

I cannot be sure whether the source of this seemingly perennial issue in my life should be attributed to good luck, good genes, good habits, or some combination thereof, but I have come to regard it as a blessing and not a curse.

And whenever I hear Bob Dylan sing these words:

May God bless and keep you always / May your wishes all come true / May you always do for others / And let others do for you / May you build a ladder to the stars / And climb on every young / And may you stay / Forever young

I think to myself, “Bob, my good friend, I’ve got you covered.”

“Forever Young” may well be the most explicitly Biblical song in all of the Torah of Bob, beginning as it does with an echo of the *Birkat Kohanim*, the Priestly Benediction from the Book of Numbers¹, and including the image of a ladder to the stars, which comes from the first verses of this week’s Torah portion, *Vayetze*:

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעָר שְׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה:

Jacob left Beersheva, and set out for Haran.

וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם כִּי־בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשָּׂם
מִרְאֲשֵׁתוֹ וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא:

He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

וַיַּחְלֵם וְהִנֵּה סֹלֶם מְצֹב אֶרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכָי
אֱלֹהִים עֲלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ:

He dreamed: suddenly there was a ladder stationed on the ground with its top reaching heavenward, and God's angels going up and down on it!

וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה נֹצֵב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹרָהם אָבִיךָ וְאֱלֹהֵי
יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנֶּה וְלִזְרַעְךָ:

Then suddenly Adonai was standing beside him, saying, "I am Adonai, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you are lying I will give to you and to your offspring."

וְהָיָה זֶרְעֶךָ בְּעֵפְרַי הָאָרֶץ וּפְרֻצֹת יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצַפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה וְנִבְרָכוּ בְךָ
כֹּל־מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה וּבְזַרְעֶךָ:

“Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and the east, the north and the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants.”

וְהָיָה אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל-הָאָדָמָה
הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם-עָשִׂיתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ:

“See, I am with you. I will guard you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

וַיִּיקֶץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲכֹן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא
יָדַעְתִּי:

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely Adonai is in this place, and I did not know it!”

וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מַה-נִּזְרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם-בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה
שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:

Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this, the gateway to heaven.”

Forty-eight years ago this month, in November 1973, when I was, in fact, young, just two months old, Dylan recorded “Forever Young” for another Jakob, his four-year old son, and it ended up on the 1974 album *Planet Waves*.

Like the ladder it references, the song’s journey is long and storied; my favorite anecdote is that Howard Cosell recited its lyrics on air when Muhammad Ali won the heavyweight crown for the third time, in September 1978, declaiming, as only Howard Cosell could:

“May your hands always be busy, may your feet always be swift, may you have a strong foundation, when the winds of changes shift,” and so on.

Meanwhile, I’ve been combing the Jewish tradition for some applicable wisdom on how to stay forever young. In the course of my research, I encountered the famous controversy on the Jewish view of when life begins. You may have heard it said that in Judaism, a fetus is not considered viable until after it graduates from medical school.

Embedded in this old joke is a deeper truth about the pain of growing up and the desire to keep our children “forever young.” Many in our congregation over the last year have shared with me how sweet it felt, at the height of the

pandemic, to turn their home into a compound for their grown children to come back home and camp out for weeks or even months, often with significant others and spouses and young children of their own in tow. Lighting in a bottle, it was—a time that felt, even for an instant, like the old days, before the kids became grown-ups, with grown-up-sized responsibilities and problems.

But even in these strange circumstances which have warped our perception of time, which have blurred the boundaries between home and office, between family nuclear and extended, a time did come for the fantasy to end. Offices and schools reopened, travel resumed, renovations reached completion, and homes that started out feeling spacious began to feel cramped.

Robert Frost put it this way: “Nothing gold can stay.”²

From the moment they cut the umbilical cord, we are teaching our children to grow up. The trauma of birth affects both parent and child, simultaneously but perhaps not equally. Abruptly or gradually, both must figure out how to belong to each other without being the owner or the owned.

All of growing up is figuring out how to be a person in the world—independent, in a sense, yet forever craving

connection, relationship, love, attachment. As a friend of mine brilliantly and succinctly puts it: “It’s not easy being a person.”

Someone once asked playwright George Bernard Shaw what, in his opinion, is the most beautiful thing in this world.

“Youth,” he replied, “is the most beautiful thing in this world—and what a pity that it has to be wasted on children!”—a quip that has come down to us in condensed form as “Youth is wasted on the young.” And perhaps it is so, because we seem to appreciate our youth only when it has fled. It should come as no surprise that so many of us grown-ups spend so much of our time and psychic energy and money chasing fountains of youth.

My colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein who works in Los Angeles (where this tendency is particularly conspicuous) says, “Think of all that’s sold to us with the promise of making us look younger and feel younger. Younger is better. Ever see anything offered to make you look older in just minutes a day? (Yes, children.)”

“...No matter how cheery and bright and clever those ads for Viagra, Levitra, and Cialis, we can read the subtext: At this

age you can't do what once came so naturally. Not without strong medicinal intervention.”³

The allure to stay forever young keeps hair colorists, plastic surgeons, and sports car dealers gainfully employed. And yet, most of us understand that none of these will keep us vital on the inside, at the soul-level, where it really counts.

