

## The Mitzvah of Caregiving

*Respect an elderly person who has lost their learning:  
Remember that the fragments of the tablets broken by  
Moses were preserved in the Ark of the Covenant  
alongside the new.<sup>1</sup>*

*Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: "...The most difficult of  
all mitzvot is 'Honor your father and your mother....'"<sup>2</sup>*

There is a woman here tonight concerned that it is no longer safe for her aging parents to be living on their own. There is a man who has helped to dress and feed his wife of many years, though she recognizes him less and less often. One of you calls your mother in Florida four or five times a day. (She doesn't think it's enough.) Several of you have spent countless hours online and on the phone, trying to enroll your father in the right Medicare Part D plan. You are caregivers.

At one of the high points of the High Holy Day prayers, we say, "*Sh'ma koleinu... Hear our voice, Adonai our God, have mercy on us and accept our prayer.*" And what do we pray, while the gates of prayer stand open? "*Al tashlicheinu l'eit zikna... Do not cast us off in our old age; do not forsake us when our strength fails. Do not forsake us, Adonai our God; do not depart from us.*" We express a basic human understanding—our strength is not forever. The strongest among us, the most independent, the most self-sufficient—should we be blessed with enough years of life—all of us will see our powers diminish. We will need help. We will be dependent, perhaps. Dependent on professionals—doctors and aides and Uber drivers. But even more, we will depend on loved ones. They are caregivers. We are caregivers.

In 2011, the first members of the Baby Boom generation began to turn 65, more and more Americans are living into their 80s and 90s, and the trend is expected to increase. An increasing number of older adults require care from their loved ones. A recent study found that 17% of Americans—40 million people—were providing unpaid care for an adult to help take care of

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 8b.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Eikev, 2.

themselves.<sup>3</sup> Caregivers spend an average of 24 hours/week providing care for their loved ones, and many spend far more.<sup>4</sup> Half of all adults in their 40s and 50s are part of the so-called “sandwich generation,” raising children while providing support to their own parents.<sup>5</sup>

What does all this caregiving look like? Most provide care for a parent, some for a spouse, and others for a grandparent or adult child. Most of these loved ones suffer from the diseases of aging, long-term or short-term physical conditions; some have memory loss or mental health issues. Caregivers assist a loved one with the basic tasks of living: dressing, bathing, eating, using the bathroom, and moving from place to place. They spend time shopping and cooking, housekeeping and doing laundry, managing finances and a household. Caregiving is monitoring a loved one’s health, helping with medication, communicating with doctors. Caregiving is acting as an advocate with insurance companies and government agencies. More than half of caregivers perform medical and nursing tasks—often with little training and more than a little anxiety—administering injections, monitoring blood pressure or blood sugar, operating hospital beds, wheelchairs, oxygen tanks, and nebulizers.<sup>6</sup>

Caregiving extends for a few months or for many years. Caregivers provide care to loved ones living in their own homes, with the caregiver, and in assisted living and nursing facilities of all kinds. Caregivers provide care long-distance, over the phone and flying in for visits. Some caregivers are the primary or only caregiver, and some share the tasks of caregiving with others.

Caregiving is a stage of life, a common experience that is becoming more common. And while we know that caregiving is difficult—exhausting even—and that caregivers need and deserve support, society and our social systems have not caught up to give caregivers what they need. Do you have a question about parenting a toddler? (I know I do.) There are a thousand websites and Facebook groups. Parenting is practically all that people my age talk about. And few parents are embarrassed to share our ignorance, our successes and failures, our insecurities. We share them with everyone. But if you have a serious question about the challenges of caring for an ailing parent? Answers and social support are much harder to find.

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<sup>3</sup> *Caregiving in the U.S.* AARP Public Policy Institute, June 2015. Available at <http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2015/caregiving-in-the-united-states-2015-executive-summary-revised.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Kim Parker and Eileen Patten, “The Sandwich Generation: Rising Financial Burdens for Middle-Aged Americans.” Pew Research Center, 30 Jan 2013. Available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/01/30/the-sandwich-generation/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Caregiving in the U.S.*

This synagogue is called to respond to the real challenges in all of our lives. And so tonight I say to the caregivers: we see you. When you leave work early to take your mother to a doctor's appointment, and spend another work day following up on the test results, we see you. When you are afraid that your husband's forgetfulness may be the first signs of dementia, we see you. In assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and hospitals, we see you. In the triumph of a good day, and in the embarrassment and guilt that come along with doing a job for which none of us is truly prepared, we see you. And what we see is holiness. What we see is a mitzvah.

