

What are They Doing Here?
Rabbi Allison Lee Poirier
RH2 2023/5784

Whenever I meet someone over the age of 90, I ask them to tell me what they consider the secret to their longevity. This inquisitive practice was inspired by my late grandmother, Yvonne, who lived quite happily and healthfully to the age of 106. She swore the source of her long-lasting good health was line dancing. As a younger woman she had been a line dancing instructor to the “old folks,” and then, as she put it, she “was the old folks.” Dancing kept her feeling fit and having fun. I’ve been asking other people the secret to their longevity ever since she passed in 2021. I get a wide variety of answers, some serious and some silly. Alcohol features prominently in a lot of answers I hear: a close family friend attributed her long and happy life to her nightly martini. A neighbor told me she has lived so long because she drank so much that her insides were “pickled.” Just as many people suggest abstaining from alcohol, so do with that information what you will. Some people tell me they simply have good genes. Many say they have lived so long because they found purpose in taking care of their family, or because their family takes such good care of them. Others swear by a good diet, exercise, or doing the daily crossword puzzle.

In our sacred texts, saying that someone lived to an old age is a way of expressing their merit. The Torah says Noah lived to be 950¹ and Avraham lived to be 175.² Moshe died on his 120th birthday, and one of the traditional ways of wishing someone a happy birthday in Hebrew recalls his greatness by saying, “may you live to 120.” Of course we know that plenty of good people die far too young and plenty of not so good people get to keep on living, but in general we still speak about longevity as being meritorious. And people who live **happily** for a long time might know something that the rest of us can learn.

Today we are celebrating the 5784th birthday of the world - of course we know it's much older than that, but that's the number of years we can account for by adding up all the ages of all the people mentioned in the Torah and then counting forward from there, so we sort of just go with it. According to academic and historical perspectives, Jews and Judaism have been around for somewhere between 3000 and 4000 years. Yet these days I hear a lot of concern about, well, “kids these days.” Social media has ruined everything. Millennials have no manners. Judaism is about to go extinct because nobody is joining synagogues and everyone has forgotten the value of community. The flaw in all these modern complaints is that they are not

¹ Genesis 7:6

² Genesis 25:7

modern at all. Jews have been wondering how we will carry on basically since the beginning of Judaism. On his deathbed, our ancestor Jacob bemoaned his children's assimilation into Egyptian culture.³ The Talmud, which we revere today as a sacred written text, was once an oral tradition passed from one generation to the next by Tannaim who memorized the tradition. Let me tell you: the first generation to write it down instead of memorizing it got an earful from their grandparents! But today we are happy to have it and couldn't imagine our religion without it. None of our ancestors has tanked our religion yet, and thinking our generation is the one who will ruin everything is the height of hubris. **Instead, it's time for us to celebrate what we have been doing right and recommit to continuing in strength. Rosh Hashanah is, after all, a birthday, and birthdays are a great time to celebrate how long we've been here.**

As far as currently practiced religions go, we might not be the oldest but we are certainly up there. Depending on how you count, our religion is somewhere between 3,700 to 3,000 years old - Avraham is supposed to have existed sometime around the year 1700 BCE. The Exodus from Egypt is dated sometime around 1325 BCE. King David, who consolidated rule of

³ Midrash Citation

ancient Israel and whose existence is independently attested outside of biblical sources,⁴ ruled around the years 1000 to 950 BCE. In comparison to many other major world religions, all of that is quite a long time ago. Right now we are in the year 2023 of the so-called “common era,” so that’s how long Christianity has been around. The Buddha lived in the year 483, which makes Buddhism 1,540 years old. The Prophet Muhammad lived in the year 632, which puts Islam just shy of 1,400 years old. By even the most conservative estimates, Judaism has been around twice as long as the next oldest major world religion.⁵

Now it’s not a contest, but it is curious. As Walker Percy so famously asked, “Where are the Hittites? Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite, even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people? **When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable. What**

⁴ In 1993 archaeologist in the northern part of Israel discovered fragments of an ancient stele – a stone slab on which an inscription was written – at a site called Tel Dan. The inscription on the slab was made by a king of the 9th century BCE mentioned in the Bible (1 Kings 19:15) Hazael, who had a major kingdom in what was later called Syria. On the inscription Hazael boasts of having defeated in battle two kings, Omri, the ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, and an unnamed king of Judea “of the house of David.” from [The Bart Ehrman Blog](#)

⁵ I deliberately omit Hinduism, which is extremely difficult to date. Many modern scholars of religion contend that “Hinduism” is not a single religion, rather the term was coined by British colonists who misunderstood indigenous practice and incorrectly applied the single word “Hinduism” to several distinct indigenous Indian traditions.

are they doing here?”⁶ Percy’s point is that most of the religions that were contemporary with our ancestors are obsolete, while we are still here despite our original and ongoing position as a teeny tiny percent of the population. What is it about us that allows us to survive and thrive for so long all over the world?

