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### “Soul Food”

The Talmud tells us that even though early biblical persons got extraordinarily old before they died, as in “Methusaleh lived nine-hundred years,” nonetheless no one ever “aged” until Abraham. They’re playing on the verse in our parasha, “*v’Avraham zaken, ba b’yamim.*” “And Abraham got old; he [literally] came into his days.” That is, he lived out his full allotment of “days.” This happens to be the first instance of the word “*zaken* – aged” in the Torah. Thus the Midrashic claim that Abraham “invented” aging.

Why did Abraham do such a thing? The joke in the Talmud is that people would walk up to him thinking he was Isaac, and likewise would approach Isaac and mistake him for Abraham. So he prayed to show visible signs of aging so there would be no mistake. The Talmud follows this with the idea that Jacob was the first to become ill as an onset to death, and it cites the passage at the end of Genesis where Joseph is informed not that “your father is dying,” but that “*avicha choleh* – your father is ill,” this being the first mention of illness per se in the Torah.

Obviously they’re making more than a cute point. As the Steinsaltz commentary puts it, “old age, illness, and repeated illness, which seem to be totally undesirable, are not completely bad, but have positive aspects... Visible old age permits distinction and honor to be paid to the old. Illness before death permits a person to prepare himself and his family for the approach of death and to take care of the future of his household.”

For a hyper-materialistic culture such as ours, it might be hard to sell people on the wonders of wrinkles, gray hair, cracking skin, liver spots, varicose veins...shall I go on? We spend billions of dollars either eradicating these things, or slowing down their progress, or hiding them from the only one who's really looking, which is to say, our own selves. But you can see what the Rabbis are going for. Aging is a fact. How one LOOKS at one's own aging is NOT a fact. It's a point of view. And in truth it can be a tool to help us understand the deep blessing of our difficult lives.

The Rabbis read our verse ("*v'avraham zaken*") in light of the parasha's opening lines, and then subsequently read THOSE lines light of the follow-up to our verse. The parashah begins by telling us that Sarah lived a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, and that "these were the years of Sarah's life," "*shn'ot chayey sarah*" Why the word "years" over and over again? Rashi as usual comes to the rescue: "*kulan shavin b'tovah.*" "They were all good."

All good?! Is he kidding? Most of them were terrible, or barely tolerable, or really tough. You know the stories yourself. Rashi's saying that on the whole Sarah (or you or I) could look back and see that pretty much every chapter in one's life is a necessary antecedent to this moment of grand perspective. On the whole, we've got a lot to be grateful for; and there's no "on the whole" without each of the specific parts. Without each "year." Or in Abraham's verse, without each "day."

So if Sarah could look at the whole picture and be grateful – with a little help from Rashi – then so could Abraham. Says our verse, “and Abraham got old; he came into his fullness of days; and God had blessed Abraham with everything.” “*va'donai berach et avraham bakol.*” They’re taking the second phrase not as a statement of fact, but rather as Abraham’s point of view about his life. Sure he was stricken with age. Sure he was close to the end. Sure he was wracked with the pains of senescence. He may have felt miserable. But how did he feel about his life? Answer: that “God had blessed him with everything.” Aging is a fact. How one looks at it is a point of view.

I tell you all of this so you’ll be able to understand two marvelous teachings from my favorite of the Chassidic masters, my friend the S’fas Emes. On this Shabbat in 1875 he taught that just as we have a body, so we have a “*nefesh*,” a soul, which we can’t comprehend but which we nonetheless know is real. He says that just as God perceives but can’t be perceived, so our soul can’t be grasped with our logical mind and yet it makes itself the centerpiece of our existence. Just as God can’t be comprehended but can nonetheless be “cleaved to,” so our incomprehensible soul cleaves to our body. And just as God is beyond nature – though don’t tell that to Mordecai Kaplan – so our soul doesn’t operate according to the forces of nature.

This means that it doesn’t age. It’s eternal. Unlike the body it travels with, which gets liver spots.