Caring for aging parents responds to the fifth of the Ten Commandments, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land that the Lord your God gives you."<sup>7</sup> How do we fulfill this mitzvah? The Talmud provides simple requirements: provide your parent with food and drink, clothes and shoes, and assist them in going out and coming in.<sup>8</sup>

If honoring our parents as they age meant only assuring that their physical needs are met, it would be difficult enough. But the duty to honor our parents demands also that we preserve their dignity. "When Rabbi Eliezer was asked, 'How far is a person to go in honoring his father and mother?' he replied, 'So far that, should his father take a purse of gold coins and toss it into the sea in his presence, he would not put him to shame.'"<sup>9</sup> What does this mean for us? When a loved one insists on eating the foods their doctor has forbidden, we must be patient. When they say something outrageous or embarrassing, we should bite our tongue. When we bring over dinner or groceries and they insist on paying, we should let them, at least sometimes.

Caring for our loved ones without putting them to shame is an excruciating balance. We must help them without making them feel helpless. We must give them control and independence while keeping them safe. When a child cares for a parent, the role reversal is disorienting. The parent is embarrassed. The child is reticent. Both experience loss.<sup>10</sup>

We see you, caregivers. And when you feel unprepared, remember that no one is prepared. Jane Gross, journalist and creator of the New York Times blog, "The New Old Age," wrote a memoir of her time spent caring for her ailing mother. She writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20:12.

<sup>8</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31b.

<sup>9</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 32a.

<sup>10</sup> See Deborah Pipe-Mazo, "The Psychodynamics of Caring for Aging Parents," in Address and Person, eds., *That You May Live Long: Caring for Our Aging Parents, Caring for Ourselves* (UAHC Press, 2003).

The most important thing I can tell you is that being clueless—utterly clueless—is the central and unavoidable part of this experience, perhaps the greatest challenge to those of us who pride ourselves on knowing what we’re doing, who like being in control.... I can’t tell you how your mother or father will die, how long it will take, how much suffering it will involve, what it will cost, how you will pay for it, what will happen to your career or your marriage in the meantime, or whether the experience will bring your family together or pull it apart. All of that depends on the imponderables, things you can’t know or prepare for no matter how smart you are, how organized, or how loving and attentive.<sup>11</sup>

So what are we to do, if there is no way to guarantee that our decisions will be the right ones? Here again, our ancient texts prove that our dilemma is not new. The Talmud teaches:

There is one who feeds his father fine foods, and yet he inherits punishment. And there is one who sets his father to work in a mill, and yet his reward is the Garden of Eden. How is this possible? One man feeds his father fine foods, but when his father makes conversation, he says, “Old man, old man, shut up and eat.” And so he inherits punishment.

Another man whose work is grinding wheat hears that the king has commanded all millers be brought to work for him. He says to his father, “You grind in the mill in my place, and I will go to work for the king. For if there is humiliation in it, I would rather be humiliated. And if there is flogging, I would rather be flogged.” And so he set his father to work in a mill, and yet inherited the Garden of Eden.<sup>12</sup>

When we are caregivers, the intentions that motivate our decisions are the basis on which we may be judged. This is liberating. Because we cannot be sure that our decisions will work out—they often won’t. But we can examine our intentions; we can even improve them. When we face a difficult care decision or a difficult conversation or a difficult day, we can reassure ourselves that we are acting out of love, the desire to honor our loved ones, and out of recognition of the divine image within them.

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<sup>11</sup> Jane Gross, *A Bittersweet Season: Caring for Our Aging Parents—and Ourselves* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 1:7.

Caregivers, we see you. And we know that the care you provide comes at a tremendous cost. There's the economic cost—cutting back on hours at work, paying for babysitters and travel, not to mention the direct costs of living and healthcare. And there are other costs. Caregiving takes a toll on your own health, it puts strain on your relationships and family. How much is too much?

The Talmud tells of a non-Jew, a man named Dama who lived in Ashkelon. Once, the Sages of the Talmud came to buy merchandise from him, and his profit would be 600,000 gold coins. But the key to his storehouse was under his father's pillow, and his father was sleeping, and he would not disturb him.

Another time the Sages of the Talmud came to Dama of Ashkelon to buy precious stones for the High Priest's garments, and his profit would be 600,000 gold coins. But the key to his storehouse of precious stones was under his father's pillow, and his father was sleeping, and he would not disturb him.<sup>13</sup>

The moral of this story: Why didn't he keep the key somewhere else? The other moral: We are indeed required to go to great lengths to fulfill the mitzvah of honoring our parents and caring for elders.