I agree that our continued existence is quite remarkable, and in order to understand what has contributed to our longevity, I have investigated a few examples of other long-lasting people, ideas, and natural phenomena. First, there’s always something to learn from the natural world, so I investigated one example each from the Animal and Plant Kingdoms to understand evolutionary methods of survival. Second, since we are a covenantal religion based on a sacred text, I’ve looked at examples from classical literature to understand how a text or an idea can continue to influence people centuries after its origin. Finally, I studied the story of one of the world’s oldest living artists who is passing on her traditional skills in a way that simultaneously preserves their integrity and responds to modern needs.

Let us begin our investigation in the animal kingdom, where we find the curious prehistoric arthropod *limulus polyphemus*, also known as the horseshoe crab. Horseshoe crabs have been around pretty much as is,

⁶ Walker Percy *The Message in the Bottle*

without evolving, for 450 million years. They survived the extinction event that wiped out dinosaurs 66 million years ago. One element of their success is a compound in their blood called LAL. Whenever a bacteria invades, the LAL surrounds it and turns the nearby blood into globs of jelly thus immobilizing the bacteria so that antibodies can reach it and eliminate it before it spreads.⁷ This compound is so effective, that it has been used by medical researchers as “the bacterial endotoxin test of choice for detection of gram-negative pathogens due to its simplicity, specificity, and sensitivity”⁸ for the last 32 years. There is an entire industry built on extracting LAL from the blood of horseshoe crabs, and the compound is used in the development and testing of almost every single drug manufactured in the United States today.

This is super cool, but at first blush it doesn't sound great for the crabs even though the extraction doesn't require killing the crabs. Fishermen capture them, bring them to the lab, extract the LAL by drawing blood, and release them back into the ocean within about 24 hours. Still sounds unpleasant. **But** our dependence on LAL and the crustaceans that produce it has led to tremendous conservation efforts on behalf of the

⁷ [Radiolab. “Baby Blue Blood.”](#) July 21, 2020

⁸ [Rachel Tinker Kulberg. “Horseshoe Crab Aquaculture as a Sustainable Endotoxin Testing Source.”](#) *Frontiers*. April 1 2020.

horseshoe crab population, including huge fines for illegal trapping, respect for maritime habitats they frequent, and extremely tight timelines on the catch and release of the crabs from which LAL is extracted. According to Atlantic States Marine Fisheries reports, the crab population up and down the eastern seaboard is stable, and the population in the southern Atlantic is growing, in large part thanks to human intervention and conservation.⁹ These dinosaurs have us humans working for them! How did they do this?! It's pretty simple. Horseshoe crabs evolved to do one thing really well and then kept doing it really well. They're managing their own immune systems so well that human beings, the most intelligent life form on the planet, have had to copy it! Now 450 million years later here they still are.

The lesson I take from these crabs is that solutions don't have to be complicated, that simple plans can not just survive, but thrive. **As a Jewish community, we can learn to notice and emphasize what we do well and continue to do those things with pride and determination.** Our first unique idea was monotheism, the idea that there was one God who loves us and who wants us to love him in return. The rest, as they say, is history. If we act out of love for HaShem and faith that Hashem loves us, we will be on a good path.

⁹ <http://www.asmfcr.org/species/horseshoe-crab>

The natural world is full of long-lived creatures like the crabs, but I'll choose just one more example, this time from the Plant Kingdom. Fishlake National forest in Utah is home to a colony of trees that scientists believe to be the oldest and possibly also the largest living organism. This organism known as Pando is a colony of more than 50,000 aspen trees spanning 106 acres.¹⁰ The above-ground aspen trees are all genetic clones, each of which lives for approximately 130 years. That's already a fairly long time but that's not what makes them the oldest thing alive. These trees are outputs of one single underground root system, which scientists believe is 80,000 years old! The colony has withstood all kinds of extreme weather, pests, and other potentially devastating disasters because of its extensive network of underground roots that sustains and regenerates life after otherwise disastrous events.

Pando is a great metaphor for the Jewish community because it is currently experiencing a problem we are familiar with. Arborists are concerned that Pando is shrinking, and might continue to shrink, because of its compromised ability to produce new offshoots. Sound familiar? While the root system continues to send up saplings, the lives of these saplings are threatened by overgrazing cattle, deer, and predatory insects which often prevent those young trees from reaching maturity. Many of

¹⁰ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/fishlake/home/?cid=STELPRDB5393641>

these threats are newly introduced so the trees have not yet evolved to resist these predators. If this continues, there will not be enough trees to replace the old trees that naturally die at the end of their lifecycle.¹¹ But notice that I said the trees have not **yet** evolved to resist them. Not yet, but maybe they will soon.

We worry about a similar cycle in our communities. There was a time when synagogue communities were huge, TBS once boasted a membership of more than 600! Now we are smaller and we worry that we do not have enough new people coming in to continue our legacy. **Jewish tradition in our small and mighty community will continue to persevere in much the same way as Pando's vast underground root system. As conservationists implement innovative protection efforts, Pando's offshoots have had the chance to take hold. The same is slowly happening in our community. Our committed and longstanding leadership continues to implement new, visionary changes and are able to take these innovative risks because of the strength of our sacred "root system," which includes financial support, committed members, and the values we have learned from generations of Jews and Jewish tradition. Like Pando's**

¹¹ <https://www.earth.com/news/pando-oldest-organisms/>

offshoots, we continue to expand our reach and we expect our organization to grow in response.

