

# Gerontocracy

Old age, Senior Citizens, Geriatrics are all rather pejorative terms for people who have reached a certain age or stage in their lives. Like me!

Shakespeare's famous description of the stages of humanity is in "As You Like It." Human beings go through seven stages from infancy to old age, dotage, and death. "The Last scene of all that ends this strange eventful history is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." In King Lear, Regan mocks her father Lear: "O, sir, you are old...You should be ruled and led, by some discretion that discerns your state, better than you yourself."

Of course, the dreaded Alzheimer's has made us all painfully aware of diseases that target older minds. We do get weaker in body and mind. It is expressed so beautifully in the liturgy of the High Holy Days when we ask God not to abandon us in our old age as we get weaker.

The Bible reiterated the moral and religious obligation to respect and learn from one's elders. "Rise before the hoary head and respect the aged"(Leviticus 19:32).

Almost every English translation I have come across varies. Here are three examples. The Art Scroll "In the presence of an old person shall you rise, and you shall honor the presence of a sage." The Jewish Publication Society "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old." And Steinsaltz "You shall rise before the grey beard and show deference before the elderly." But not necessarily to be enslaved or bullied by them.

There is a tendency to shunt the elderly off out of sight and out of mind. Retirement sounds like giving up on life. There is no word in biblical Hebrew for retirement. Indeed, neither was there in English until the sixteenth century when the word was borrowed from the French for military retirement and much later came to be used as retirement from any job. In different cultures, older people are revered and respected. In Judaism, they hold a very special place in our value system and hierarchy. They are valued both for their learning and experience. And if you study Torah, it is something that goes on and may increase with age and time. This is what gives status, purpose, and meaning in one's life when no longer employed.

The Hebrew word for the elderly is **ZaKen**. Which can either mean any old person, a grandparent or an elder, the leader of the religious community, or a household. Elders were part of the judicial and educational system initiated by Moses. Later, the word referred to those who kept the Mosaic tradition alive during the fractious First Temple Period. Finally, it was used for the men of the Great Assembly and the Sanhedrin. Otherwise, it was simply used to distinguish one generation from the next.

Judaism after the destruction of the Temple was led traditionally by scholars of Jewish Law and Lore who debated, voted, and tried to reach consensus on

matters of religion and Jewish affairs. There was no idea of infallibility or extending their expertise to areas beyond the commands of the Torah. But there was a strong tradition of going to them for advice, encouragement, and comfort. One looked for various intellectual and moral qualities in such a person. And if one's teacher was found wanting ethically, one switched to another. The Talmud gives such an example of leaving an academy over rabbinic moral failure (BT Taanit 20a) and of a highly regarded rabbi who was lacking in humility and sensitivity (BT Taanit 24a). Moses, the greatest of all our authorities was known to be exceedingly modest, above all others (Numbers 12:13). He did not arrogate to himself any grand title and was not infallible. Although admittedly he had God on his side. Traditionally, the leadership of the Jewish People was fluid "The heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, every man of Israel" (Devarim 29:15). One was expected to consult, to look for guidance, to be open to other opinions.

But now Orthodox Judaism has been re-cast in an almost unrecognizable straitjacket. The lynchpin of this new paradigm is the use of the term **Gadol**. Meaning a *Great One*. Used to refer to the primary scholar or leader of different sects and communities within what is called the Charedi world. Some achieve this title through their learning and age, others through their hereditary appointment to the leadership of a Hasidic sect. One is expected to rely on the *Gadol* for a true and authentic view and opinion, not only on Torah but on every aspect of life. And the *Gadol* can do no wrong or make mistakes.

Current leaders are often in the nineties and surrounded by gatekeepers and intermediaries who filter what goes in, what is shown, and what comes out in their names. So that one does not know how they would react or think if they had other information fed to them. And sometimes different *Great Ones* disagree amongst themselves. Ill-conceived statements from on high often cause anguish amongst many of their followers not to mention the outside world. And the leadership has signally failed in dealing with important issues, discouraging aggression and violent protests, and turning blind eyes to abuses of all kinds. As we have seen in the most recent responses to sex abuse coming ostensibly from these elderly men. Several other recent tragedies have underlined the failure of the leadership to condemn and insist that effective measures be taken to prevent recurrences.

An added issue is the involvement of religious parties in Government in Israel. It is a moral disaster because it encourages corruption and uses religion as a political tool. The **Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah**, Council of Torah Sages, *the Gedolim*, is the voice of the various religious parties with everything that that implies. The hope was that they would protect the interests of the religious communities in the Secular State. Which they have done. But at the cost of alienating everyone else and encouraging confrontation.

The confrontational mentality of religious parties in the Israeli political system also explains why so many of the Charedi voices of dissent are coming from those scholars who have an American rather than an Israeli political background. They have experienced the outside world and are less negative and are more sensitive.

The bright light is that now, at last, we are seeing signs of change coming from within the Charedi world from below. In many areas extremes are being disregarded. Thank goodness other and younger authorities are beginning to speak out and offer more nuanced responses. In some cases, they are actually standing up to the old guard.

I once had a conversation with an Indian friend who gave me the secret of his family's company's success. As one generation began to lose its cutting edge or grew out of touch with new developments and situations, they would be elevated to a position of noble seniority in which all outward authority and power were maintained till the very end. But in practice, a younger and hungrier generation began to take over the reins of the business. And in many cases, it works well with minimum disruption.

On the other hand, I have seen great, successful family businesses collapse when the hungry younger generation, impatient with the constraints of their seniors undermined the whole structure. And there have been many cases where the older generation just stubbornly refused to change altogether with dire consequences. I believe the Charedi leadership would do well to learn from these examples.

And this leads me back to the idea of old age and the gerontocracy of religious life that is typical of all forms of autocracy. Empires have fallen, we have lost temples through the inability of leadership to pursue humane policies or see the weak points of their societies. The achievements of the Charedi world are enormous. They have restored the primacy of passionate commitment to Torah and raised the level of learning above previous eras. However, need more religious leaders who are prepared to be open to other perspectives and admit the faults of a system that has bad points as well as good ones. If one is not prepared to modify what is not working, then the whole of the edifice is in danger of crumbling.