

spiritual sustenance for their aging souls. And just as they have been forced into looking at their own spiritual lives, I know that I must likewise confront my own spirituality as I grow older. I have changed and evolved as they have—perhaps, to some extent, because they have—as I face the life that God has given me. When my wife confronted cancer five years ago, I had to face once again my mother's struggle, which I recalled from childhood: The wondering, the uncertainty, the questioning of God's role in the life of our family. It is a theme that continues to come back to me as I grow older, as my children grow and mature, and as my parents face the infirmities that accompany them along with the blessings of old age.

How shall I prepare spiritually, now that I am in middle age, to maintain my covenantal relationship with God into my older years? This is a lesson I must learn from my parents. I am now at the age they were in my earliest childhood memories. I know, as did Isaac, that I can't begin on my own. First, I have to redig and rename the wells my parents dug—the ones that they dug for themselves and for me—before I can attempt to claim any well as my own, however distant it might be from theirs. I know that I have to rehearse the spiritual struggle of my parents. Instead of rejecting it, I must hold it fiercely within my heart. It's the only way to make the journey. And there, just as I remember from my adolescence, will I find the light on the front porch patiently waiting, beckoning me home.



Cycling and Recycling

Mary Gendler

I am a 55-year old Jewish American woman. If I lived in Nepal, I would probably be dead by this age. If I lived in Malaysia, in five years I would no longer be permitted to drive a car. If I'd grown up in Eastern Europe, I would likely be feeling "old." But in America, 55 is still very much part of middle age, although in some circles I am already considered a "senior." I am fortunate in that I do not yet feel a diminishment of energy or health, but I have begun to feel a sense of limitation, which helps me focus and prioritize how I want to spend the years I have left.

Because my husband, who is twelve years older than I, has just retired, I am also thinking about my elder years. This is about a decade earlier than the time many people begin taking stock of their life and what is left of it. And yet, my timing makes sense. I am just coming to the end of menopause, a tumultuous, upsetting period, which has made my life hell for several years. Might this not be a natural time, especially for women, to stop and reevaluate—a preretirement mini-pause connected to our body rhythms, a built-in urge to reflect on direction/

Mary Gendler is a psychologist, photographer, artist, gardener, adventurer, and writer who lives in Andover, Massachusetts. She has written on Jewish feminism and is currently trying to figure out how to grow old usefully, gracefully, and wisely.

redirection, an opportunity to search for the seeds in our spiritual womb that have not yet fully germinated but that can still grow and bear fruit? Since this particular life passage has been so important in my maturing and aging process, I will pause for a moment to explore its meaning to me.

MENOPAUSE AS MINI-PAUSE

I live in cycles. My body, my emotions, and my interests all cycle and recycle. All humans cycle, I believe, but women especially are tied biologically to these ebbs and flows. Like it or not, we fill and empty every month, like the moon, the tides, and breath itself. From the time of puberty and for decades thereafter, this is a woman's bodily rhythm. It ties her to the earth, to the pulse of the universe. Then something happens. Bodies change; sometimes they even go berserk. In my own case, instead of gentle monthly menstrual cycles, I swung wildly between hot flashes which made me want to strip instantly in the most inappropriate of places, to hemorrhage-like periods, which made me fear I would bleed to death. My body and my emotions, were totally out of control.

Unfortunately, Judaism has no rituals for this transition, and these troubled waters can be lonely and frightening. Needed is a ceremony, a ritual, a celebratory song of passage such as the one Miriam sang at the edge of the Red Sea. Like that song celebrating our passage through the "sea of blood," we need to acknowledge our transition—past the tide-based monthly cycles into crone, sage, wise-woman.

Readings from older women could guide and inspire us about for the future. Those assembled could share wisdom they have received from their mothers, grandmothers, and other important women in their lives. The loss of the biological cycle would be acknowledged, and each

woman would have an opportunity to discuss what this passage means to her. The ceremony could end with a group blessing.

In the absence of such a ceremony, I have muddled through this period on my own. My musings have raised many questions: What is my task as I move into this later stage of my life? How do I balance my duties to myself, my family, and the world? Looking back, in twenty-five years, will I have accomplished all that I had hoped to do? How can I remain anchored to my past self and activities, yet take advantage of this next phase so I can ripen and continue to grow?

