Bring Your Days With You

Shabbos lunchtime drush | Parshas Chayei Sarah

Why Would Anyone Ask to Get Old?

וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים.

Avraham was old, advanced in days.

Let me ask you something. How much would people pay to look ten years younger?

Look at the advertising. L'Oréal offers a cream promising skin that appears "visibly younger, firmer, and more radiant." You put it on before going to sleep, and hope that by morning you've moved backwards!

How big is this business? One research firm estimated the worldwide market for anti-aging products at more than fifty-five billion American dollars in 2025.

What do people want to hear? "You don't look your age." Tell somebody he looks ten years younger and you've made his day. Tell him he's beginning to look old, and see how that conversation goes.

And then we open the Gemara and find ***Avraham Avinu asking Hashem for old age.***

People couldn't distinguish between Avraham and Yitzchak. Someone wanted to speak to Avraham, he approached Yitzchak. Someone wanted Yitzchak, he approached Avraham. Avraham asked Hashem to make a distinction, and old age came into the world.

Fifty-five billion dollars on anti-aging products—and Avraham Avinu asks Hashem for old age. What did he want that everyone else is trying to conceal?

Pause. Let the question settle.

What did he understand about getting older that we're missing? Let me ask you a few questions. You tell me what you think.

Who Has More—the Younger Person or the Older Person?

You have a twenty-year-old sitting next to an eighty-year-old. Who has more?

Allow a response.

The twenty-year-old has more energy. More strength. We hope he has many more years ahead of him. His whole life is in front of him.

And the eighty-year-old? We start listing what he doesn't have anymore. He can't walk as quickly. He can't hear as well. He gets tired more easily.

All right. You've told me what he has lost. ***What has he gained?***

The younger person has years he hopes to live. The older person has years he has actually lived. Now, what did he do with them?

Take a Jew who has spent decades learning Torah, davening, doing mitzvos, working on himself. How many times has he put on tefillin? How many Shabbosos has he kept? How much has he given of himself?

You see an older man coming into shul. It takes him a little longer to get to his seat. Do you know what just walked into the room? ***Decades of avodas Hashem.***

You noticed the cane. Did you notice what else he was carrying?

The years can become a person's possessions. He has worked, he has learned, he has acquired something. But now we have to ask what all those years are for.

Why Did You Daven This Morning?

Why did you daven Shacharis today?

"Rabbi, because a Jew is supposed to daven Shacharis." Certainly. But what are you trying to accomplish?

Suppose somebody says: "I want to live to eighty. When I come before the Ribbono Shel Olam, I want to bring Him eighty years of Shacharis, Mincha, and Maariv. So this morning I added another Shacharis."

What do you think? A good answer?

Allow a response.

It sounds like an excellent answer. ***But it's a mistake.***

You've made this morning into a way of getting to something else. Another tefillah in the collection. Eventually, you'll have eighty years.

But why are you here this morning? ***To daven this morning's Shacharis.*** Hashem has given you the opportunity to stand before Him today. That is your avodah.

Yesterday has passed. Tomorrow hasn't arrived. ***This morning is what you have.***

Now somebody should stop me. "Rabbi, which is it? First you tell us how wonderful it is to have eighty years behind us. Now you tell us that what matters is today. ***So what were all those years for?***"

Exactly.

What Can Fifty Years Bring Into One Tefillah?

If today's Shacharis is the purpose, why does a person need eighty years? Let him daven one Shacharis, one Mincha, one Maariv, and he's finished!

Because a person needs to learn how to daven. A twenty-year-old has had twenty years to prepare for today's avodah. ***An eighty-year-old can bring eighty years into the way he stands before Hashem now.***

You aren't davening today merely to accumulate eighty years of tefillah. Those eighty years prepare you for today's tefillah.

Take "רְפָאֵנוּ." A young person says, "Heal us, Hashem, and we will be healed." He understands the words. He knows that people get sick and need a refuah.

But take someone who has lived another fifty years. He has seen sickness. He has visited friends in the hospital. Perhaps he has sat beside his wife, waiting for a doctor to explain what happens next. Perhaps he has been the one lying in the bed.

He understands what it means to wait for a result. What it means when a treatment works. What it means to get up and do something that, a month ago, he couldn't do.