And this is why the famous psalm text has us commanding not our body to praise God, but our soul: “*barchi, nafshi, et adonai.*” “Hey, my soul! YOU give praise to Adonai.!” This is

because our body by itself wouldn't know how to fulfill this command. It is caught in the process of deterioration, and so it needs help knowing how to be thankful. That's where the soul comes in.

So both Abraham and Sarah get old, but because they're in touch with their *nefesh*, they are able to take the long view of life and call it a blessing. Get it? "*Barchi, nafshi, et adonai.*" Hey, my soul! Help me with this 'big picture' thing. Teach my body how to transcend its own self-involved narcissistic limits and learn how to be thankful." In his words, "*ha-inyan hu l'hasig baolam hazeh ha'arat olam haba.*" "The trick is to grasp in this world an awakening to the world to come."

Now comes the second S'fas Emes teaching, and with this I'll be able to wish you a thankful Thanksgiving. On Shabbat Ekev in the summer of 1889, he gave a talk on the verse on which the Rabbis base the prayer of thanksgiving after a meal, the *Birkat Hamazon*. The verse reads in part, "*v'achalta v'savata uveyracha et adonai elohecha.*" "You shall eat and be satiated and bless the Eternal your God."

The rebbe teaches that when we eat physical food to nourish and sustain our bodies, we are also eating spiritual food to sustain our souls. He calls this "*mazon ha-nefesh*," literally – you guessed it – "soul food." He argues that if the soul is not fed this *mazon hanefesh*, it will starve as surely as the body will starve without *mazon ha-guf*, i.e. turkey and dressing (or in our house, butternut squash and pearl onions).

Where do we get this soul food? What high-end grocery chain purveys it? His answer is that physical food, like all physical things, comes from a single source, namely the Source of Life itself. Therefore everything contains within it the word or essence of the divine. Everything. Thus our physical food carries this all-important “additive,” this soul sustenance.

But it isn't that easy. He doesn't say that if you eat body food, you automatically receive the soul food as well. On the contrary. You have to eat the physical food so conscientiously, so mindfully, so intently that you extract the soul food for your starving soul. In other words, when we eat, we need to try to eat on two levels. We need to feed our animal selves, and at one and the same moment to think about our eternal selves, our all-important *nefesh*.

For sure, he's telling us to slow down and eat carefully; to chew our food; to note that the very fact of food is miraculous, that it connects us directly to all of those cycles of nature and weather and soil and human ingenuity and hard work. All of the above. But the way he says it is pretty inspiring. He's telling us, of course, that the divine is in the details, in this case the details of the most basic of our acts of survival. We eat, or we die. But when we eat with our eternal selves in mind, we feed that part of ourselves that enables us to look at our life as a whole and call it in Abraham's words “*berach bakol*,” “blessed with everything.” Or in Sarah's terms, “*kulan shavin b'tovah*,” “it was all good.”

Finally this jarring idea: He says we erroneously think that the mitzvah in this verse is to offer the blessing after the meal, the *Birkat Hamazon*. This, because the act of blessing reminds us to be thankful, and also because it keeps us from thinking that we are the source of our own

sustenance, which would in turn lead us further down the road to narcissism. *Adaraba*, says the S'fas Emes. On the contrary. The mitzvah, he says, is the word “*v'sava'ta*,” “and you shall be satiated.” This is because true satiation involves feeding both body and soul. If we merely eat, we fall short. Only if we train ourselves to eat on two levels – body and soul – do we truly achieve satiation, and thus fulfill the Torah's command to “be satiated.”

And when THAT happens, says our teacher, we won't need a commandment to offer a blessing. We won't need a commandment, or a text, or a prayer, or a special day of Thanksgiving. At that moment our bodies will spontaneously offer a word of gratitude. How will our body know what to say? Our soul will teach it the words and the melody.

I wish you a Thanksgiving where you pay attention to the divinity in your food; and to the tzelem elohim in the people with whom you're eating; and to the love that went into the preparation of the meal; and to the very fact of your blessed existence, a life of gray hair and varicose veins and liver spots AND of being *berach bakol*, of being blessed with absolutely everything.