NEW LIMITS, NEW FRONTIERS

As I've grown older, as my body changes, I have become increasingly aware of my limitations, both physical and temporal, and my priorities have started to shift. I have less patience for meaningless tasks and a greater urgency to express the more creative, artistic, and spiritual parts of myself and to make space in my life for contemplation. I feel an increased need for beauty and quiet. I can spend hours arranging flowers, their delicate scents and sensuous beauty bringing pleasure to the senses and peace to the soul. Small things give me pleasure and wonder, and they bring me closer to an awareness of the Divine Presence. Such was my encounter with a tiny translucent snail that was tickling my leg as it made its passage across a stream running through our property. Instead of impatiently brushing it off, I picked it up on my finger and was rewarded by the sight of an amazing creature no more than a quarter of an inch long but perfectly formed, with minuscule feeler horns, which retracted when I gently touched them with my finger. We looked at each other for a few minutes and I then deposited it on the bank of the stream, feeling as though I had received a gift of God's

manifestation, present all around us but seldom noticed in our busyness.

Nature has always been my primary path to the Divine Presence. Planting a corn seed and watching it turn first into a tiny seedling and soon sprout into a six-foot sturdy corn stalk is a constant source of wonder. Scuba diving, which opens up a colorful, fanciful, awesome world would make a true believer of almost any confirmed atheist. Traversing the stark plateaus of Tibet at 18,000 feet, surrounded by mountains and glaciers and stunning turquoise lakes, or simply wandering in the woods of western Massachusetts, where we summer, fills me with the awareness that some force beyond the human or beyond chance has created all this. This awareness is not new, but it is more powerful at this time in my life, I believe, because of the paradox of simultaneously having both more and less time to appreciate the world and its beauties.

As I wander in God's wonder-filled world, I see evidence of my own internal rhythms and of the cycling and recycling of all creation. I, too, will soon become the humus from which will spring new life. This may seem trite, but such awareness urges me to make the most of my remaining time on earth and connects me to the larger cycles and to the oneness of all. If I can stay open to this awareness, I will be less afraid of death and, like my friend and mentor Helen Nearing, be quite ready to die when it is time.

Family life, which has always been important to me, has taken on new dimensions as ours both shrinks and grows. My parents and my husband's parents have all died, and he and I are now the older generation. But our family has also grown with the addition of our new son-in-law and his family. Some day, God willing, there will be grandchildren. Cycling and recycling. How deeply satisfying this is.

And yet, I also want to remain active in the world, to

make a difference, at least in small ways. I have been a practicing psychotherapist for twenty-five years. I am at the peak of my professional powers. Will I find a way to use these professional skills while taking advantage of the new flexibility in my life?

The amazing experiences of the past two Chanukahs have directed me toward new paths. In 1994, an international, interfaith group of 200 men, women and children gathered at Auschwitz/Birkenau to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II and to inaugurate a peace march to Hiroshima. The first night, which was also the eighth night of Chanukah, we came together beneath the fearsome sign "*Arbeit Macht Frei*," "Work Makes Free." There we lit candles and prayed together, the light of our candles and faiths joining to bring a tiny bit of light to this place of the darkest night of other Jewish people. Among those present were children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis. Reaching across the gulf of hate, they found in each other more commonality and understanding than anywhere else. Their example has inspired me to think about searching out ways to help people bridge the gulfs of hatred and to heal such searing splits. If children of Nazis and Jews can come together, why not Palestinians and Jews? *Tikkun ha-olam*: Healing the world is the work I wish to still do.

Chanukah 1995 was spent in Dharamsala, India, the present home of the Dalai Lama and the center of the Tibetan community-in-exile. On the first night, the light from our candles merged with that of the Tibetans, who, coincidentally, were commemorating what Jews would have called the *yahrzeit* of the founder of the yellow hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Aside from the mingling of our candlelight, we were struck by the connections that exist between our two peoples: the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the Chinese destruction of Tibetan monasteries; the exile of the Jews from their homeland and the Tibetans' exile from theirs; the

only of difference, but also of the “oneness” of all creation.

Thus, as I move into what will hopefully be a full last quarter-century of my life, I am increasingly aware of being tied to a larger cycle of life and death, generation and regeneration, birth and rebirth. My current task is to find my place in this cycle, to cultivate and reap the spiritual seeds that lie within, to continue to reclaim and develop my gifts and talents as fully as possible so that I can better share with others whatever wisdom and ability I have.



III. INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS



*Children's children are the crown of the old;
and the glory of children are their parents.*

—Proverbs 17:6