

Deference to the Old: What We Have Learned from the Pandemic

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Suffering brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic has not affected all Americans equally. I have previously discussed the disproportionate impact on communities of color and people in jails and prisons. Parents of school-aged and younger children have faced particular challenges. Celebrating life's most joyous moments at a time of necessary social distancing has diminished joy, and grieving alone has deepened bereavement. One group whose challenges have affected virtually all of us are older Americans, including a significant portion of our own congregation.

My dad is among the lucky ones. He is healthy; he lives in his own home; and he has family in town, so he was able to limit his exposure to the virus. Still, he felt badly about what he called being “dependent” on me. Said dependency amounted to my doing his grocery shopping once a week—and, lest there be any doubt, he paid for those groceries! Nothing made him happier than the morning, two weeks after his second vaccination, when he put on his mask and presented himself at Kroger as the doors opened.

Others faced infinitely greater challenges. Among people in my age group, 50 to 64, who contracted Covid-19, only about a quarter of one percent have died. Among those 65 and over, the death rate has been about nine times higher. During the pandemic, Covid-19 was second only to heart disease as the cause of death of adults ages 85+; and in the very broad group, 50 to 84, it was behind only heart disease and cancer. Many have wrongly equated Coronavirus with the flu, but such a comparison only highlights the significant difference between the two. People 65+ have been four times more likely to die from Covid-19 than they typically would be as a result of the flu.ⁱ

Concerned about the danger that Coronavirus poses to older people, younger family members kept their distance from their parents and grandparents. Again, my family has been exceptionally fortunate. Circumstances blessedly brought my mother and me together in the same city three times, in three different cities, in February, 2020; but now, I have not seen her in person for well over a year, a sad reality that I plan to rectify on May 29. For so many others, the isolation has been infinitely worse.

Many older Americans who live alone, with no close family in town, have faced terrible loneliness. People who live in long-term care facilities, virtually all of them older, went for months and months without seeing a loved one, except perhaps for a wave and shout through a window. Within some long and loving marriages, the health of one spouse had required residential care for one but not the other of the couple. Married and sharing their lives for decades, and already reduced to daily or almost-daily visits, some went nearly a year without being together in person for the first time in their adult lives.

While most of us moved our lives online, some older adults were unable to make that transition. Thankfully, these days, many older people are quite familiar with FaceTime, and most of those folks were able to figure out Zoom sooner than later. Older adults, commendably including folks in their nineties, have joined us for programs and services on Zoom. My dad has enjoyed reading to his seven-year-old grandson on FaceTime at least once a week, but not as much as he is enjoying his post-vaccination trip to see young Elliot and his family in New York this week. Some seniors mastered Zoom, opened their own accounts, and regularly convened their families. Still, for others, particularly those experiencing infirmities that can come with age, navigating new technology has been extremely difficult, even impossible. People with advanced dementia, able to enjoy the sights, sound, and touch of an in-person visit, were deprived of virtually all human contact. For many months, the only people some saw in person were health care providers.

Unlike the pandemic's disproportionate impact on people of color or prison inmates, the government and our society as a whole are not particularly implicated in the suffering of elderly Americans during the pandemic. Nobody is to blame for the tragic fact that older people's immune systems are less equipped to fight this virus. Moreover, older people were properly the priority, right after health care providers, as soon as vaccines became available. As a happy result, so many older people have been able to hug their grandchildren for the first time in over a year, to enjoy a meal in a restaurant, and even to look forward—God willing, before too long—to returning to worship at Temple in person.

Still, the pandemic highlighted the obligation, which devolves upon each of us individually and upon our society, to care for the elders among us. The Torah, in the portion we read this week and also on Yom Kippur afternoon, includes the injunction: "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God; I am the Eternal."ⁱⁱ The medieval commentator Rashi pointed out

that the commandment includes an oddly-placed sentence, “You shall fear your God.” He wrote, “One might think that one is allowed to close one’s eyes as though one does not see the elderly.” Torah adds the words about fearing God to indicate that God is watching, even if we are not.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rashi’s words are wise. Too often—outside our own families and friends, at least—we avert our eyes from older people, particularly those who are infirm. Mindfulness is required to assure that we do not behave as if old age and the debilitating illnesses that sometimes accompany it are contagious.

Many years ago, my teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, described long months at a loved one’s side during a grave illness. Describing what he learned, he said: “I will never again ignore the person on the other side of the curtain in a semi-private room.” Broadening Professor Hoffman’s advice, when I visit a long-term care facility, which I look forward to being able to resume again soon, I try to acknowledge, not only the individual I am there to visit, but every person I pass along the way. Some probably enjoy regular visits from loved ones, while others rarely see a familiar face or a caring smile. Some will have forgotten even a recent visit; a smile and simple greeting may bring a moment of sorely needed human warmth. The life-affirming work of certified nurse’s aides is low paid and often thankless. A kind word to members of the staff may bring a better day to scores of residents.

I urge us all to take Dr. Hoffman’s teaching one step further. As this pandemic begins to subside, let us all take inventory: Are we tempted, as Rashi suggests, to avert our eyes? We cannot diminish the vulnerabilities that come with age, but we can reduce the resulting loneliness. Let us celebrate our seniors with gratitude for all they have brought to our lives—and let us rise, literally and/or metaphorically, in their presence, as the Torah commands.

Amen.

ⁱ David Leonhardt, “What Do You Do When the Kids Are Still Unvaccinated?” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Leviticus 19:32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rashi to Leviticus 19:32.