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What is wise aging? It starts with staying engaged — And sometimes it takes a village

BY Rabbi Laura Geller (<http://jewishjournal.com/author/rabbi-laura-geller/>) | PUBLISHED Jul 28, 2017 | 50 Plus (http://jewishjournal.com/category/culture/lifestyle/50_plus/)

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One of my favorite biblical verses is Psalm 118:5, "*Min ha metzar Karati Ya; Anani b'merchav ya* — From the narrow place I call out to God, who answered me with the Divine Expanse." It's a verse that speaks to me especially now, at this stage of my life.

The narrow place: Those birthday cards that suggest anyone over 50 is over the hill. The ones that start coming when you turn 60: "Think of it this way: You're not losing it, you are just not using it as often." Or the ones this year, age 67: "There are three ages of a person: youth, middle age and 'You look good!'"

The narrow place: What am I? What words do I use to describe myself? *Retired*? Yes, but I still am engaged in projects that matter to me. *Senior*? Well, I do like that movies and the Metro are less expensive, but I don't like the word. *Elder*? Sounds too old or too pretentious.

The narrow place: Ageism, stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of a person's age — the last socially sanctioned prejudice. The way you become invisible as you grow old; the fear of becoming isolated or dependent.

The narrow place: Internalizing popular stereotypes — that wrinkles are ugly, that it is sad to be old, that old people are incompetent.

The narrow place: Denial. Not being willing to admit that we deserve or need help in certain situations. Not facing the truth that we will die someday, like Woody Allen, who said: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality by not dying."

Yes, there is a narrow place. But we don't have to stay there. The challenge is to transform this paradigm of decline into one of possibility and opportunity. I can tell myself that 60 is the new 40, or that 70 is the new 50, that I'm really not growing older. But the truth is I'm 67. And 67 is the new 67.

The challenge is to reimagine the narrow place as one of Divine expanse, an invitation to growth. The word our tradition uses for this stage is “*zaken*,” the same word as “beard,” “elder,” “sage” or “old.” I prefer the interpretation that views *zaken* as an acronym for “One who has acquired wisdom.”

So that is the challenge at this stage of my life. It begins with admitting there is less time ahead than behind me. How do I make meaning out of however much time I have left? How do I discover purpose in the years to come?

Confronting that question is the concept behind wise aging.

Focusing on what wise aging means began at my congregation, Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, after a community organizing effort several years ago when we talked with more than 250 congregants over the age of 55 in small house meetings about what matters to them at this stage of their lives. Four themes emerged: spirituality, community, giving back and concerns about people they loved, particularly end-of-life issues. Three fears emerged: being isolated; becoming invisible and becoming dependent.

Spirituality includes asking what I need to do now to become the person I want to be in my 80s. And who are the people who can be my teachers, the over-age-80 congregants who are engaged in the world, joyful, grateful, compassionate, patient, funny, curious, optimistic? I see them and I think of the scene in “When Harry Met Sally” when Estelle Reiner says, “I’ll have what she’s having.” I want them to teach me how to have what they are having, and how to work on myself now to cultivate those characteristics.

Spirituality opens me to move from the narrow place to notice those moments when we touch the Divine expansiveness — moments of transition. These could be important birthdays, becoming grandparents or taking on a new challenge. That openness leads me to ask what are the new rituals we need to create to mark those transitions.

We learned more about how to explore such issues together by bringing in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality’s training program for “Wise Aging” and its creators, Rabbi Rachel Cowan and Linda Thal. But that was just the beginning.

Our focus on community blossomed into the creation of ChaiVillageLA, which just celebrated its first anniversary. It turns out that the majority of our baby boomer congregants want to age in place, remaining in their homes and neighborhoods, enriched by a supportive community.

Research led us to the village movement, which began 15 years ago in Boston when neighbors got together to figure out how they could age in the homes they loved. Now there are more than 200 such villages around the country and 200 more in formation. A national movement called Village to Village Network (vtnetwork.org) holds an annual conference and has best practices and software tools to make organizing a village more viable.

We thought people would join because they would want to get or give services. But just as the AARP suggested, we discovered instead that people really want social connections — that those are the antidote to the fears of becoming invisible and isolated.

A village is a membership-driven, self-governing, grass-roots “virtual” community. It is not a contiguous neighborhood or a social service agency, but the embodiment of the radical old idea of neighbors helping neighbors through services like walking the dog when someone is out of town, bringing meals when someone is sick or providing transportation to medical appointments.