But those lengths are not unlimited. It is a mitzvah to balance the demands of caregiving with our other needs and values. Take care of your own health. Nurture your other relationships. We are not allowed to impoverish ourselves—mentally, physically or yes, even financially, providing care for another. There is no easy or constant way to achieve this balance. We see you trying.

It once happened that Rabbi Tarfon's mother went for a walk on the Sabbath. Her sandal split open, and she couldn't repair it because it was Shabbat. Rabbi Tarfon placed his hands beneath the soles of her feet at each step, and she walked on his hands until she reached her bed.<sup>14</sup>

We see you, caregivers. And you might as well be placing your hands beneath your loved ones' feet, step by step. Your devotion is that great. And if sometimes your devotion is not enough? That same Rabbi Tarfon also said, "It is not your obligation to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a.

<sup>14</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31b.

<sup>15</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:21.

Caregiving is isolating. And this is something that we as a synagogue can do something about. We are Temple Beth Or at our best when we help each other deepen our relationships around the things in life that really matter. And so we are creating a new group, to share the experience of being caregivers. Whether you are caring for a parent or spouse, an adult child or anyone, I hope you will join us. We will come together once a month to listen and to talk, to ask questions and to laugh. But most of all, to be seen and acknowledged. Rabbi Richard Address, one of our leading thinkers on Judaism and aging, writes:

Relationships and community are the healing balm in caring. They can provide the emotional and spiritual support that helps people heal from loss and discover their own strength as they confront the challenges and blessings of honoring and respecting those for whom we care.... The relationships we have with others and the relationship we develop with God help form a personal spiritual support system that can hold and care for us as we face the often difficult task of making sacred choices for ourselves and for others.<sup>16</sup>

Right after the High Holy Days, you will see information about our new Caregivers Group. I hope you'll join us.

Jane Gross again:

We want to do all we realistically can to ease the suffering...of our loved ones. But we also have the opportunity to watch what happens to our parents, listen to what they have to say to us, and use that information to look squarely at our own mortality and prepare as best we can for the end of our own lives. In fact, we have the opportunity to become better people, wiser and stronger, not simply older and grayer. We can make something of this crisis, or we can endure this experience until it's over and then escape back into the daily buzz of our lives until suddenly it's our turn.<sup>17</sup>

Caregiving puts us in direct contact with life and death, with ultimate meaning. We are forced to confront mortality, the unavoidable decision of what to do with our time on earth. The High Holy Days also call us out of the everyday, to reach towards something greater than ourselves.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard F. Address, *Seekers of Meaning: Baby Boomers, Judaism, and the Pursuit of Healthy Aging* (URJ Press, 2012), p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Gross, *A Bittersweet Season: Caring for Our Aging Parents—and Ourselves* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), p. 5.

On Rosh Hashanah we marvel at the miracle and mystery of Creation. We submit our deeds and our souls to judgment. We make sincere effort to do *teshuvah*, to bring our thoughts and actions in closer alignment with our values. Rosh Hashanah is not ordinary, but holy. Caregiving, too, transforms the ordinary into the holy.

Kathy Kahn, a longtime outreach specialist for our Reform Movement, offers a beautiful reflection on caring for her mother, who had Alzheimer's:

Today I think I cracked the code of two phrases that she uses so often. The first one, "What comes next? What are we supposed to do now?" means she is feeling anxious and needing reassurance. I know that I am trying to find answers to those two important questions as well. The second is her use of the word "real." "You look so *real*" is the highest compliment my mother can pay anyone. A face that looks real offers a lifeline of meaning for her.

Today we sang the entire score of *South Pacific* and laughed through it all.

Today my mother and I pulled into the driveway of the house she's lived in for forty-five years. She turned to me and said, "Have we been here before?"

Today my mother gently corrected my sloppy grammar twice and then, with a chuckle, reminded me that as my mother, that was her job.

Today, like many days, was full of joy and despair and wonder.<sup>18</sup>

We see you, caregivers. May your efforts pierce the veil of the everyday to reveal the holiness of caring and honoring.

May all of us be so sensitive to the needs of all those around us, careful with their dignity, recognizing the Divine Image within them.

And may our acts of care and kindness cause us to be inscribed for a year of health, sweetness, and blessing in the Book of Life. *L'shanah tovah*.

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<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Kahn, "Becoming an Expert on the Individual, Not the Disease," in Address and Person, eds., *That You May Live Long: Caring for Our Aging Parents, Caring for Ourselves* (UAHC Press, 2003), pp. 110-111.