

"THE CULT OF YOUTH"

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Our rabbis maintain that the three major books written by King Solomon were composed during different times of his life, and that each book represented the mood of the author during that period in which it was written. Thus, the "Song of Songs" -- Shir ha-Shirim -- was written during Solomon's youth, when he was most predisposed to the use of romantic metaphor. The "Book of Proverbs" -- the Mishle -- was written in his middle ages, when a man's inclinations are towards sententious wisdom, when all the world seems clear to him and he is ready to offer sage aphorisms on how to live. In his old age, Solomon wrote "Ecclesiastes," the Book of Kohellet, which we read this morning. The Book of Kohellet is neither romantic nor straightforwardly wise. It represents, rather, a maturity that comes from the experience of life itself, from having met skepticism, struggled with it valiantly, and in the end having overcome it. It is not a simple book of easy aphorisms, but a profound and deeply confusing work. And despite, or perhaps because of, the confusion -- it remains most enlightening.

As a book of his old age, Solomon's Kohellet presents us with some *sturdy* ~~thirty~~ prejudices concerning youth and old age. Solomon is not blind either to the vices or the virtues of either youth or maturity. Thus he tells us (al tashlichenu Hineni), "rejoice, o young man, in thy youth," enjoy the vitality and the vigor that are characteristic of youth; and yet, in the long run, he warns us (~~that~~), "but know thou that for all these things G-d will bring thee into judgment." -- Youth's vigor is compounded with folly for which a man must ultimately pay. On the one hand Kohellet will tell us (~~that is why: ki'chelet kochenu~~), "better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king." And yet he reminds us (ke'tefillat zeken ve'ragil: sha'ne'amar mi'penai savah takum - ve'yareta ma'alekha), "woe to thee, o land, when thy king is a mere boy." Yet if one takes all of Kohellet ~~remarks~~, we have the feeling that ~~all~~ all other

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things being equal, youth is a time of greater folly and old age a time of greater wisdom. He is not impressed with the wonders of youth -- "for childhood and youth are but vanities," (~~al tashlikhenu: ke'tefilat taken~~  
~~ve'tamid~~).

In toto, Kohellet would not agree that age automatically disqualifies a man. He would say that despite some of its more apparent faults, age leaves a man richer than he was, wiser even if sadder.

The judgment of Kohellet seems to go against much of the grain of modern life. For we moderns have by and large decided in favor of youth. We have placed a premium on youth in industry and business -- not too long ago the President of the United States had to make a special appeal to employers to engage those over forty. We have placed a premium on youth socially -- it is regarded as a compliment when we say of someone that he or she acts or looks younger than his or her years. Only recently I read of the organization on the West Coast, of a number of "over-forty-clubs." As if those over the age of forty are automatically decrepit and disqualified as active members of society. We have placed a premium on youth in our public life. Serious analysts of the national situation are impressed by the fact that both presidential candidates are comparatively young men, both aspiring to succeed the president of the United States who is the oldest ever to have held that eminent position. The propagandists for the State of Israel do not usually stress that Israel represents the oldest people in the world today. They more often speak of Israel as "the world's youngest democracy." Even religiously we have placed a premium on youth. Where once upon a time a synagogue would pride itself on being the oldest in the community, many a new temple in suburbia expresses pride in the fact that it is the neighborhood's youngest temple. How often do members of a synagogue say to a rabbi: Forget about us, we are members of the lost

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generation; you cannot do much with us -- try for the youth, only the youth. As if Torah was meant as a plaything for America's youngsters, as if it had no relevance for those who already were <sup>set</sup> ~~sick~~ in their wonted ways.

What I have been describing is, essentially, the cult of youth as it is practiced in modern civilization. What we are experiencing is the apotheosis of the Teen Ager, the new worship at the shrine of Adolescence, ~~As~~ if old age is something shameful, something to be avoided at all costs. We have combined this cult of youth with a pampering of the young, an over-indulgence of our children. We have acted as if we prefer the high pressure, minute to minute efficiency of the young, more than the sober, patient reflection of the elderly.

The traditional Jewish attitude agrees with Kohellet, rather than with the modern prejudice in favor of the young. Not that the young man should be discouraged, or that the old man is automatically right and good. That is ridiculous: Wisdom is more often a matter of inherent talent and intuition rather than a mere accumulation of years.

Yet our Torah has emphasized time and time again that a cardinal principle of the social behavior of Jews must be reverence for the aged. One of the important commandments of the 613 is: mi-penei sevah takum u-fenei zaken tehadar, "thou shalt rise before the hoary head and shalt reverence the face of the old one. Our Halakhah insisted that one of the qualifications for a member of the Sanhedrin, or supreme court, is that he be <sup>a</sup> ballo<sup>e</sup>t ziknah, elderly. You recall, no doubt, the passage in the Passover Hagaddah by Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah: Harei ani k'van shiv'im shanah, "behold I am as one of seventy years old." The traditional explanation of that sentence is that the rabbi was only 18 years old when he was elevated to his supreme office of Chief of the Sanhedrin, but that because high position in Jewish life was generally reserved for the



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elderly, a miracle occurred and the rabbi suddenly grew a long white beard. Our tradition taught us that setirat zekenim binyan, u-vinyan ne'arim setirah -- that when the elderly seem to destroy they are actually building; whilst the building of the young is often destructive. Joseph in his youth was criticized by our rabbis as oseh maaseh naarut, one who engaged in childish activities. But when he was older, Joseph showed signs of mature wisdom. He had the bigness to be able to say to his brothers: ki le'michyah shelachani lifnekhem, "do not fear any revenge by me; I realize that G-d sent me here to provide a livelihood for all of you." The heroes of the Greeks were usually the youths of the gymnasias. With us, life often began at advanced age. The career of Moses began at the age of eighty. Rabbi Akiva, until he was forty years old, was insignificant and ignorant. The singer on Broadway makes every effort to appear younger than his years. The cantor when he appears in the synagogue before G-d on the High Holidays recites the Hineni prayer in which he does not exhibit his youth -- on the contrary, he pleads that his prayer be accepted ke'tefillat zaken ve'ragil, like the prayer of one who is old and experienced in the ways of life and in the ways of supplication.

