Yom Kippur Sermon 5785

There was a time when people cried in synagogue. And when they cried, it was when the Cantor sang one piece in particular. It is still part of our liturgy for this holiest of days — Sh’ma koleinu — hear our voice.

What was the one line in that piece that always brought people to tears?

Al tashlicheinu l’eit ziknah — do not cast us off when we are old.

Why did people tremble and weep when they heard that one line?

Because that is our deepest fear in life — that, when we are old, that our loved ones and society will simply discard us.

Today is Yom Kippur, and I want to declare a new sin: for the sin of casting away the elderly.

Let me speak of how we do that — and how we must not do that — and how we can heal that.

Let me begin with a personal reflection on the meaning of aging.

The story is about my grandmother. Her life was not easy. Like the biblical matriarch Rachel, who has a starring role in the Haftarah on Rosh HaShanah, my grandmother wept for those she has lost. First, my uncle, who died of a heart attack at the age of 42, then, her second husband, my step grandfather.

And then, my mother, who died of cancer. Though she is gone, she is still very close to me — buried in Mount Freedom Cemetery in Randolph.

When my mother died, my grandmother was 88 when she lost her second child. After my daughter Emily was born, Tony and I invited her to live with us. A friend referred me to an agency in Irvington,  NJ, which helped Russian-Jewish immigrants. Even though my grandmother was not an immigrant, they had “rachmones” (pity) and provided her with healthcare for the year and a half that she spent with us.

To quote the psalm: there was simply no way that we would abandon my grandmother to old age.

It was so rewarding to see my grandmother smiling at her newly born great granddaughter, Emily, getting distracted for at least brief moments from the unimaginable pain of her grief. She enjoyed walking with me with the stroller and watching Emily growing day by day. My grandmother was overcome with joy, when Emily smiled at her for the first time.

Unfortunately, there came a time when it was no longer possible to provide health care for my grandmother. I had to think of alternatives. With the help of my relatives, I found a nursing home in Netania, Israel. With a heavy heart, I took my grandmother back to Israel.

The facility was very nice. While it was not luxurious, the staff was very attentive. The residents could come and go during the day. The place was a block away from the boardwalk along the sea and my grandmother found solace in taking strolls, whenever she pleased. Also, the residents were allowed to have pets, and even though my grandmother was not a huge cat fan, she enjoyed petting her roommate’s cat once in a while. I felt assured that I was leaving my grandmother in a place, where she could feel independent, even as others were taking care of her. While I could no longer give her the happiness of seeing Emily every day, I knew that she would not be alone and would be able to maintain her dignity for however long God would grant her life.

My grandmother died at the age of 90. I flew to Israel for her funeral. Before the burial, the rabbi removed a cloth, in which she was wrapped, according to Jewish tradition, so that I could look at her face. She looked peaceful.

Peaceful — despite what had been a long and difficult life. She had been born in a shtetl. She came to Leningrad. She survived WWII. She lost many of her family. Her first husband died of tuberculosis, when my mother was only three. My grandmother remarried. She had a son —and then, toward the end of her days, she lost both of her children.

My grandmother lived fully until the end of her life —finding some joy not only in her great granddaughter but in the people who surrounded her in her last few years. These were people who cared for her full heartedly. For them she was not just a “resident.” She was a human being.  Once again, the words of the psalm: they did not abandon her to old age.

In his book “Being Mortal, Medicine and What Matters in the End”, Atul Gawande tracks the history of how our society has treated the elderly.

The story is not always pretty. He writes:”The story of aging is the story of our parts. Consider the teeth. The hardest substance in the human body is the white enamel of the teeth. With age, it nonetheless wears away, allowing the softer, darker layers underneath to show through. Meanwhile, the blood supply to the pulp of the roots of the teeth atrophies, and the flow of the saliva diminishes; the gums tend to become inflamed and pull away from the teeth, exposing the base, making them unstable and elongating their appearance…The ability to chew declines, and people shift to softer foods…”

Now, there’s something to look forward to!

All I can think of is Moses — standing on mount Nebo, glimpsing the Promised Land, with eyes “undimmed” and “vigor unabated.” Fine. But what about his teeth?

Gawande writes of his grandfather, who died almost at the age of 110, due to an accident. He lived in a village in India. Up until his death, he was self sufficient and even made rounds of his farm on a small horse.

Recently I officiated at the funeral of a gentleman  who lived to 104. He worked until he was 100. After that, he still lived a full life, until he got sick a year before he died.

These men were not a burden to their families. They lived to the very end of their lives independent. They were not cast away into old age.

But you and I know: most people, even if they live to an old age, do not reach those years in good health, strong enough to live on their own.

Therefore, when the time comes, their children or younger relatives must decide: can our loved one continue living in their home, even if that requires professional help? Or should they move to something like an assisted living or independent living facility?

This is now what our society says: no, we will not abandon our elderly into the ravages or old age. It is a relatively new phenomenon. Slightly more than a hundred years ago, the elderly who lacked resources, ended up in the poorhouses. During the time of Great Depression, middle class people who had lost all their savings faced the same fate. “It sparked a nationwide protest movement,” writes Gawande. “In 1935, with the passage of social security, the United States joined Europe in creating a system of national pensions. Suddenly, a widow’s future was secure, and retirement, once the exclusive provenance of the rich, became  a mass phenomenon.”

While there were private nursing homes already in 1930s, and with the “Social security Act, some impoverished citizens were provided an access to the facilities, it was not until 1965, when the government established Medicare, that most people even had access to places, such as nursing homes.

Finally, in the late 1970s, we had the growth of assisted living facilities. In those places, the residents could duplicate their own homes. They could make their own decisions. They had freedom to make choices about their daily lives. Sometimes, they can bring their plants and their animals. Why? Because when you’re responsible, your life has depth and meaning. You are not abandoned to old age.

Let me tell you about one of the holiest sites in Jerusalem —and it doesn’t appear in any brochures. It’s “Yad LaKashish” - “Lifeline for the Old”. It was founded in 1962. It provides support and services for hundreds of elderly, including the physically challenged. Some are poor. Some are immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia and South America. The website of Yad Lakashish states that “ it strives to understand and meet the needs of this unique, aging population, valuing each individual’s background, while empowering every participant with new skills and strong sense of purpose.” The environment of Yad Lakashaish is “infused with dignity and respect”.

Yad Lakashish is not a nursing home. People do not live there. But they have a life there. Once again, it’s about responsibility. The clients create, in artisan workshops, where they can work on ceramics, silk-painting, needlework and many other crafts. They create Judaica items, which are sold in the gift store to earn some of the proceeds.

Why is Yad LaKashish successful? Because it gives each individual, in the final chapters of their lives, what we all need throughout our lives — to have purpose.

I believe that one of the greatest things that we can do as a congregation is to teach this value to our children —this value of *kvod zekenim*, of honoring those who are aged, of refusing to cast them off into old age. That is why in this coming year 5785, I plan to encourage more B’nai mitzvah children to take upon themselves the mitzvah of making the lives of elderly more meaningful.

I want the children to talk to the residents and learn their life stories, because each one of them have a unique story to tell. As it is said:” Blessed is the generation, who listens to the young, and double blessed the generation, who listens to the old.”

I am going to ask that we extend this mitzvah to the entire congregation — writing a holiday cards or volunteering to lead a book club or a program. You can even twin with the resident at the local assistant living places.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Polish-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, taught:

“A test of a people is how it behaves toward the old. It is easy to love children. Even tyrants and dictators make a point of being fond of children. But the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless are the true gold mines of a culture.”