You tell him, "The main thing is your health." ***He knows what that means. He has lived it.***

And he has seen how people can grow through sickness. How someone can become more sensitive to another person's pain. How tefillah can change. How things that once seemed terribly important become very small, and things he barely noticed become precious.

Now that Jew opens his siddur and says:

רְפָאֵנוּ ה׳ וְנֵרָפֵא.

The same words he said when he was twenty. ***But look at what he can put into them now.***

There are people behind those words. Faces. Memories. Gratitude for healing he has witnessed, and an understanding of how desperately someone needs the healing he is asking for.

And sometimes a young person has already lived through enough to put an older person's understanding into those words. We are talking about what life has taught a person—and whether he brings it into his tefillah.

That is what fifty more years can bring into one "רְפָאֵנוּ." And those same years can give him something precious to bring to someone else.

The Older Man Beside the Hospital Bed

Rabbi Paysach Krohn related a story about a shul group from Boca Raton who travelled to Israel to give chizuk. Another published version identifies their rabbi as Rabbi Yaakov Gibber.

They visited displaced families and wounded soldiers. At Tel HaShomer Hospital, they came to the amputee unit.

Now imagine going on such a visit. You want to encourage someone. You want to offer hope. But what do you say to a young person whose life has suddenly changed so drastically?

The visitors noticed a man in his seventies sitting beside a young soldier. He was wearing civilian clothing. He, too, was an amputee. They asked what brought him there.

He explained that he had lost a leg in the Yom Kippur War, at approximately the age of these young soldiers. Since then, he had worked, married, and become a father and grandfather. He visited every day to help them understand that they still had a future.

Pause.

What did he bring to that bedside? Fifty years. Those years gave him something to offer that young man today.

He could sit there as someone who had lived through a similar injury and built a life. ***The young soldier could see a possible future sitting beside him.***

That brings us back to our question. What are your years doing for the avodah you have today? They can enter your tefillah. They can enter your chesed. ***You have to bring them with you.***

Even Being Ill Is an Avodah

Now let me ask you a sharper question. Why do older people die and young people don't?

You'll immediately tell me, "Rabbi, unfortunately, young people die too." Of course. We know that. The question concerns the normal course of a human lifetime. What are all those years preparing a person for?

The answer is startling: ***a child doesn't yet know how to die.***

Returning to the Ribbono Shel Olam is itself an avodah. A person spends years learning what it means to belong to Hashem, to trust Him, to give himself over to Him.

And before we speak about the end of life, what about illness? Does a person know how to be ill?

"If you're ill, you're ill!" Yes. ***But how do you serve Hashem there?*** Suddenly, you have to depend on others. You have to wait. You cannot make the uncertainty disappear.

A lifetime of working on emunah, patience, and mesirus nefesh can enter the way a person faces that situation. It can still be terribly difficult. That difficulty does not erase the avodah he is doing within it.

The years prepare a person for the avodah he has now—even when it is an avodah he would never have chosen.

So What Did Hashem Give Avraham?

Now we can return to Avraham. What did Hashem give him? White hair? Wrinkles? A way for people to tell father and son apart?

The Gemara describes the visible distinction. But why did Avraham want it? What did those signs of age represent?

Sit down and speak to someone who has spent decades learning, living, and working on himself. ***You can hear the years.***

He has lived with questions that once seemed simple. He understands that before you answer someone, you may have to listen a little longer. He knows that words carry weight.

The years have prepared him for the person sitting in front of him now. That is where the respect comes from.

Of course, birthdays alone don't accomplish this. ***A person has to use his years.*** Avraham had used his. The appearance of age made recognizable a distinction with real substance behind it.

Let me show you what it can mean to bring your years into a conversation.

Rav Gustman Came as His Rebbe

Rabbi Ari Kahn recounts that Rav Yisrael Zev Gustman's public shiur in Jerusalem drew scholars and professionals. Professor Yisrael Aumann regularly attended. ***Rav Gustman was his rebbe.***

In 1982, Aumann's son Shlomo fell in the Lebanon War, leaving a wife and child; another daughter was born afterwards.

Rav Gustman attended the funeral with his students, then asked to visit the family. Aumann thanked him and suggested he return to his yeshiva.

