

Facing Mortality

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Congregation 
Rodeph Sholom

- We can certainly slow the aging process down, if it had to work its way through Congress (*Will Rogers*)
 - The only reason I will take up jogging again is so I can hear heavy breathing again (*Erma Bombeck*)
 - Regular naps prevent old age, particularly if you take them while driving.
 - I don't plan to grow old gracefully. I plan to have face- lifts until my ears meet (*Rita Rudner*)
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What Matters Most As We Face Mortality

Rating Our Feelings 1-5, 1 not very important, 5 quite crucial

- Finding Purpose
 - Deepening spirituality
 - Seeking or giving forgiveness
 - Maintaining my looks
 - Remaining physically active
 - Doing for others
 - Family ties
 - Accomplishing my bucket list
 - Handling fear of death
 - Maintaining financial security
 - Deepening my relationship with God
 - Avoiding loss of control
 - Having fun
 - Dealing with fear of loneliness
 - Maintaining friendships
 - Feeling grateful
 - Avoiding crippling disease
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Moses Takes On Mortality

When God told Moses that he would not enter the Promised Land, he seemed to accept the verdict with resignation. The Midrash paints a very different picture:

“Eternal One you know all I did and how much I suffered for this people until they believed in your name. As I witnessed their woe, should I not be able to witness their triumph? This is the reward I get for making Israel a holy people?”

Said the Holy One: “Such must be the way of the world- each generation is to have its own leaders. It is time for your disciple Joshua to serve me.”

“If you will not let me enter the Land Of Israel, allow me to stay alive like the beasts of the world who savor the world.”

“Enough! Speak no more to me of this matter.”

A divine voice came forth: “the time has come for you to depart this world.”

“Please dear God remember all I did, remember when I stood on Mount Sinai forty days and forty nights. I beg you, do not hand me over to the angel of death.”

A divine voice then said “Fear not, I myself will take you to your burial.”

One book in the Bible tackles the meaning of life

There is a great deal of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible- riveting history, the full outline of the covenant bet God and the people of Israel, dynamic personality sketches. There is only one book, however, which attempts to uncover the meaning of life.

The Book of Ecclesiastes (Kohelet) seems remarkably modern in its description of a person who has untold riches but little joy as a result. "Hevel Havalim," he declares. This is usually translated: Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity. As Professor Tamar Ashkanazi of the Hebrew- Union College points out, this is a serious mis- translation. The first male Adam was named Hevel. Would the first male be named vanity?

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One book in the Bible tackles the meaning of life

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The better translation is ephemeral, fleeting.

Life is fleeting, the author proclaims. There is urgency in that realization. So little time. Meaning must be found.

Tradition teaches that King Solomon was the author. This is highly unlikely.

Whoever the author was, he brilliantly posed the right questions, but he seemed a bit disorganized providing the answers.

Kohelet Speaks

- "All is fleeting," said Kohelet, "so why do all the gains a man makes in this world matter?" (1:1-2)
- "Therefore one should eat drink and get pleasure from all the gains he has made during the limited number of days God has given him." (5:17)
- "A good name is better than fragrant oil, and the day of death better than the day of birth."
- "It is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting, for that is the end of all of us, and we should take that fact to heart." (7:1-2)
- "So whatever is in your power to do do, with all your might. For a man can never know when his time is up." (9:10-11)
- "Send your bread forth around your world. Distribute portions to seven even to eight people, for you cannot anticipate what misfortune may occur on earth." (11:2)
- "The sum of the matter when all is said and done: Revere God and do all divine commandments, for God will call all of us to account." (12:13-14)

So what should we do about mortality?

Who better to opine than Nora Ephron?

Why do people say it is better to be older than younger? It's not.

Even if you have all your marbles, you are constantly reaching for the name of the person you met the day before yesterday.

You can't ride a bicycle without becoming a candidate for traction.

Plus, you can't wear a bikini.

We are a generation which will try anything. If a pill will help we will take it.

When we hear about a ludicrously expensive face cream, we will buy it even though the last five we bought were completely ineffectual. We do crossword puzzles to ward off Alzheimers. We eat six almonds a day to ward off cancer.

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So what should we do about mortality?

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We are in control. But there are some things that are entirely uncontrollable.

Death is a sniper. You know you could be next.

Here are some questions I am constantly fretting over: do you splurge or do you hoard? Do you live every day as if its your last, or do you save your money on the chance you will live 20 more years?

Do you work as hard as you can, or do you slow down to smell the roses?

And where do carbohydrates fit into all of this?

No matter what, feel grateful

Jewish liturgy is relentlessly positive. The daily morning service begins with the Modeh Ani:

“I am grateful to you ever- living Sovereign that you have restored my soul to your body with grace.

How great is your faith.”

God has enough faith in us to restore life every day in the hope we would do something good with the time.

In response to God’s confidence we are required to say 100 blessings a day.

(Talmud Menahot 43b)

The accomplishment of this obligation is aided by a series of morning blessings called Nissim B’chol Yom- miracles of every day life.

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No matter what, feel grateful

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If we behold all the gifts we are given as daily miracles, how negative can we feel in the face of our inevitable trials?

Some of the hundred blessings are found later in the liturgy like the 18 found in the Amidah.

But you also must say a blessing performing daily tasks.

There is even a blessing for moving the bowels. Many of us understand the importance of that blessing.

When we survive an illness or a dangerous voyage, we recite Birkat HaGomel, the blessing of restoration.

As we recite daily blessings, hopefully we will feel truly blessed no matter what we deal with in our own life.

