

**JEWISH WISDOM for GROWING OLDER:**  
**Finding Your Grit and Grace Beyond Midlife**  
**by Rabbi Dayle Friedman**  
**2015 Jewish Lights Publishing**

***The challenge of aging isn't to stay young; it's not only to grow old, but to grow whole—to come into your own.***  
**— Connie Goldman**

The Connie Goldman quote at the beginning of the book sets the tone for the whole book.

A number of years ago I heard an interview on NPR where a man had written a memoir of his life with his father. The title was based on his father's favorite saying: "Might As Well Be A Mensch" (Yiddish for "a person of integrity and honor.") The memory of his father's use of this phrase shaped the choices the boy made throughout his life (It is what I want as my epitaph). Jewish Wisdom lays out a long pilgrimage that includes stories, biblical interpretation, anecdotes, reflections, and exercises. As a Gentile / Goy / Christian (take your pick) I'm going to hear some words with which I'm not familiar, be introduced to some rabbinic stories, along with a few new biblical interpretations that challenged my perspective; but all of which are about the human relationship with self, others and God.

The book is divided into three parts. The overriding metaphor through which Jewish wisdom is revealed arises from a rabbinic story of creation: "God had intended to fill the world with the divine light, but the world could not endure this intense and overwhelming splendor. God contracted the divine presence in order to make room for the world, but in a devastating cosmic accident, the vessels intended to hold God's light shattered.

The light that was abundant and omnipresent was suddenly hidden and dispersed—encased in shards (shards) of the

vessels that had been meant to contain it. So now the Divine is limited and concealed in a world of darkness” (x-xi).

This is an important book because it asks the hard questions. The first section involves many of the ways we too are broken by life. Each chapter reminds us that every loss offers a choice regarding our response. We look at:

- Ageism
- Loss of Loved Ones
- Death - Our Own Mortality
- Diminishment of Our Bodies
- Caring for Those We Love As They Become Fragile
- Dementia

There is absolutely no denial of the pain. Each chapter contains questions for reflection, so it offers forewarning that this brokenness will be part of your life and for those who are already experiencing their own diminishment, death preparation, chaos, and evil it offers perspective, communion, and hope. With God there is always something more. With community there is always someone who has already been there. With Faith and Love there is always Hope. The way through has something to do with finding the fragments of life that are hidden throughout creation.

Section Two of the book is about our learning to gather light. But I like how Rabbi Dayle puts it; “Beginning Again (and Again). Most people seldom face reality, we have instead be taught to live our expectations (which may in fact be someone else’s expectations). The joke around the 12 Step Community is that DeNile is not just a river in Egypt. Sometimes it takes crashing into a reality that is greater than our denial that allow us to discover reality. We discover not only that what we experience outside of ourselves is not real, we also discover that there is much on the inside that needs to be reexamined.

Almost every wisdom tradition I’m aware of includes the need to wrap up unfinished business. There are now numerous books regarding forgiveness as one of the major tasks that need

to be addressed to achieve satisfaction or wellbeing in later life. The revelation at times comes with the saying that, “holding onto resentments is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die.” Forgiveness is really a matter of self care. The unexpected piece is that forgiveness may carry an element of grief; we again have to let go of that which cannot be and accept the present possibilities.

The rest of this section is about preparing for and accepting inevitable diminishment (and death), encouraging us to watch for and choose paths that deepen our relationship to the divine. Again the book places before us choices that challenge the sacred cows of our culture. Mindfulness becomes the new mantra for this time of life.

I would say that the last section of the book is to gather all the fragments of light that we have discovered, integrate it into our life and offer it back as our tribute to life. There are the young gifts that we have to offer that are half developed but full of vigor, but then there are the mature gifts that have grown through the “grit and grace beyond midlife” Through grace we grow older; growing wiser takes grace and grit. For the light to become integrated into our life requires our learning to step back and make room.

Two more pieces makes this book well worth the cost, time and energy to purchase and read:

- In the appendix there is a guide for Book Groups and Wisdom Circles. One of the best ways to combat Ageism in our worshipping communities is the establishment of wisdom circles, particularly intergenerational wisdom circles. This book gives clear instructions.
- Each chapter concludes with a blessing. I believe that there is power in blessing, particularly if we let the words wash over us and its intention are heard not only by the divine but by our own brain and heart. These blessing are offered for us.

*May you fulfill the promise of your minutes, hour, and days. May you grow in patience. May you stretch to*

*discover new ways to spend and treasure time, as the Psalmist teaches, "Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart."(Psalm 90:12) p.109.*