

## **Va'era: Age is Just a Number** **Rabbanit Nomi Kaltmann, Class of 2023**

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As I marked a major milestone birthday last year, crossing the threshold into my thirties, the occasion carried immense significance for me. It felt like a profound coming-of-age moment, a juncture in life where I sensed the gravity of growing older and, optimistically, growing wiser.

Embracing the aging process is something I've come to appreciate; it brings a sense of self-awareness that I find fulfilling. Yet, along with this personal growth, there's a subtle pressure to ensure that my life and career stay on the path I envision. It's a delicate balance between cherishing the present and navigating the expectations of the future, all part of the complex beauty of growing older.

In Western culture, aging is often viewed negatively, with much emphasis being placed on youthfulness and on not seeing signs of aging, such as covering up gray hair or using facial creams to reduce wrinkles. But this week's *parsha* pushes in a different direction.

Va'era speaks of the commencement of Moshe's leadership journey at the remarkable age of 80, alongside his elder brother Aaron, aged 83—a time when many might consider themselves "too old" to embark on significant life changes.

*U'Moshe ben shmonim shanah v'Aharaon ben shalosh u'shmonim shanah b'dabram el Paroah.*

Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three, when they made their demand on Pharaoh (Exodus 7:7).

They were just getting started in their ninth decades!

Pirkei Avot underscores the significance of the wisdom acquired from the elderly.

*V' halomeid min hazikaynim lamah hu domeh, l'echik anavim b'sheilor v'shoteh yayin yashan.*

And he who learns from the old, to what is he compared? To one who eats ripe grapes, and drinks old wine (Avot 4:20).

This analogy reflects the benefits of learning from the elderly, who offer a richness of wisdom garnered from having experienced the fullness of life.



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Differing from Western culture, Judaism holds the elderly in high regard. The Torah mandates the Jewish community to honor and respect the elderly, stating:

*Mipnei seivah takum v'hadartah pinei zakeyn v'yaratah me'elokecha ani hashem.*

You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am God (Leviticus 19:32).

I like to think about aging in the context of Rabbi Akiva, who began studying Torah at the age of 40. His remarkable transformation from an illiterate shepherd to a renowned scholar, despite the advanced age when he started learning, teaches a timeless lesson about age: it's just a number.

So as I read this week's *parsha*, and witness the 10 plagues brought by Moshe and Aaron, I remember that there's always time for new beginnings and continuous growth. Life is an ongoing journey! It's never too late to get started.

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