Unprecedented Control

Every High Holiday the beautiful but haunting Unetaneh Tokef reminds us that we can never know how much life we have to live. The author is clear that life and death is in God's hands. We perhaps can influence divine decision making through prayer repentance and righteous acts but we were never in control of our ultimate fate.

Today we have superb medications, great doctors and machines that can keep us breathing. It is fair to say that we have more control over life and death than ever before.

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Unprecedented Control

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Generally we are pleased about this power. In relative health and comfort we not only make out our wills , we choose our health proxies and declare our resuscitation wishes at the dire hour with no understanding of what will be the precise circumstances we will confront.

Control is a cherished right. Yet, very often we will not escape the agony of choice at the moment of truth.

The Tradition Speaks

Hundreds of years ago, well before we embraced medical technology, important texts support the idea that we don't have to prolong suffering if there is no hope for any quality of life. One such text comes from the Talmud and concerns the rabbinic giant Judah Hanasi, the editor of the Mishnah.

He laid dying in his home, and rabbis gathered from all over to pray for his recovery. Judah's trusted assistant knew that the prayers of these holy men could keep the great rabbi alive.

Seeing his agony and the helplessness of his situation, she took an earthen jar, went up on the roof and threw the jar to the ground.

Startled, the rabbis stopped their prayer. At that moment the soul of Rabbi Judah The Prince left his body. Finally he was at peace.

Death is not the end

Post- biblical Judaism refused to despair about the fact of death. Simply put, death is not the end. There is life beyond this world.

This view is expressed early in the popular mishnaic book Pirke Avot:

- This world is like an ante-chamber to the world to come. Prepare yourself in the ante- chamber that thou may enter the hall. (4:21)
- Rabbi Jacob used to say: Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the whole life in the world to come. Yet better is one hour of blissfulness of spirit in the world to come than the whole life in this world. (4:22)
- A couple thousand years later Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: "Afterlife is felt to be a reunion, and all of life a preparation for it. Death is not sensed as a defeat but as an arrival." (Conservative Judaism Fall 1973)

As The Soul Departs the Body

There are too many texts to choose from discussing the beyond.

The possibility of resurrection, particularly in the messianic era, was so strong that in the second blessing of the Amidah, we thank God who brings the dead to life.

The mystical text the Zohar contains this speculation:

Rabbi Eleazar said: "On the day our time arrives to depart the world, three angels descend to take account of all we have done in this world, begin divine judgment and escort the deceased to the next realm."

In The Meantime, We Really Need Each Other

We are living longer, living better. Twenty Five percent of the American Jewish community are over the age of sixty five. As time goes on, problems like illness arise. So does loneliness.

Rabbi Richard Address, who has been Director of Jewish Sacred Aging for the URJ, stresses the importance of social relationships as we get older. Without them your life expectancy drops.

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In The Meantime, We Really Need Each Other

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Address has said: "I tell synagogues: Don't put a billboard up saying join the Temple- we are a warm caring community.

Put up a billboard saying:

**JOIN THE TEMPLE
YOU WILL LIVE LONGER**

Because all the statistics tell us that.

The Wisdom of Elizabeth Kubler- Ross

All the hardships that come to you in life , all the things you see as punishments in life, are in reality like gifts. They are an opportunity to grow which is the sole purpose of life.

You cannot heal the world until you heal yourself.

You should live until you die.

No one dies alone.

Everyone is blessed and guided.

Dying is nothing to fear. Death is but a transition from this life to another existence where there is no more pain and anguish.

Steve Jobs At Stanford

At a memorable Commencement Speech on June 2005, Steve Jobs said: "for the past 33 years I have looked in the mirror each morning and asked, if today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?"

Remembering that I will be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to make big decisions in life. Almost everything-pride, fear of embarrassment or failure- fall away in the face of death.

Remembering that you will die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart."

The Most Important Thing

One of the greatest hasidic masters Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav spoke this truth that became a popular song here and in Israel:

The whole world is nothing but a narrow bridge. For those who might cross it, the most important thing is not to be afraid.

We are the only creatures who live with the fear of our mortality. It is important not to be paralyzed by that fear. No matter the obstacles, we must not give up, must cross the bridge and find courage and resilience when we are on that bridge.

A Time To Be Born A Time To Die

There are lots of ways to extend life. But there comes a time..,

In a wonderful sermon Rabbi Ed Feinstein said:

“There comes a time when we must give up the fight and provide the fullest possible life now. We can offer the patient what can be valued beyond longer days- to be at home, not in the hospital; to be free of pain and discomfort; to be mentally aware and not sedated into delirium; to be with loved ones and friends; to be able to share final words and say goodbye.”

“Its Time We Talk: OnLife And Death,” Yom Kippur, 2013

The Wisdom Of Joan Didion

The brilliant author suffered the deaths of her husband and daughter in 2003 and 2005 respectively.

In 1975 she delivered a memorable Commencement Address at UCLA in which she concluded:

“I’m not telling you to make the world better , because I don’t think that progress is necessarily part of the package. I’m just telling you to live in it... to live recklessly. To take chances.. to seize the moment.

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The Wisdom Of Joan Didion

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And if you ask me why you should bother to do that, I could only tell you that the grave's a fine and private place, but none I think do there embrace. Nor do they sing there or write or argue, or see the tidal bore on the Amazon, or touch their children.

And that's what there is to do. Get it while you can, and good luck at it."

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Next To Last Words Of Wisdom

William James once wrote:

“These, then, are my last words to you. Do not be afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.”

Final Words Of Wisdom

As his incredible life was coming to a close, Moses gathered the entire people of Israel and proclaimed, "I call heaven and earth to witness this day. I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, that you and your children shall live."