Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in the Nursing Home: Torah for Confronting Fragility and Mortality¹

By Dayle A. Friedman

spent my formative years in the nursing home. Not what the commercials used to call the "Wonder Years, 1-12," but my late adolescence, early adulthood and early midlife. I arrived quite by accident. Actually, I was dragged one Saturday morning by a fellow college student seeking an additional volunteer to help make Shabbat services happen in a nursing home his group had taken on. Initially, it was disorienting. What did it mean when Mary invited me back to her house for lunch, when she clearly lived there in the institution? What was I supposed to make of Jenny, who called out every couple of minutes during the service, "WHAT PAGE?" Should I wake Max, who was sleeping so peacefully through the whole service and then woke up and told us how "vonderful" it was at the end?

But mostly, it was simply amazing. Here we were, college kids and octogenarians, praying, singing and celebrating together. The gaps between us melted away when our voices joined in the traditional chants. And the change in the older people was nothing short of miraculous. The sleepy, seemingly indifferent and somewhat confused bunch who greeted us when we came in were suddenly animated, funny, proud and present.

Sacred Insights

I was intrigued. These old people seemed to know things. By dint of the decades they had lived and the adversity they currently faced, they had gathered Torah, sacred wisdom. They comprised a repository of knowing. Like Torah, their teaching was rich with

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possibilities for interpretation, explication and practical application. Like Torah, these elders' sagacity needed to be passed on, from generation to generation. I sensed that theirs was the Torah that I needed to learn.

I continued studying that Torah, mining the text of frail elders' lives for wisdom — in my social-work training in senior centers; as a rabbinic student in a large urban home for the aged; and at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, a community of 1,100 Jewish elders I was privileged to serve as a spiritual caregiver while Director of Chaplaincy Services for twelve years.

In the time that I spent in the nursing home, I found that colleagues, family members and people I met in the community hardly shared my enthusiasm for the riches available in the nursing home. On the contrary, whenever I mentioned where I worked, I was met with expressions of fear and loathing. A neighbor exclaimed, "I've told my family, if I ever need to go to a place like that, they should just shoot me." A rabbinic colleague who asked where my congregation was, and seemed to feel terribly sorry for me once he heard the answer, said: "Was that something you chose?" A friend remarked, "You must find that so depressing." And even a resident of the home said, "You're so young. Why would you want to be here?"

Accumulating Wisdom

All of those folks were not wrong. The nursing home is a terrifying and very sad place, a place everyone dreads, and almost no one would choose. And yet it is precisely in that place of loss, fragility, indignity and death that elders are living each day, accumulating wisdom and eager to share it, if only someone will listen. These elders, whose bodies and minds are broken, who are discarded, dismissed and discounted, still have intact souls, radiant with light that can illumine a path. Like the burning bush, you have to stop to notice it; or like Jacob after his dream, you have to be prepared to discover that "God is in this place and I, I did not know it" (Genesis 28:16).

What does all of this have to do with spiritual caregivers? Most do not see themselves working in geriatrics (though as an advocate for the elderly, I'm called to point out that a very significant proportion of us encounter older people and issues of aging in our work every day). I want to suggest that the Torah that frail elders embody is precisely what we need to guide and sustain us as we accompany people through the valley of the shadow, through darkness, despair, brokenness and to the very end of life.

When they came to clean out her room after she died, the daughters of a very tough, very cool 94 year-old nursing home resident named Mary gave me a needlepoint she had made. It bore these words: "Old age is not for sissies." It now hangs in my office next to snapshots of my husband and three children.

Living in the Face of Death

I think about Mary's message often.

I used to think I understood it, since I saw how crushing the vicissitudes of late life could be. Lately, it has occurred to me that the challenges faced by Mary and the very old are not so different in kind from those we all face. We spiritual caregivers are called to live in the face of death, to find meaning amid suffering, and to fan the smallest spark of light in the darkest place. Our work is not for sissies, and, I believe, we can take fortitude from the Torah embodied by the elderly sages from whom I've been blessed to learn.

