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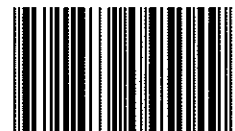
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1

JEWISH  
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# LIFECYCLES

*Jewish Women on  
 Life Passages  
 &  
 Personal Milestones*

## Spiritual Menopause

MARY GENDLER

*"...They are always green and full of sap...."*

—PSALMS 92:15

The day of my fortieth birthday I woke up with chest pains. Instead of heading to the airport for my eagerly awaited weekend away, I went to the hospital where an EKG revealed that all was well. I was both relieved and embarrassed to discover that my "heart attack" was caused by gas. I spent much of that year uncharacteristically in and out of the doctor's office with a variety of other minor problems. That same year I went back to school to begin work on my doctorate in psychology, a program that involved five years of nonstop work and left me gasping but degreed somewhere into my forty-fifth year. It seemed, for the time being, I had warded off growing old.

My fiftieth birthday was quite a different experience. Notwithstanding the cast firmly supporting the ankle I had broken in Bali that summer, I jitterbugged and had a wonderful time at my "50s" party. I had gotten over the shock of realizing that I was old enough to join AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) and the psychosomatic illnesses had disappeared. So, also, had my serious ambitions. Gone was that compelling drive which had enabled me to pull "all-nighters" with my adolescent daughters and fueled my capacity to run seven children's groups a week while taking four graduate courses. My need to prove myself seemingly accomplished, something else was stirring in me.

As the decade progresses, this feeling of well-being remains, as does my urge to make time for myself and the small pleasures of life. While I still wish to work and be productive, I am increasingly resistant to "busy-ness," and more interested in sorting out what really matters. The balance between "being" and "doing" is shifting. What is going on?

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Dr. Mary Gendler is a psychologist and clinical director of the Jewish Family Service of Merrimack Valley, Massachusetts.

## Changes in Midlife

Menopause marks the end of a woman's ability to reproduce, a finality which can bring twinges of regret even to those who are longing only for the limited responsibilities of grandparenthood or those who have chosen not to have children. Yet, for some this is a time of opening, of moving beyond gender definition, of surging energy and a sense of liberation. Like menstruation, menopause is a time of emptying and refilling, a cycle familiar to women. Now that the womb is destined to remain empty of blood, the "refilling" must come in a different mode.

This can be confusing, leaving us lost and floundering, filled with fears of emptiness. Indeed, the "empty womb" syndrome may be even more of a problem than the "empty nest." Although we are no longer physically tied to the moon-cycle, our deepest rhythms are still intimately connected with the rhythms of the Mother, moon, sea, and tides, granting us a kind of knowing, a "womb wisdom" that is precious. The key question is how to cultivate and remain connected to this wisdom.

Certainly, worldly activities in and outside the home can be fulfilling, but too often they run the risk of being purely linear, outward, filling the empty space with too much doing, pulling us away from our centers. How to satisfy the archaic rhythms? How to open to the larger questions, our purpose? I suggest we call these aspects of the passage "spiritual menopause."

Spiritual menopause challenges us to make deep changes in our souls, just as physical menopause engenders deep changes in our bodies. It leads us to move beyond old definitions of ourselves, our roles, and our ways of being.

How can the Jewish tradition help in this passage? Is there a Jewish way to celebrate the changes occurring in our bodies, to acknowledge that a new space is opening, a new rhythm developing, a new energy flowing, new aspirations and needs emerging? Is there a symbol with which we can reconnect to help us in this passage?

### Jewish Images and Models

The tree represents our desires to stay rooted in our lives and yet let our spirits soar. According to Mircea Eliade, the tree in ancient times represented the "living cosmos endlessly renewing itself."<sup>12</sup> Throughout Scripture the image of the tree is that of wisdom (Proverbs 3:13-18), vitality (Jeremiah 17:8; Psalms 1:3), righteousness (Proverbs 11:30), and fruitfulness (Ezekiel 17:23). The *Zohar* (premiere Jewish mystical text) invokes the "tree of life" (5:38), an image applied to Torah itself (Proverbs 3:18). Cedars in particular are traditionally associated with miraculous and mysterious renewal.<sup>13</sup>

Evoking reverence for the "Great Mother" in the form of a tree,<sup>14</sup> the words of Psalms 92:13-14 are especially relevant to menopause:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,  
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.  
They are planted in the house of *Adonai*;  
They flourish in the courts of our God.  
In old age they still produce fruit,  
They are always green and full of sap....

So what might bearing fruit mean for us in our advancing years? How can we, post-menopausal women, be "always green and full of sap" even though our monthly blood cycle has come to an end? How can we renew our strength and generativity, beyond the time of youth and fertility, beyond all "rational" limits and expectations? Meditating on these questions, I thought of Sarah, our mother.

Sarah, whose menopause is clearly long past, laughs when God tells her that she will bear a child in her old age. This is commonly interpreted as a sign of Sarah's cynicism, but it can also be read as a sign of her righteousness, which lies in a laughing acceptance of God's gift which flows through her, ultimately yielding fine fruit. Sarah is able to conceive Isaac in her old age because her sap is still flowing even if her menstrual blood is not. Her milk also flows so plentifully that she not only nurses Isaac (Genesis 21:7), but, according to the *midrash* (Rabbinic legend), many gentile infants as well. Converts to Judaism are said to descend from

her sucklings (*Pesikta Rabbati* 180a). We have much to learn from Sarah, our spiritual as well as biological mother. Through her we learn not to be too hasty in declaring ourselves or others "barren." A wizened old woman in her nineties, Sarah is "up" for anything. Although she was not actively seeking when God came to call, she was available and ready, and this is why she both flourishes and nourishes.

May we have the courage to follow Sarah's example, to be open to new challenges, new opportunities, new paths and voices, never to forget that despite the changes in our bodies, the sap continues to flow. May the blood of our wombs be replaced by the milk of Righteousness, the sap of Age and Spirit. May Wisdom cycle through our "womb knowing," our understanding of the cycles of birth and death, emptying and filling, ebbing and flowing. As we move into the later decades of life, let us not forget to make space and time for the sap of the Source to flow; let us be careful that we do not plug up the sources with too much activity; let us find ways to be deeply rooted in our Mother even as we stretch our hearts and spirits as far as they will reach; and, finally, let us trust in and begin to share our wisdom with others. In uniting our spirits with earth(1)iness, we will reconnect to the divine in Earth our Mother and to the cosmic tree of life, and like Sarah and all the righteous, produce much fruit in our old age.