Moving on from the survival skills of the natural world, our sacred text has lasted thousands of years and inspired several offshoot religions. May would call it a “true classic.” German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer theorizes that what makes a classic a classic is its ability to speak to universal truths outside of its time and place. The “classical,” he writes, “is something raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes....When we call something classical, there is a consciousness of something **enduring**, of **significance** that cannot be lost and that is **independent of all the circumstances of time**—a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.”¹² For example, if I were to refer to *Hamlet*, most people in this room would have read the play or at least understand the reference. That’s incredible! *Hamlet* is 424 years old. No one in this room is, to my knowledge, Danish royalty. And nobody here, I hope, has plotted murderous revenge against their kingdom usurping uncle. But the themes of *Hamlet* transcend time, they continue to be so pervasive that we teach this play to millions of American high school students and there is even a Disney childrens’ movie¹³ based on it! **Why?**

¹² Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, 288

¹³ The Lion King

In the course of this five-act play, the main characters wrestle with their own mortality, with anger and revenge, and with difficult family dynamics including the tension of the son inheriting the weighty expectations of his father. Although we may not experience these feelings on the same violent scale as Hamlet, we certainly can relate to his difficulties and doubts. Similarly, our sacred texts touch on universal human emotions and experiences. From sibling rivalry to strained parent-child relations to questions of faith and doubt, we see it all. When we discuss the weekly parsha, we often make note of how flawed and relatable we find our ancestors and how these flaws make us feel more connected to their stories because they are difficulties we experience ourselves.

Furthermore, the Torah goes beyond teaching us the individual history of our people. Remember, we start the Torah not with the history of the Jews but with the history of humanity. Adam and Eve are the first people, but Avraham is the first monotheist and nobody is referred to as a Jewish collective until we leave Egypt. Rashi argues that the Torah could have started with the twelfth chapter of Exodus, but the book of Genesis was included because it was important for us to understand ourselves in the

context of all of humanity. **Thus, our tradition speaks to universal human truths in the particular language of our ancestors.**

Finally, I have one more example from someone who carries on a tradition that has survived, that has continued to speak to people beyond her community, and who is now passing on that tradition to her descendants. Apo Whang-Od is a 106 year old traditional tattoo artist in Buscalan in the Philippines, who has been hand tapping ancient and sacred *batok* tattoos since she was 16. You might have seen her featured on the cover of *Vogue* this past spring. In many ways, she represents an “old way,” as the tattoos she creates represent an ancient sacred tradition. For many decades, traditional Kalinga practices were suppressed by colonizers and missionaries, who viewed traditional tattooing as archaic and painful. Despite these obstacles, Whang-Od continued to practice her tradition. For much of her career she was known as the “last remaining batok tattoo artist” but this moniker no longer fits.

Now there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional tattooing, from a generation that is looking to reclaim its identity and traditions in a post colonial era. Whang-od is passing on her craft to her great-niece Grace Palicas, along with several other students. While the content of the practice remains largely the same as it has always been, the context and

transmission of the art form is quite innovative. Whang-Od is the first female artist in her tribe, and now many of her students are women as well. Their audience has broadened as well; Whang-Od and her apprentices now welcome clients from all over the world. Grace even toured France as a guest artist in several Tattoo parlors, becoming the first *mambabatok* artist to practice the art in a western country. Thanks to their efforts, “A Philippine indigenous practice that was on the verge of being lost to history is being inscribed on new skin.”¹⁴This practice was in danger of being lost to history until traditional practitioners shifted their focus to passing on their sacred tradition in new ways. The tattoos and their meaning have not changed, but the context in which people receive tattoos and the artists bestowing them have broadened their reach.

Similarly, our sacred text, rituals, and traditions have not and will not change. But as we grow, we shift the mode of access to these traditions in order to bestow them upon a wider audience and upon the next generation. We welcome people who have traditionally been excluded from our communities, we practice accessibility and strive to grow in that area so that everyone can participate. We are proud of what we have and we want to share it!

¹⁴ AUDREY CARPIO, Apo Whang-Od And The Indelible Marks Of Filipino Identity. [Vogue](#) March 30, 2023.

So to answer Walker Percy, that's what we are doing here! Jews have a tradition we are proud of and we persevere in the face of anything that threatens. We are successful in part because we are determined, but there is no one reason why we have been able to survive for this long. Instead there are lots of small things that go into living a long and fulfilling life. Like the crabs, we know what we are good at and we continue to do it really well. Like Pando, we build on our solid foundation, and expand courageously even if our efforts don't always work right away. Like classic literature, we speak boldly and proudly to the whole of humanity. And like Apo Whang-Od and her apprentices, we are confident that we will hand the tradition, safe, whole and complete, to the leaders who want it next. We've been here for a long time and plan to be here a lot longer.