



“And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age [*seivah*], old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre.” (Genesis 25:8-9)

The Cave of Machpelah, which Abraham purchased as a burial spot for his beloved Sarah, would serve, upon his death, as a place of reconciliation between estranged brothers. I thought about this on a visit to Hebron in 2016. Hebron today is often not a place of reconciliation or of death “in a good old age.” Tragically, too many have died there at too young an age, and the cave itself has become a symbol of lethal hatred. Machpelah means “double,” suggesting its significance as a place of both love and strife. The Zohar (*Vayechi* 1:250b) teaches that through that cave we will re-enter the Garden of Eden, the place of ultimate peace and harmony. But for Machpelah to become the gateway to paradise, we must prioritize the values of reconciliation and love and subdue the impulse to dominate our estranged brothers and sisters.

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“But [Jacob] said, “My son must not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If he meets with disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head [*seivah*] down to Sheol in grief.” (Genesis 42:38)

Jacob in his old age is living in grief over unresolved trauma and violence, and famine is threatening the future of his entire family. His sons come to him offering a new path—taking Benjamin to Egypt. The path has potential of not only relieving the hunger but also offering some healing to the trauma. Jacob resists. Rabbi Chaim Ben Atar (Morocco, 17th c.) writes that Jacob feared another tragedy from the path his sons would take, “the way in which you go,” which was the usual path they always went in – בדרך שהם רגילים ללכת בה בתמידות – the one that had previously ended in death. Israel at 70 faces the same crossroads as Jacob: the fear of the past and the fear and the understanding that walking the same old path would lead to more violence. The younger generation may be offering new paths of healing and salvation, and we need to find the courage to follow them.

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“Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head [*seivah*], and honour the face of the elderly, and thou shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:32)

Judaism is at core an inter-generational and relational project. We stand on the shoulders of giants even as we are obligated to take hold of their legacy—so full of passion and creativity—to sustain and create a Judaism that is meaningful and relevant for us and for the next generation. This verse evokes these characteristics and grounds them in obligation. We must act with respect and empathy toward our elders. In Israel, this verse appears on public buses instructing riders to yield their seats to the elderly. More generally, this verse guides us in creating a society of care and connection. Since we should all be so lucky to be spared illness or accident and live until we are “hoary-headed,” we can easily extrapolate that respect

and empathy should at all times be extended to all people—all once someone’s tender child, all potential future elders.

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[Yehudah ben Teima] would say... seventy is the age of *seivah* [white hair].

(*Pirkei Avot* 5:21)

“The righteous bloom like a date-palm... In old age [*seivah*] they still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness.” (Psalm 92:13-15)

Our sacred texts are replete with trees. Numerous laws emphasize the sacred value of trees and the need to protect them. In *aggadah*, prophesy and psalms, trees are metaphors for different aspects of human character and our investment in the future. If we choose to act in

righteousness, our lives will bear fruit for the generations to come. A desert people understands that it takes strong roots, nourishing water, warm sun and profound patience for a tree to flourish. A fruit-bearing tree is the most precious of all. The palm tree evokes not only fecundity, but also justice. Sitting under her palm tree, “*Tomer Devorah*,” the prophet Deborah led her people peacefully for forty years through her pursuit of justice.

The rabbis imagined 70 as an age of maturity they dared hope to reach. Yet as we mark this milestone, Israel still has much growing ahead. For her to flourish in righteousness like the palm, all who care for her must tend to her with the waters of justice so that her boughs will grow wide enough and her fruit plentiful enough to shelter and sustain all of her inhabitants.

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