I want to share four pieces of Torah, sacred wisdom, I have learned from frail elders. In Jewish tradition, Torah means literally the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. It also means the entire oral and written tradition that has grown up around the text as it has been passed from generation to generation over the millennia. Just as the biblical Torah text is adumbrated by rabbinic interpretation, here, too, we look at a piece of teaching from Jewish tradition that sheds light on the Torah of the elder sages. Each teaching can be applied to our own encounters with fragility and mortality.

Learning and Growing

My first Torah is, "It's never too late to learn and grow." People think of the nursing home as the end of the road, for, as one resident put it, "You come in on two feet and you leave in a box." But if you are still alive today, it might be that there is not only something to learn, but something new to become. This Torah was impressed upon me by

a group of twenty nursing home residents, assisted-living tenants and elders from the community who decided to participate in an Adult Confirmation program at the home. In the home, Confirmation was an opportunity to affirm a connection to Jewish tradition and study for those who were 70 to 95 years old, most of whom were women who had never been offered a Jewish education.

The Confirmation process took seven months. The students participated in a course about Jewish values and contemporary social issues. They had to meet a requirement of "perfect attendance," meaning no unexcused absences. Over the course of the class, members faced both ongoing frailty and major life crises. Rachel broke a hip. Her daughter called me while Rachel was in the hospital: "All Mom wants to know is whether she can still be confirmed. Is there work she can do? Does she need a tutor?"

Mitzvah Project

Despite challenges, the students were remarkably committed to participating in class sessions. In addition to their studies, the elderly students did a *mitzvah* project, helping an after-school program for at-risk Jewish and Arab children in Israel. They managed to raise more than \$600 for computers, and they corresponded with the kids, who were amazed and thrilled that this group of elderly Jews on the other side of the world had taken such an interest in them.

On the second day of the festival of Shavuot, twenty confirmands made their processional into the synagogue on walkers, in wheelchairs and in electric carts. Wearing white robes, they conducted the service, received certificates and spoke to the 250 relatives and friends in the audience. This is what one confirmand said in her speech:

I never had a formal Jewish education, though I was raised by wonderful Jewish parents and grew up to be a properly raised Jewish girl . . . I wanted to join the Confirmation class because I could be enlightened about our Jewish religion and what it means to be a Jew . . . I can truly say that in our discussions, I learned that there is a God. I feel wonderful that I was able to complete this course. I'm proud of myself and my fellow confirmands.

One confirmand literally came from her deathbed to the ceremony; in the end-stage of pancreatic cancer, Sarah had continued to attend classes, and emphatically wanted to be present for the ceremony. I was devastated to learn when I came for the ceremony that Sarah had been taken to a hospital for an emergency procedure that very morning. Amazingly, thanks to my screaming and the administrator's persistence, she was brought back, and was wheeled into the sanctuary in a geri-chair in the middle of the service. Sarah was able to chant the *Aleinu* prayer in Hebrew, and to receive her certificate in the presence of her family. She died one week later, having achieved a cherished goal at the very end of her life.

Like Sarah, all of the confirmands felt a profound sense of accomplish-

ment and affirmation; they had reached for something and attained it, despite impairments, serious illness and loss. They had managed to serve as exemplars of life-long Torah learning, Jewish commitment and continual growth and renewal.

Lifelong Learning

These confirmands were fulfilling a holy demand. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish sage, taught that learning is a lifelong obligation for everyone. Rich or poor, smart or simple, weighed down by family responsibilities or not, all are called to keep studying Torah. Even an elderly person whose strength has waned must continue to learn. Until when does this obligation last? Until the day of your death, teaches Maimonides.

What does this Torah mean for spiritual caregivers? We need forever to continue discovering. We must never assume we know it all. We must never meet the 100th person in a given condition or situation and think we know what it is about for him or her. We are called to stay curious, keep open, keep learning — from books, from colleagues, from our own life experiences, and most of all, from those whom we accompany through their suffering.

This Torah also calls us to shift the way we see those whom we accompany. We are invited to recognize in them the striving not just to endure, but to continue to become. The person who is still becoming is always a subject, never an object. When we see him or her as reaching, we are barred from becom-

ing condescending. On the contrary, we are inspired to stretch ourselves to become more, better. If we are lucky, we can become like the dream weavers of Second Wind Dreams. This incredible organization's sole mission is to help elders in institutions to make their wishes come true, such as enabling a pioneer woman pilot to fly a plane at age 91, taking a wheelchair-bound man on a deep-sea fishing trip, or assisting a retired church organist to put on a concert in the home. We, too, can be dream weavers. We can support aspirations and the thirst to learn and grow.