For this is the judgment of the Jewish tradition on most matters of youth and age. While it is true that youth has its advantages: energy, clarity of purpose, ambitiousness, the willingness to undertake risks and new ventures; while many a young man can attain the mellowness of wisdom that others do not achieve until they are past eighty, still, by and large, age is the time when cleverness changes to wisdom, when practice becomes experience, when ability gives rise to insight.

What are the reasons or the purpose for the Jewish emphasis for those who are older than we are? I believe that it is based upon three major values. The first is the consideration for the waning vitality of the

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elderly. Judaism always encourages us to extend our protection to the weaker members of society. Age is a time when our vitality begins seeping away, our vigor diminishes, and our energy wanes. In the high holiday prayer of al tashlikhenu, we equate l'et ziknah -- time of old age -- with ki'khelet kochenu -- the waning of our strength. From this point of view reverence for the aged is in the same category as care for the orphan and widow and love for the stranger and the alien.

The second value of the Jewish tradition of respect for the elderly is the acknowledgment that the elderly have a better appreciation of the preciousness of life itself. One of our eminent sociologists, David Reisman, in his book Individualism Reconsidered, makes the point that the older one gets the more <sup>he</sup> concentrates upon the primary values of life, and the less disposed he is to waste his time on trivialities. A young man is rarely if ever conscious of death. He therefore accepts as an unspoken hypothesis that life is infinite and time will never come to an end for him. In that case, he makes no special attempt to conserve his time for only the important things; he may, and usually does, squander it on the insignificant, the petty and the trivial. The elderly, however, are far more aware of the fact of death. They are much more conscious of the finiteness of life and the mortality of man. With this awareness that life must come to an end, comes a heightened appreciation of the preciousness of the years G-d allots to us. With this appreciation, there is a <sup>concentration</sup> ~~contemplation~~ on the importance and significance <sup>it</sup> and a fading into the background of the trivial and the secondary. So that when we reverence old age, we acknowledge that life is precious.

Third, and perhaps most important, when we respect those who are older than we, this symbolizes our respect for authority and our loyalty to tradition. The elderly symbolize to the young all that is past. The

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aged are living representatives of history and tradition. Perhaps that is why people who, in their youth, have had good relations with grandparents are predisposed to accept the authority of tradition and religion. The elderly, as representatives of tradition, are by the same token representatives of authority; respect for them means respect for authority, and disrespect for the elderly is, in effect, disrespect for authority itself. That is why in a society in which you find the cult of youth, you will find enshrined not the principle of respect for authority, but the principle of rebelliousness and anarchy. The most practical results of this legitimization of rebelliousness in the cult of youth is the high incidence of juvenile delinquency in our contemporary civilization.

Indeed, we must spare no effort in teaching our young people the reverence for their elders that Jewish tradition demands of them. Only thus will be able to impress them with the three values I have mentioned, and particularly the last. The Talmud (in Tractate Kiddushim) reports the statement of Rabbi Abba ha-Kohen who said: It was my practice that whenever I would see a group of young people on the street I would purposely walk in a different direction, out of consideration for them, for I realized that if I would walk past them they would see me and feel constrained to rise before me. Yet when I told this to Rabbi Yose, the son of Zavda he scolded me and said, you certainly ought to walk past them. On the contrary, let them see you and let them rise before you so that v'ata meviam li'yedei yirat shamayim, you will thus bring them to a greater reverence for G-d, she'ne'omar mi-penei sevah takum - ve'yareta me'elokekha, as it is written: thou shalt rise in the presence of the hoary head; and "thou shalt fear thy G-d," thus indicating that reverence for the aged is intimately connected with the fear of Heaven.

Certainly, the young will respect their elders, will revere their

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G-d. The youth who rises in the presence of his elders will acknowledge that all the world was not made expressly for him. Young people will thus realize that though G-d has been verbally represented in many ways in our literature, he very often is referred to as Attik Yomin, "The Ancient of Days," but never, never is G-d referred to as a teen-ager!

Kohellet thus called<sup>s</sup> us to us from the maturity of his experience, and recalled<sup>s</sup> for us the great Jewish ideal of respect for the elderly and the abolishment of the cult of youth. For not only at the present and not only in the past but even in the great future will this be the case. We may conclude with the prophet Zachariah who in his messianic vision beholds ode yashuve zekenim u-zekenot bi-rechovot Yerushaleym, ve'ish u-mishanto be'yado me'rov yamin, "the old men and old women shall yet return on the streets of Jerusalem, each with his cane in his hand because of his many years." May G-d grant all of us long years and the privilege of arriving at old age, in which we will receive not only the reverence and respect of our children but love and affection as well.