And that, I think, is what Dylan may have had in mind when he sang,

May you build a ladder to the stars / And climb on every rung / And may you stay / Forever young

Dylan is not praying for the impossible—to remain wrinkle-free, with shiny hair and sturdy bones—so much as he is inviting us to consider a life of spiritual vitality, a soul that remains youthful even as the years go by.

Judaism proposes a means which this can be achieved, a way to “stay forever young,” at least spiritually speaking, even when we are chronologically or biologically old.

It's a simple thing, really. We must retain the capacity to dream, *especially* as we age.

Beginning this week with Jacob, dreaming emerges as a Biblical *leitmotif*, moving the Jewish story forward: Jacob's dream of a ladder to the heavens, with angels going up and down, brings him powerfully into relationship with God for the first time in his life, a relationship that will persist, even though it goes through many stages and changes, for the rest of his life.

His son Joseph is the Bible's great dreamer and dream-interpreter, capable of translating dreams into actions that will save lives and shape the destiny of the Jewish People. The Book of Daniel is largely a record of symbolic dreams foretelling the fate of empires. And many Biblical Prophets encountered God through dreams and visions, and transformed these experiences into the ethical wisdom that would give Judaism its eternally relevant voice in shaping a just and humane world.

I'm sure many of you have read the fascinating cover piece from this week's *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, which is all about dreams. At the center of the article lies an exploration of the pandemic which seems to have inspired, across the globe, a surge in vivid and provocative dreams possibly linked to the jarring experience we have been sharing.

Long before Covid, Deirdre Barrett, the scientist of dreams profiled in the article, noted that dreams have long been associated with creativity. Dreams were credited as the direct origin of, to name a few examples, Jasper Johns's painting "Flag," the author E.B. White's character Stuart Little, the plot of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Beatles song "Yesterday," the first ironclad battleship, the scientific breakthrough that earned researchers the 1936 Nobel Prize in Medicine and—though this one may be apocryphal—the structure of the periodic table.⁴

The Prophet Joel describes the spirit of God entering humanity by promising that "the old shall dream dreams, and the youth shall see visions"⁵, a verse tunefully enshrined by Debbie Friedman of blessed memory.

In other words, our dreams are a way of keeping God alive within us: the uniquely human spark of creativity, the uniquely human capacity for hope and possibility, the ability to imagine, to visualize a future of the way things ought to be (instead of the way they are).

In this country, we still speak of the "American Dream," although lately it usually comes up in the negative: dream interrupted, a broken dream, a dream that is no longer a

dream (much less a reality), and, perennially for many, less a dream and more a nightmare.

Aware of all of this, I still find inspiration in those who are keeping the dream alive.

On Halloween, our new favorite ice cream parlor, Ice Cream Social on Mamaroneck Avenue in White Plains, was offering a free scoop for anyone who showed up in costume.

So I drove straight there from a wedding and met Kelly who had brought a bag of goofy hats and masks and accessories and two cherished friends, Mariam and Achta Ali-Khamis, the refugee sisters who arrived in the US in 2018 with WRT's initiative and assistance and who have been steadily climbing the ladder, one rung at a time, ever since, and who live near the ice cream parlor.

I cannot fathom the trauma that Achta and Mariam endured in their brutally wartorn home country, the Central African Republic, or the subsequent five years in a refugee encampment in neighboring Chad, much less the strength of will required to come to America knowing no one, not speaking the language, leaving behind a family including an aging mother, siblings and nieces and nephews, as Black

Muslim refugees. And then to come here and after less than two years to have life paralyzed by Covid—I stand in awe.

And yet here they are, speaking English beautifully, employed and advancing in work, financially independent, currently pursuing better employment and housing of their own initiative.

Yes, they are climbing with their own hard work and determination; but without the capacity to dream, the whole enterprise crumbles.

And if Mariam and Achta can “build a ladder to the stars and climb on every rung,” why not we? Who made it a rule that at some point in life, the responsible thing to do, the grown-up thing to do, is to tuck our imaginations away in some unattended drawer, to lay our dreams to rest?

And so here we are tonight, to do what we do on Shabbat, which is, to pray. Let our prayers never become a rote exercise in repeating Hebrew words. Prayers are dreams given voice. Remember what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, that “to pray is to dream in league with God.”⁶

Every time we open our mouths in prayer, let it be with dreams of a life filled with joy, with purpose, and with transformative potential—for ourselves and for the world.

When we pray, let it be because we still remember how to dream.

And if you can do that, I promise you, you may indeed stay *forever young*.

1. Numbers 6:22-27.
2. Written in 1923. Now in the public domain.
3. “The Wisdom of Jewish Adulthood,” as posted at https://www.vbs.org/worship/meet-our-clergy/rabbi-ed-feinstein/sermons?post_id=1021118
4. Paraphrasing from “Did Covid Change How We Dream?” *New York Times Magazine*, Sunday, November 7, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/03/magazine/pandemic-dreams.html>
5. Joel 2:28.
6. As quoted in the anthology *I Asked for Wonder* (1983).