The Power of Mitzvah

My second piece of Torah is about the power of *mitzvah*. A *mitzvah* is a commanded, holy act. In colloquial usage, to do a *mitzvah* is to do a good deed. My elderly teachers have shown me how much doing a *mitzvah* can transform them, and us.

Ethel, Esther and Bertha had struck up a friendship in the nursing home. They came from strikingly different backgrounds, but they found that they enjoyed spending time together. Every Friday evening, the three of them came into the synagogue, supported by canes and walkers, and found their way to their usual spot, right up front in the second pew, on the right side (no one sat in the first pew, as is, seemingly, universal custom in congregations everywhere!).

After a while, Ethel, who had been managing to get around with the help of a walker, could no longer do so. Suddenly, Ethel was in a wheelchair, a source of great unhappiness to her. "This is not Ethel," she would say, pointing to the wheelchair and her useless legs. Being in a wheelchair also meant that Ethel could no longer sit in her usual pew in the shul. On the first Shabbat that Ethel arrived in a wheelchair, I noticed that Esther and Bertha were also not seated in the second pew. They had quietly moved chairs to the space behind the pews. They were seated on either side of Ethel's wheelchair. Esther and Bertha had understood Ethel's sadness. Through this simple mitzvah, they reminded Ethel that she was very much "still Ethel," despite the wheelchair, despite the pain, despite the dependency.

To Change the World

In my experience, frail elders not only wish to do *mitzvot* that change the lives of those who cross their paths in the nursing home; they want to change the world. For example, a few years ago, our nursing home congregation was told by a guest speaker about Yonah, a 26-year-old Ethiopian Jew airlifted to Israel in a remarkable rescue effort, Operation Moses. Yonah's mother and siblings were still in Ethiopia. He was barely subsisting on government stipends and trying to find work in his new land.

Although they were previously unaware of the existence of the Ethiopian-Jewish community, my congregants immediately wanted to reach out to this fellow Jew. The residents decided to adopt Yonah. They wrote letters, with the help of volunteers, who took dic-

tation from them, since most couldn't see to read or write. They sent photos and expressed sentiments such as, "Don't give up, you'll soon be with your family," and, "I remember when I left my family in Russia when I came to America as a young man. You should find the happiness I found in my new home," and, "God should watch over you, and by Pesach, you and your family should all be together."

Sending encouragement was not enough for these nursing home residents turned activists. They wanted to do something. They raised money to help rescue Yonah's family, contributing dimes and quarters from their meager spending money or bingo winnings, and asking family members to donate as well. Their giving spurred local synagogues to join in raising more than \$6,000 for Yonah's family. Several months later, Yonah wrote back, "When you write, I feel like I have brothers who care about me. Everything you wrote, it has come to be. You wrote that God would bring my family to me. At Pesach, my mother and brother came to Israel."

From Learning to Doing

Through their involvement with Yonah, my congregants came to experience themselves not as patients, residents, or recipients of care, but as redeemers, observers of the *mitzvah* of *pidyon shevuyim*, redeeming the captives. Truly, these elders taught me the lifesaving power of a *mitzvah*, not just for those toward whom it is directed, but for those who perform it as well.

According to Jewish tradition, a per-

son is part of the ongoing covenant between God and the people of Israel. We are born not only into a loving family, but into a relationship with God as a part of our people. God's part is to be present for all of the generations; our part is to keep the *mitzvot*, the commandments.

There are *mitzvot* that are between you and God, including the whole realm of ritual observance, and, equally importantly, *mitzvot* that are between you and your fellow human beings. Amazingly, God needs us to do the *mitzvot*... to fulfill our part of the covenant, and, ultimately, to be God's partners in repairing our broken world and bringing redemption.

We have worth always, because we have this cosmic job to do. And, it turns out, even if we are ill or frail we are not off the hook. We are still obligated, and thus, still able to be God's partner in changing the world. If we cannot do the whole thing, then we do the part we can, the way we can, for this is a "sliding-scale" obligation. When we do all that we can, we have fully discharged our obligation.

