Musings on Turning 70

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Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said: Here I am as a man of 70 years old, yet I was not privileged to know the source of the commandment to recite the story of the exodus from Egypt at night, until Ben Zoma interpreted the verse. The Torah states (Devarim 16:3) “so that you will remember the day you went out from the land of Egypt ALL the days of your life.” If the verse had stated “the days of your life” I would understand the commandment to refer to days. Since it adds the word ALL, this comes to include nights. The sages have interpreted the verse as follows: The days of your life refers to this world; ALL the days of your life comes to include the days of the Messiah.

The above Talmudic passage, well known due to its inclusion in the text of the Passover Haggada, relates to Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah. The sages of Yavneh, during the period following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, wanted to appoint Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah as head of the Academy. He was a brilliant scholar, respected and beloved by his colleagues. But he had one shortcoming: he was too young! It was considered inappropriate to have such a young man as head of the venerable rabbinic sages of Yavneh.

The Talmud relates that a miracle happened. The young Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah woke up one morning and found that his hair and his beard had turned gray! He now looked like an elder. When his colleagues viewed his new appearance, they then felt comfortable asking him to become head of the Academy of Yavneh.

So Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah had the best of both worlds: he was chronologically a young man, full of the strength and energy of youth; but he was also (at least in appearance) an old man, filled with the experience and sagacity of age.
What a great combination! What a wonderful blessing to be young and old at the same time!

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, once he was “as a man of 70 years old,” realized something very important, something he had learned from Ben Zoma. One is obligated to recite the story of the Exodus from Egypt at night. This lesson, I believe, goes beyond the technical issue of when to recite the Haggada. It reflects a religious worldview.

Night symbolizes the time of darkness, the crises and sadnesses of life. At night, things seem bleak, even frightening. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah came to understand that even at the “nights” of life, one must recite the story of redemption. One must look forward to the coming dawn. One must see beyond the darkness and envision the brightness and glory yet to come.

The secret of being young and old simultaneously is: maintaining hope, looking ahead, overcoming gloom and failure by focusing on the brightness on the horizon.

A wit once said: You don’t stop laughing when you get old; you get old when you stop laughing. This can be rephrased: You don’t stop dreaming and growing when you get old; you get old when you stop dreaming and growing.

It is a great blessing to reach age 70. One can look back on a long span of life’s joys and achievements. But one, inevitably, also looks back on a long span of life’s sad moments and failings.

I thank the Almighty for having brought me to this special time of my life. I don’t have adequate words to express my joy and gratitude to my wife Gilda, to our children and grandchildren, to our relatives and friends who have made life so worthwhile and so satisfying. I thank all those who have been steadfast and loyal in their friendship over these many years. I am grateful for the special people and the special moments of my life. My cup overflows.

But one cannot reach age 70 without having experienced sadness and loss. I remember with profound love my late parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts; my parents-in-law and so many relatives and friends who have passed on to their eternal reward. I sometimes quip that I have more friends in the next world than I do in this world; although this is just a quip, it has a lot of truth in it. So many

loved ones and real friends have died, but their memories continue to inspire.

One of the common features of aging is a sense of “contraction.” One’s physical strength isn’t what it used to be. One’s circle of relatives and friends changes—and often contracts—as the mysteries of life and death play out. One’s professional life changes—and often contracts—as one grows older and less “productive.”

So I find great satisfaction in thinking about Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah’s ability to be young and old at the same time. I find great meaning in his lesson to overcome darkness by envisioning the coming redemption.

In a sense, I feel that I have a reverse situation to that of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah. I AM a man of 70 years old; and yet, I thank the Almighty that I have the enthusiasm, optimism and energy of someone much younger in years. Instead of letting life “contract,” I have been very fortunate to keep “expanding” the scope of life, through our growing family, through my work for the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and through my ongoing writing, teaching and lecturing. I pray that the Almighty will bless me with additional years of learning, growing and sharing.

The Messianic era has not yet arrived. There is much work to do, many challenges ahead. I am grateful for the many wonderful yesterdays of life. I pray to be worthy of many wonderful tomorrows, together with Gilda and our family, our loved ones, and our true and trusted friends.

May the Almighty Who brings harmony in the spheres above, bring peace to us, to all Israel, to all good people everywhere.