Hard, Harder, Hardest: Thoughts for Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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By

Rabbi Marc Angel

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

My wife and I recently had lunch with a longtime friend, Fortuna Calvo Roth. Fortuna is an award winning journalist, with an amazing list of accomplishments. She was recently honored by the University of Missouri for her many years in journalism, and she chose to speak about the challenges of being a good journalist. She framed her talk as "hard, harder, and hardest."

Hard: One has to work hard to find the facts, to distinguish between truth and falsehood. One has to write honestly, with unflinching commitment to getting things right.

Harder: While it is hard to research and write articles, it is harder to stand up to power. There are those who would prefer to quash your article, or ask you to alter it so as to change its truthfulness and impact. Resisting those pressures requires courage…and can be risky to one's career.

Hardest: The hardest challenge is to wake up every morning with the same enthusiasm with which you began your profession…and still have a job! During the course of one's career, one faces so many ups and downs, disappointments and disillusionments…and it is very difficult not to lose one's sense of idealism and enthusiasm. But if one can continue to feel renewed and energized by one's work, one can push forward with optimism.

As Fortuna reviewed her talk with us, it struck me that her observations were also true for rabbis! It is hard to pursue truth and to maintain communal harmony and spiritual growth. It is harder to stand up to power, to those who would undermine your work and threaten your position. It is hardest to maintain the youthful idealism and enthusiasm with which one entered the rabbinate.

But then it occurred to me: Fortuna's framework refers to almost everyone, regardless of occupation or profession. It is hard to live with integrity, to strive to clarify and maintain one's values. It is harder to resist the powers that seek to curtail your own ideas and ideals, to force you into conformity with their viewpoints. It is hardest to work year after year without becoming "burnt out," without losing the visionary gleam of your youthful expectations.

This is the hardest challenge in life: to grow older while still retaining youthful enthusiasm.

This week's Torah portion offers insight on this issue.

"And Abraham was old, well stricken in years" (Bereishith 24:1). The Hebrew phrase for "well stricken in years" is "ba bayamim" which literally means that Abraham came in days. When the Torah describes the elderliness of Abraham and Sarah, it uses similar wording: "And Abraham and Sarah were old, well stricken in years" (ba'im bayamim); literally, this means that Abraham and Sarah came in days, If the Torah informs us that Abraham is old (zaken) and that Abraham and Sarah are old (zekeinim), what is added by the words ba bayamim or ba'im bayamim? What do these words actually mean? How does one "come in days?"

When Abraham and Sarah are described as zaken/zekeinim, this refers to their chronological ages. They were indeed old in years. But when the Torah adds the words "ba bayamim/ba'im bayamim" it may be teaching us that Abraham and Sarah were living actively, making every day count. They were physiologically, emotionally and psychologically much younger than their chronological ages. They did not live passive lives waiting for their days to pass. Rather, they "came in days," i.e. they actively

greeted each day, they were ready for new challenges and new adventures.

This interpretation is borne out by the Torah narratives themselves. Right after Abraham and Sarah are described as being old and ba'im bayamim, the Torah informs us that Abraham aged 100 and Sarah aged 90 are going to have a baby! As old as they were chronologically, they were ready to start a new phase in life with the energy and enthusiasm of a young couple awaiting their first child. When the Torah tells us that Abraham was old and "ba bayamim," he was busy making plans to marry off his son, Isaac. Abraham was at least 137 years old then—but was very much alive, very much involved in the doings of his family and his society.

Although the chronological aging process is automatic and beyond human control, humans can lower their psychological/emotional ages by keeping alert mentally, by continuing to learn, by keeping focused on new goals to accomplish. Abraham and Sara "came in days"—they dealt with each day actively and purposefully.

Life offers all of us hard challenges. These challenges are made even harder by those who try to impede our growth and our progress. But the hardest challenge is to maintain enthusiasm, to keep looking forward, to overcome obstacles…to grow old in years while remaining young in idealism.

Angel for Shabbat