Engaging in Holy Action

For those who are facing brokenness or mortality, engaging in holy action has a transformative power. You change the world, and you change yourself. Here's the challenge: In order for those who are frail or impaired to do their *mitzvah*, someone else may have to help. I suggest that the shaping of the task in a way that is accessible and doable may well become our responsibility as spiritual caregivers.

How would our work be transformed if we thought not just about how we can comfort and heal, but about how we can help those we are serving to use their will, love and abilities to comfort, heal and help? For spiritual caregivers, part of our task thus becomes empowering those we serve to do and to contribute. We need to ask: What is the part of the task we need to do or shape so that the one we serve can do her part?

Can the bedridden, homebound elder become a caring phone buddy for a latchkey child of working parents who comes home from school to a house empty of company, nurture or supervision? Can the person struggling with depression be invited to pray for someone else in the community? Can the dying hospice patient give a lasting legacy to her loved ones by making an ethical will? What do we need to do to make that possible?

This Torah can be something of a paradigm shift for us. We are accustomed to thinking about the transformation that occurs when spiritual caregivers are simply present. We try to quell within ourselves and our students the impulse "to fix" the one we are accompanying. The Torah of *mitzvah*, though, also calls us to enable those we serve to do and be all that they can be. And when we do that, neither we nor the one we are helping will remain the same.

The Courage to Love

The third piece of Torah deals with the courage to love. Residents of the nursing home are veterans of loss. They have withstood legions of tiny as well as monumental bereavements, losing everything from the furnishings of their longtime homes to their dearest beloveds. There is no one who has survived without parting with siblings, friends, parents and neighbors. Most have lost spouses or partners; many have lost at least one child.

In the home, death is the neighbor next door; crouching at the threshold, it is ever-present. You just never know quite where it will next strike. Will it be your roommate? Your tablemate? Will it be you? You never know from day to day who will be there in the morning when you wake up.

In that land of loss and grief, you would expect that hearts close down. It can be just too painful to open up to human connection, only to lose it yet again. Yet I have seen true courage in that barren wasteland, for I have seen that the will to love can conquer the fear of loss.

Finding a Teacher, Finding a Friend

Dr. Rose was a retired professor of Jewish studies. When his beloved wife died a few short days after they came to live in the nursing home, it seemed that Dr. Rose might give up altogether. Suddenly, instead of sharing his home with his wife of more than 60 years, he was rooming with a stranger. Instead of being the teacher, respected by neighbors and students alike, he was "a resident," expected to follow the routines like all the others. His three children lived far away, so in a sense, he

was truly alone. Who would have guessed that the stranger in the bed next to him would become a dear and treasured friend? Who could have imagined that Dr. Rose would once again become an honored teacher?

Dr. Rose's new roommate was Mr. Fairstein. Mr. Fairstein prided himself on his intellect, and felt that there was no one in the home whom he could consider a peer. Mr. Fairstein had completed several advance degrees, run a successful business, and always maintained interest in Jewish life. He reluctantly moved to the home after the death of his second wife, when he could no longer manage alone, since he had lost one leg to diabetes complications, and the other was infected.

Somehow, the scholar and the intellectual had a meeting of minds. Mr. Fairstein, always fascinated by Jewish history, asked Dr. Rose to give him a tutorial. Thus began a daily study session, filled with discourse, debate, good humor and mutual respect. When Mr. Fairstein became confined to his bed for nine months because of his ever-worsening leg, it was Dr. Rose's lessons that kept him going. Dr. Rose said of Mr. Fairstein, "He is my best pupil." Mr. Fairstein said, "Ours is a true intellectual peership." The two pledged unending friendship, and promised each other that they would remain roommates until death separated them, which they did.

Love and Marriage

Lillian and Eric were 75-year-old residents in independent living. They

had each recently lost a spouse after a long illness, and both were volunteers in the nursing home. Eric noticed Lillian's flaming red hair and, one day, he got the nerve to invite her to coffee in the cafeteria. One thing led to another and soon they were inseparable. He called her "Carrot Top," and she walked around with an elated grin. One day, they made an appointment to see me. They had decided to get married, they said. They wanted the wedding in the home's synagogue, and they wanted me to officiate.