But Rav Gustman sat beside him and revealed that his own young son Meir had been murdered during the Holocaust. He had later bartered the child's shoes for food, but could not eat it and gave it away.

He described Meir welcoming Shlomo into a heavenly minyan: Meir had died as a Jew; Shlomo had died protecting other Jews. Rav Gustman pictured Shlomo leading that holy congregation.

Then he said:

> **"I never had the opportunity to sit shiva for my Meir; let me sit here with you just a little longer."**

Aumann responded that Rav Gustman had brought him comfort.

Pause. Do not rush to explain.

What did this rebbe bring to his talmid's house?

His own life. His own understanding of what it means for a father to lose a child.

And ***he chose to make that understanding available to someone else.*** He recognized what he could give in that room, at that moment.

That is the point. The years had given him something. Now he used it in an act of compassion.

"Rabbi, What If I Missed the Boat?"

Now somebody may be thinking: "Rabbi, you're describing someone else. Sixty years of beautiful davening? There were years I hardly davened at all. You're telling me what I could have accumulated. I'm thinking about what I missed."

So what do we do now? ***You have today.***

You can't go back and daven yesterday's Shacharis. But you can put yourself into the next tefillah. You can learn something this afternoon. You can do a mitzvah. Where you need teshuvah, you can begin teshuvah.

And your life experience hasn't disappeared. You understand responsibility, gratitude, loss, and dependence differently from when you were twenty. ***Bring that understanding into your avodas Hashem now.***

You realize you let opportunities go by? Let that put some urgency into what you do next. But don't say, "I wasted too much time, so what's the point?"

Why should yesterday's mistake be allowed to take today away from you too?

You regret the days you didn't use? ***Begin using the day you have.***

Do You Have to Be Old to Understand?

And if you're one of the younger people here, you may be wondering: "Rabbi, should I come back in forty years?"

You don't have to wait forty years to begin recognizing what matters.

There is a story about the Rebbe Rashab, Rabbi Shalom Dovber of Lubavitch, when he was a little boy.

He and his older brother would visit their grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek, who would give them coins. On one occasion, the younger boy went without his brother. His grandfather held him on his lap, gave him a coin, and kissed him.

When he returned home and told his brother, the older boy was upset at having missed the visit and grabbed the coin.

The young Rashab answered:

"You can grab the coin Zeide gave me, but you can't take away the kiss!"

His brother offered to return the money. The younger boy's response was that his brother could keep the coin; ***he would keep the kiss.***

Pause.

The years are supposed to teach us what matters. This child was already beginning to understand.

He recognized that what he could hold in his hand wasn't the whole gift. He had received something from his grandfather that could not be taken away with the money.

That is wisdom appearing early. And that is the challenge for a younger person.

A conversation with a grandparent. A chance to learn. An opportunity to help somebody. Can you recognize its value while it is still in front of you?

You don't have to wait until you're older to take today seriously.

Bring Your Days With You

"בָּא בַּיָּמִים"—Avraham came with his days. Where was he bringing them?

We would answer: to Olam Haba. Eventually, he would bring Hashem a lifetime of avodah.

But the point here concerns how he lived while he was still in this world. ***He brought his days into his old age, so that he could serve Hashem now.*** All that learning, all that work, all that understanding—available for today's avodah.

If you have many years behind you, bring them into today. If you are young, begin filling your days now. And ***if you regret the years you lost, don't give away this day too.***

What have your years prepared you to do today?

--- Adapted from Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, Tiferes Shimshon, Chayei Sarah, pp. 263–264.

Reference notes · not for delivery

Advertising and market estimate: L'Oréal product advertising

Grand View Research: US$55.6 billion, global products market, 2025

Hospital story: Account attributed to Rabbi Paysach Krohn, April 9, 2024

TorahTable version identifies Rabbi Yaakov Gibber

Rav Gustman: Rabbi Ari Kahn, "The Rabbi and the Professor"

Rebbe Rashab: Rabbi Sholom Avtzon, citing Oros Ba'afeilah, pp. 121–122

The hospital visitor is unnamed in the published account. Rabbi Kahn describes his account as combining firsthand knowledge with a reconstruction of events reported to him. Stories are paraphrased; reflections and transitions are applications for this drush.