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Aging and the aged in Jewish law

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SELECTED REFORM RESPONSA

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MENOPAUSE

Solomon B. Fraum

QUESTION: What are the Biblical and Rabbinical references on menopause? (Rabbi S. E. W. on behalf of Dr. M. G.)

ANSWER: There is, of course, the Biblical reference to Sarah (Genesis 18: 11): "There had seemed to be with Sarah the way of women." Undoubtedly, the Talmud makes no reference to this physiological condition, incidentally, none of the modern Talmudic medical books.

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These responsa on aging are a representative selection from more than one thousand American Reform responsa published in the twentieth century. We are grateful to the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Hebrew Union College Press for permission to reproduce them.

The Talmud (*Middot 9a*), discussing this *Mishnah*, gives a sort of "social" definition of the words, "near her older years." The rabbi says, "All whom her friends consider old." The other rabbis say, "All whom people call 'mother' and she is not embarrassed at it." The *Tosafot* (ad loc.) objects to this on the ground that the definition should not depend upon how she feels (i.e., that she should not resent being generally called "mother"). Therefore, quoting the Jerusalemi, the *Tosafot* says that it means every woman who should be called old (and misses three periods).

These definitions of menopause are of importance with regard to the laws of uncleanness (*Niddah*), and so on. Hence they are codified in two references in the *Mishnah Aramit*. In *Yoreh Deah*