It is a tad embarrassing to say that, 30 years old and unmarried at the time, I had the *hutzpah* to suggest pre-marital counseling. Lillian and Eric and I had some frank and difficult conversations, as they shared the pain of caring for a spouse who became frail, and their fear of how they would feel if it should happen again. I asked if they were prepared once again to face loving and losing. Lillian and Eric were absolutely clear; however long we have, they said, we are going to enjoy each other.

After some delays due to illness, the big day finally came. The wedding was small, simple and moving. Under the *huppah*, the wedding canopy, Lillian and Eric looked with delight into each other's eyes. Her children and grand-children celebrated with them. Eric was dead a year and a half later. Lillian was bereft, but philosophical: those were the best months of my life, she said.

Someone observing these loving ties among the oldest old might think that they are cute or sweet. I, however, think that what we see are awesome examples of real grit, from people brave enough to open their hearts and give and get whatever love they can for as long as they can.

Attachment and Loss

We can keep our hearts open to love by learning from the Bible. Look at Naomi, for example. Shorn of husband and sons, she could not bear to remain connected to her daughters-in-law, for she feared being a burden. Or, perhaps, she could not face the risk of yet another loss should they decide to abandon her. Yet after pushing them away, when Ruth was persistent, Naomi let her in. She found the courage to open her heart to the one who wished for connection. And this love bore fruit, for Ruth's child became hers, too. Suddenly, instead of being a bitter old woman, Naomi was connected to present and future, a vital link, a nurturer.

This Torah is relevant for spiritual caregivers in some way. Even if we care for well people, our relationships are finite; we become attached to people who will be in our lives for a limited time only (of course that is also the human condition). This Torah is particularly rich for those of us who care for people at the ends of their lives. The nature of our work is to love and lose. It is an excruciating condition of our situations. But how are we to cope with this? How do we respond when the person we have come to cherish, whose soul has touched ours, is gone? And when there is another person in her bed, her seat, her place, intensely needing our care while reminding us of the hole left by the one who has died?

Our elders teach us: We can keep our hearts open to love by keeping them open to loss, to crying those tears, to stopping to feel the sadness, and to remember just who it is we have lost. Rachel Naomi Remen teaches us that burnout happens to helpers who keep accumulating losses without ever giving themselves a chance to grieve. We simply cannot keep caring when our hearts are broken. We need to acknowledge and mourn those we love and lose in order to keep our hearts soft and open to the next person whom we will be called upon to accompany. We need to mourn relationships lost, not just through death, but also through trust betrayed, boundaries transgressed or illusions shattered. The mourning for a lost relationship might be formal — a prayer or a service — or it might be makeshift — a moment of meditation, a journal entry or a conversation with a colleague.

We can find the courage to remain open to love through the Torah of the elders, those who have preceded us down this path, for they have shown us that we gain even in loss, and that, as Lillian said, every moment of connection is a blessing, for as long as it lasts.

One Hundred Blessings a Day

The fourth piece of Torah has to do with blessings. Over the course of the time I worked in the nursing home, all kinds of things happened in my life. I bought a home; I got married. My congregants shared the events in my life with avid interest and great enthusiasm. When my first daughter, Anya, was born, I felt as if she had hundreds of

bubbies and zeydes, grandmas and grandpas, many of whom were intensely interested in her every developmental milestone and adorable antic.

And then I got divorced. How could I tell my loving congregants that my heart was broken, my faith shaken, my world turned upside down? I could not figure out a way, so I did not tell them. People would ask how my family was, and I would say, "Fine."

Except for Bessie. Bessie was 100 years old. We had known each other for nine years, and there was a loving, knowing way about her that just made me feel good in her presence. We had been through so much together: the death of her son-in-law; the conversion of her granddaughter's husband, who found Judaism through attending services with her; her worries about her daughters' declining health. So when Bessie asked shortly after my husband and I separated, "How are you, how's your husband, how's the baby?" I just could not lie or evade. So I told her.

Bessie said, "To tell you the truth, I never thought he was your type! But I want to tell you something . . . when you were born, God made a *bashert* (destined one) for you. You'll find him in a *vinkl*, a corner."

