

Our Annual Midlife Crisis

by *Rabbi Judith Schindler*

My 40th birthday truly gave me pause. While it is not old, it is considered to be middle aged. In seeking wisdom on entering a new decade, I turned to Sid Cojac, the George Burns of Temple Beth El for some advice. At the age of 92 he has experienced many milestone moments.

“Were any of your birthdays hard?” I asked him. “No,” he responded. Every birthday was a blessing. They may have made me move a little slower, but they always made me wiser.”

Another year has come and gone and we are all getting older. The Torah teaches, “Mipinei sayvah takum, v’hadarta pnai zaken – you shall rise before the elderly and show respect for the old.” But in contrast to our Biblical commandment to honor those who are aging, our popular culture shuns the process. We are sold color for our hair and creams for our wrinkles so we can deny that reality. Plastic surgery, in its claim that it can remove the toll that time takes on our bodies, is a multi-billion dollar industry.

Judaism teaches that as we age, while our physical strength lessens, our spiritual strength increases. Each decade brings new and treasured gifts. It is for this reason that a part of me was excited to turn forty. In Judaism, the age of forty promises wisdom. The forty days and nights Moses spent atop Mt. Sinai, gave him the deepest level of spirituality and the gift of Torah. The forty-year trek of our Israelite ancestors through the desert, gave us the faith to enter the Promised Land. And at forty, our tradition teaches, we are grounded enough to study the Kabbalah, the core text of Jewish mysticism.

One of my seminary professors, Dr. Michael Signor, taught that no one likes the middle anything! There was the Middle Ages that difficult period between proud antiquity and enlightened modernity, and what about the middle of our bodies that quickly spreads more than we like to admit. And finally, there is the middle of our lives, when mid-life crises are the norm. These so-called “mid-life crises,” psychologists tell us, can begin anywhere from the age of forty to the mid-fifties and come with the realization that our lives are more than halfway over. The turning of decades jolts us into the reality of our mortality.

As Jews we are taught that we need not worry about midlife crisis at the age of forty, or fifty, or even sixty, for we are fortunate to have a midlife crisis every single year. The day of Yom Kippur, is our annual midlife crisis, which forces us to take pause and ask the critical questions about our lives. On Yom Kippur, we ask ourselves how we need to change. On this day, we address the meaning of our lives.

Sometimes acknowledging that we need to change our course

is difficult. There are times when we have no choice. If we do not change, our days will be diminished not only in length, but in quality. Today, we need to be honest about the ways we fail to care for our bodies – by overeating, overworking, and neglecting to exercise, or how we fail to care our souls by neglecting those social and spiritual connections that sustain us.

Like Jonah running away from his mission and then turning back to follow God’s command, Yom Kippur is a day for realigning our priorities and committing to support those causes our faith demands: caring for our families, supporting our community, and healing the world in which we live.

One Charlottean named Frank Reed changed the direction of his life at the age of 44, leaving his successful company to become a full time volunteer. In being named Habitat for Humanity’s Volunteer of the Year, he explained “What I am and who I am is a result of good fortune. At some point I began asking, ‘Did God really shower this good fortune on me just to live a rich life?’ Someone once said: I’ve achieved success, now I’m trying to achieve significance.”

Achieving significance does not require money and does not require us to be a certain age for according to Judaism, each stage of our lives has meaningful task. Pirkei Avot, the wisdom of our second century sages, teaches that at age five we should begin our studies of Torah. At age thirteen we should take responsibility for our actions, for mitzvot. At twenty-one we must embark on a career. At age thirty, we are at the height of our strength. At forty we attain wisdom. At fifty we can give counsel. At sixty we are given deference as an elder. At seventy we are considered a sage and at eighty we are of heroic strength.

Yet each of these achievements does not happen by default. Wisdom does not just roll off our tongues as we blow out the seventy candles on our cake. To become a sage, we cannot start learning about Judaism at the age of five and leave the Torah behind at thirteen, just as we cannot one day receive a professional degree and the next day give away our books and discontinue reading research. Wisdom is gained only through years of struggling to learn and to understand. Fortunately for us, the doorways to each of the stages are always open.

“No matter what age we are,” Rabbi David Wolpe notes, “We never lose the potential to grow.”

The seniors of Beth El have taught me how great aging can be. While I am in no rush, I, for one, think retirement will be wonderful. Our younger years are consumed by the advancing of careers, the

raising of children, or supporting of families. The older years are for appreciating the trees of our lives that we have nurtured to be solid and strong, for finally enjoying the fruits of our many, many years of labors. The older years are for engaging in passions we never had the time to pursue – study, art, travel, Torah.

That is why at Beth El, we have revived a program called SPICE - Special Programs of Interest or Concern to Elders. Recognizing that sixty is an age of vitality, we hope that all of you who are that age and older will join us on Wednesday for the first of our engaging and entertaining bi-weekly luncheon programs with food, music, poetry, study, provocative dialogue, and more.

Yet, what about those times in which it is really hard to see the best: when our bodies begin to fail us, when our friends or family members are torn from our lives through death, when our resources are limited and we stay up nights worrying about our financial future.

That is our task. When life is hard, when loved ones have died, we need to make music with what we have. If, on this day, our lives are lives feel empty, we need to fill them with meaning. We need to take the notes we have been given and recompose them, making of our lives the symphonies we want them to be.

As we approach our midlife crisis, we sit not with a therapist before us but with the prayer book, which like a magnifying mirror enables us to see both our blemishes and our beauty with more clarity.

More importantly, may we find the direction we seek, filling our days with meaning and with wisdom. May we be blessed with length of days and with an ability to make beautiful music with lives that we



have. And may the world be better, because we were here. Amen.

Rabbi Judith Schindler came to Temple Beth El as an Associate Rabbi in 1998 and was named Senior Rabbi in 2003. Prior to coming to Charlotte, she was an Associate Rabbi at Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York. She received her Bachelors Degree in Clinical Psychology from Tufts University in 1988 (magna cum laude), her Masters from the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles in 1993, and was ordained at the Hebrew Union College in New York in 1995. Rabbi Schindler is active in Mecklenburg Ministries, an interfaith organization that promotes racial and ethnic understanding and addresses social needs of Charlotte. She served on the editorial board of "The Torah: A Woman's Commentary", published in 2007 and also currently serves on the advisory board of the North Carolina Conference for Women and on the board of Providence Day School. She is a past co-chair of the Women's Rabbinic Network, which is a national organization of Women Reform Rabbis and founding co-chair for the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health. She has served on the board of Charlotte's Florence Crittenton Services (a home for unwed mothers) and has been a mentor to student rabbis and newly ordained rabbis for the past seven years.

Rabbi Schindler is married to Chip Wallach. They have two sons: Maxwell, 7, and Alec, 5.