As important as these services are, however, many villages are finding that social programs are even more valuable in helping members continue to build “social capital.” Research by AARP has shown that village members experience reduced isolation, increased independence and a deeper sense of purpose. We thought: What a good idea for a synagogue!

Supported by a generous Cutting Edge Grant from the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles, we joined with Temple Isaiah to found ChaiVillageLA, the only synagogue-based village in the country. Members, who must be members of one of the partner synagogues, pay a membership fee of \$100 for an individual or \$150 for a household and commit to providing at least four hours a month of service to the community. That service can be responding to the needs of another member or organizing a program, like a backyard gardening group or volunteering at one of the synagogues. People access the services via our website (chaivillageLA.org) or our director, Devorah Servi.

We thought people would join because they would want to get or give services. But just as the AARP suggested, we discovered instead that people really want social connections — that those are the antidote to the fears of becoming invisible and isolated. Since launching last July, our membership has grown to almost 200 members and has inspired more than 21 member-run interest groups, 185 member-led events and a handful of major events like the village seder attended by more than 100 people.

The village has been a huge win for our synagogues. People are joining the synagogue in order to become members of the village. Young people from the synagogue are beginning to volunteer with village members. And we are strengthening our synagogues by re-engaging boomers and those slightly beyond — people with skills, energy, experience, wisdom, resources and discretionary time that will make a difference.

It is a work in progress; we have lots still to figure out after our first year. As we celebrated the occasion, our keynote speaker, Los Angeles City Attorney Mike Feuer (whose mother is a member), asked what the traditional gift is for a first anniversary. It’s paper, a tradition that goes back to the Victorian Era, in the 19th century.

No one knows why it’s paper, but there are many theories. One is that paper represents a blank page, and that the first year is the beginning of the writing of a future together. A second is that paper reminds us of the fragility of starting something new. A third is that paper, while fragile, is actually created by weaving fibers tightly together, so that what results is interwoven and strong. A fourth is that paper — which can be made from trees, bamboo, cotton or plants — connects us with life and growth.

All this is true of our village. Our recent anniversary is the beginning of the future we are writing together. We are making it up as we go along, trying new ideas, taking risks, finding ways to give one another joy. But like paper, we have become an increasingly interconnected community, weaving individual fibers together, making a difference in individual lives now, and eventually, we hope, in the larger fabric of our neighborhoods and cities.

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Although we don’t want to be dependent, we know that none of us is, or ever was, independent. We are interdependent. And we are no longer afraid of becoming invisible or isolated. All of this is part of wise aging.

So is dealing with the concerns we have about the truth that we will die someday, as will the people we love. The best gift we can give to our families is a clear understanding of what kind of care we want at the end of our lives.

Temple Emanuel and other congregations in Los Angeles, led by IKAR, want to facilitate these difficult conversations, sacred conversations, by holding a series of Death Over Dinner gatherings. Based on a secular project — and infused with Jewish sources and wisdom by IKAR (deathoverdinner-jewishedition.org) — congregants will be invited to host such a dinner with a small group of friends or family for a conversation about end-of-life issues. We have held several practice dinners over the summer and are ready to kick off the project in the fall.

Then there is another of the four themes identified in the meetings of our congregants: Giving back. I’m reminded here of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson’s vision of generativity, the impulse of older generations to invest in younger ones. We are working with Encore.org, a national movement, to encourage those in midlife to imagine an encore career of service to the larger community, to create connections between older people and younger people through its visionary program called Generation to Generation (generationtogeneration.org/communities/la) (<http://generationtogeneration.org/communities/la>). It is a five-year campaign “to mobilize a million adults age 50-plus to dedicate their time, talent and experience to help young people thrive, and to unite all generations to create a better future.” Research suggests that more than 30 million people — 29 percent of adults age 50 and older — have indicated interest in the campaign. Imagine the difference that could make in our country.

And giving back includes not just leaving a legacy — through our philanthropy and through the tradition of writing an ethical will or making a video for those generations who will come after us — but also, and even more important, by living our legacy through a commitment to continue to lead a life of purpose and meaning.

So, after considering all this, I ask again: What is wise aging? It is summed up in another biblical verse I love, this one from Psalm 92, A Psalm for Shabbat: “The righteous will blossom like a date palm, still fruitful in old age, full of sap and freshness.”

Still fruitful. Still juicy. Still curious. Still adventurous. Still grateful. Still engaged in the world.

That is what I would call wise aging. I also would call it wise living, at any stage of life.

RABBI LAURA GELLER is the emerita rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills. She and her husband, Richard Siegel, are working on a book called “Getting Good at Getting Older: A Jewish Catalog for a New Age,” to be published by Behrman House in 2018.