Bessie's blessing cheered me enormously. She had joined me in my suffering, and offered me a vision of hope. And, it turned out, she was right! I did find my *bashert*, my beloved husband, David, and I thank God every day!

Words of Blessing

It was not just Bessie who gave me

blessings. Early in my work in the nursing home, I noticed that this was a kind of pay that I received daily. In nearly every interaction — casual conversation, hospital visit, exchanging greetings after Shabbat or holiday services — at some point, the person I was with would offer me a blessing.

Some of them were quite simple: "You should be well." "God should let you live to be my age, but healthy." "I wish you everything you wish yourself." Others were amazingly profound: "May God grant you the happiness I've known." "May we live and be well and be here together next year." "May God bless you with a future which is unprecedented, and may your congregants appreciate the meaning of your message."

Some blessings used the language of faith; others were simply offered as loving, sincere, wishes. However they were articulated, these blessings were abundant and powerful. They shifted the nature of my relationship with my congregants. They made our encounters explicitly reciprocal; we were each giving to the other in a holy way. Moreover, these blessings connected the two of us to the Transcendent, the Source of life and love. Privileged to receive these blessings on a daily basis, I felt rich, full, sated.

Avoiding Complacency

A text on blessings: In the Talmud, tractate *Menahot*, we are taught that a person is bound to recite 100 blessings a day. The justification for the number 100 is in a reading of "And now, Israel, what does the Eternal your God require

of you?" (Deuteronomy 10:12). The word *mah*, "what," is read as *meah*, which means 100. So what is it that God requires of us? 100 [blessings].

The blessings to which this text literally refers are liturgical benedictions. In Jewish tradition we offer a benediction to acknowledge the wonders of nature, like seeing the sea or a beautiful tree, or hearing thunder. We say a benediction before doing a commanded act, like lighting Shabbat candles, and we recite a benediction when we experience sensory enjoyment or satisfaction, like when we eat, drink or when we go to the bathroom. We say a blessing when we hear good news, see a wise person, and even when someone dies. It's easy to see how you can get to 100 in a day!

The wisdom of offering these blessings throughout the day is that it keeps us from becoming complacent, from taking for granted what the Siddur calls *nisekha sh' b'khal yom*, the miracles we experience every day.

The Torah of the elders' blessings also sharpens our capacity for gratitude, wonder, and holy connection. It calls us to appreciate and acknowledge the blessings we receive from those we serve. And it invites us to find our own capacity to offer blessings, to elevate an encounter to the Holy by invoking the Divine, by entering into the dimension of the Eternal. As David Spangler teaches in his wonderful book, *Blessing: The Art and the Practice*, blessings remind us that "we are made of spirit stuff, soul stuff, love stuff... and therefore kin to life and to each other."

Lives Enriched

Once we develop the habit of giving blessings and acknowledging the ones that come our way, our whole lives just might be richer and sweeter. Who knows, we might be giving a blessing to our partners as they rush off to work, to our assistant for coming through in a crunch, or even to the person who managed to deliver our newspaper after a blizzard! We might find ourselves getting a blessing from the grocery store checkout person, or even from our kids as they cuddle before bed.

The Torah of blessings is infinitely valuable for us in confronting fragility and mortality. When we respond to the call to give blessings, we are drawn to notice and celebrate the beauty, nobility and goodness that exist right in the midst of pain, suffering and death. If we become aware of and share blessings in our relationships with those we accompany, we will deepen our capacity to be present to all of reality. We will be sparked to receive bounty from those we serve, and to give our love back in a transcendent and eternal form.

May we who walk with those facing brokenness and the finitude of this life, who ourselves are fragile and mortal, find the strength and inspiration to keep our minds open to learning, our souls open to empowering, our hearts open to loving, and may we find a way, like Abraham, not to just give and receive blessing, but *he'yeh berakhah*, to be a blessing.

^{1.} This article reports on the experiences

of Jewish elders in a Jewish residential care facility. Most frail Jewish elders reside in non-Jewish care settings, and are thus isolated from Jewish life. This fall, Hiddur will release *Sacred Seasons: Jewish Resources for Elders*, a series of resource kits devised

to enable a staff member, volunteer or family member to facilitate the celebration of Shabbat and holidays with elders. The materials will be available after October 2004 at www.sacredseasons.org.)