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## **Aging and the aged in Jewish law**

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INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he population of the western world has been slowly aging through the twentieth century; the trend has increased recently and is likely to continue. Yet we live in a youth culture. Although the average person lives far longer than in previous times, age is not prized until the very end of life. Every effort is made continually to look young and act young. Grey hair is hidden, wrinkles are removed when possible, and euphemisms are used to describe the organizations and residences of the elderly. This creates pressures and imbalances which continue to be discussed in the world around us. We need to view them from a Jewish perspective. The traditional literature dealt with aspects of old age, but only in a limited manner.

Respect for the elderly and an appreciation of their contribution to life should come naturally to every Jew. After all, the Torah deals exclusively with leaders who retained their positions into very old age. All of this was further augmented by the *midrashic* tradition and for the modern Jew through the visual depictions of Biblical figures. In the world of art, most of them are white bearded gentlemen.

This high regard for the elderly had a Biblical basis provided not only by direct statements, but also through the many tales. Respect needed definitions. What was required and where were the limits of such respect? The *halakhah* provided the guidelines.

The classical Jewish literature dealt with old age as a blessing. This led to theological debates as it was necessary to see whether it should be considered as a reward for living a good life and conversely, an early death should be seen as divine punishment? Both the *halakhah* and the *agadah* delved into this question.

The extreme ages provided at the beginning of Genesis have provoked questions throughout the ages. Many solutions were proposed. This was not an area with *halakhic* overtones, but needed to be explored in order to define old age.

On a more practical level the care of the aged frequently posed a problem. In order to keep such individuals from becoming burdens for the broader community, *halakhic* decisions needed to be made and implemented. The issue defined the nature and structure of the family. The multi-generational family living in a single household needed clear definitions of the roles to be played by each generation and the limits of independent decision making.

The two thousand years between the conclusion of the Bible and modern times have seen many changes in Jewish life and also in our attitude toward the elderly. What could be taken for granted in the Biblical age was no longer appropriate for the period of the Talmud or later rabbinic times. Furthermore it became necessary to frame the matters in a *halakhic* context, so that obligations and rights were defined.

Such definitions did not exist in the Bible, but they were necessary to govern daily life. The *halakhic* framework which emerged from the discussions of the Talmud and later rabbinic literature, then governed the popular view of the elderly. The Torah created an attitude through stories of patriarchal and matriarchal lives; later Judaism did so through the details of the *halakhah*.

The topics were limited by the needs of each age and therefore only a handful of areas significant for us were discussed in the traditional *halakhic* literature, while many others, important to us, were not even touched upon. The societies in which we lived were different and many issues which face us now, did not exist.

This volume is intended to carry the discussion of aging and the aged further by reviewing the traditional material and then dealing with topics which concern us. Only a few issues have been addressed by these essays. Others have been provided with brief practical answers through responsa. The nature of that literature precludes lengthy more theoretical investigations. Many questions need further explication and we hope to return to this subject in the future.