

Rosh Hashana 2 "Why I Hope to Live: Making a Blessing Over Life"

Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ, 5775/2014

A controversial article appears in the current *Atlantic* magazine. Written by Ezekiel Emanuel, the article is titled, "Why I Hope to Die at 75". Who is Ezekiel Emanuel?

Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel has a great name and great credentials. In addition to being the brother of Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, he's Director of the Clinical Bioethics Department at the U.S. National Institutes of Health and heads the Department of Medical Ethics & Health Policy at the University of Pennsylvania. Not exactly a shlepper!

With a resume like that you might be tempted to take his views seriously. After all he offers some interesting reasons why he believes there's no point in living beyond the age 75 when, as he puts it, "he will have lived a complete life – and it's all downhill from there."

Here's how he explains why he will make no effort for longevity after his self-selected age for decrepitude:

But here is a simple truth that many of us seem to resist: living too long is also a loss. It renders many of us, if not disabled, then faltering and declining, a state that may not be worse than death but is nonetheless deprived. It robs us of our creativity and ability to contribute to work, society, the world. It transforms how people experience us, relate to us, and, most important, remember us. We are no longer remembered as vibrant and engaged but as feeble, ineffectual, even pathetic.

In short, getting old should be avoided even if it means longing for its only alternative. Write me down in the book of death, is Dr. Emanuel's plea to God, when I'm no longer the young man I used to be with all of its blessings. It is a prayer that runs counter to the most basic teachings of Judaism.

Yes, getting old isn't for sissies. When I was in my 30s I remember seeing a framed quilt on the wall of someone's home, with the large inscription: "After 40, it's patch, patch, patch." At the time, I didn't quite understand what that meant. But I do now.

Still: Write me down in the Book of Death once I hit 75?

It's no small thing that on one of the most holy days of the Jewish year we think about the possibility of death ('who will live, who will die'). Why? So that for the rest of the year we will love life. Jews are the people who more than any other see G-d in life -- this life, down here on earth. Rosh Hashana is the day on which we give a reckoning of our life, remembering how short life is, and how important it is, therefore, to live it well. But Rosh Hashana is not only a day when we make a reckoning of our life, but make a blessing over life. So, despite Dr. Emanuel's recommendation, I will join Jews around the world this Rosh Hashanah in praying to continue to be inscribed in the heavenly book of life. Take that, Dr. Emanuel!

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Many other religions don't embrace life in the way we do. They think that G-d is to be found in life-after-death, or in a monastic retreat or in mystical ecstasy. For them the holy is somewhere else. For us the holy is the here-and-now. Hamas and their ilk openly worship a Culture of Death. Just Wednesday, President Obama implored world leaders at the United Nations to rally behind his expanding military campaign to stamp out the violent Islamic State group and its "network of death."

But we say, *le-chayim*, "To life". Moshe's great command was '*u'vcharta b'chaim*', "Choose life." From Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur we pray, "*Zachraynu l'chaim*", "Remember us for life, King who delights in life, and write us in the Book of Life for Your sake, G-d of Life." You wouldn't be wrong if you said that Judaism is a sustained discipline for not taking life for granted: The thanks we say in our prayers, the blessings we make over every pleasure, the way kashrus turns eating into a holy act. Shabbos stops us from travelling through life so fast that we never get to enjoy the view.

Yes, life can be hard and full of the possibility of loss, pain, disappointment and grief. But the solution isn't to avoid taking risks, or wishing your life away once you've reached the age of 75. Life is about cultivating the things that give us strength ...and making a blessing on life, itself.

How can we make a Blessing Over Life?

This is the question we should ask ourself on Rosh Hashana. Let me share with you five secrets I've learned from Judaism. Whatever Hashem has in store for you in the coming year, I guarantee you that these secrets (which aren't really secrets -- it's just that many don't put them into practice) will increase your happiness and add abundant life to your existence.

1. Give thanks. Sincerely. Once a day, at the beginning of the morning prayers, thank G-d for all He's given you. This alone will bring you life. We already have life. It's just that we tend to take life for granted and concentrate instead on what we don't have. If you have something but you don't appreciate and enjoy it, is it really yours? Giving thanks in prayer focuses our attention on the good and helps us keep a sense of proportion about the rest. It's better than shopping -- and cheaper, too.

2. Praise. Catch someone doing something right and say so. Most people, most of the time, are unappreciated, and underappreciated. Being recognized, thanked and congratulated by someone else is one of the most powerful things that can happen to us. So don't wait for someone to do it for you: do it for someone else. Make someone's day -- and by doing so, it will help make yours. You'll give them life -- and give yourself life in the process. *Alenu l'shabayach* means, "It's our duty to praise."

3. Spend time with your family. And the best way to do it is to keep Shabbos, so that there's at least one time a week when you sit down to have a meal together with no distractions -- no television, no phone, no email, just being together, talking together, celebrating one another's company. Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald frequently says, "You can't have quality time without

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quantity time." Happy marriages and families need dedicated quality AND quantity time.

4. Discover meaning. Take time to ask Rosh Hashana questions. "Why am I here? What do I hope to achieve? How best can I use my gifts? What would I wish said about me when I'm no longer here?" Finding meaning is essential to a fulfilled life -- and how will you find it if you never look? And then take your values, and live them. Aspire to be not simply a 'better person', but a 'better Jew'. That's what mitzvos are for: Ideals in action, constantly rehearsed. Anne Frank once wrote: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

5. Transform suffering. When bad things happen to you, use them to sensitize you to the pain of others. The people who survived tragedy and became stronger as a result didn't ask, "Who did this to me?" They asked, "What does this allow me to do that I couldn't have done before?" They didn't curse darkness; instead, they lit a candle. They refused to become victims of circumstance. They became instead, agents of hope.

It might not be coincidental that Dr. Emanuel chose the year 75 for ideal death when it was that very age at which Abraham first began his momentous mission to transmit his monotheistic belief to the rest of the world. Until the age of 75, Abraham was just getting warmed up! Achievements come when G-d wills them, often times quite late in life.

What we love most -- because that is where G-d Himself is to be found -- is life itself. That is our greatest strength. It enabled our ancestors to survive every persecution. It helped Holocaust survivors to survive. It gave the Jewish people the courage to rebuild the land and state of Israel. That's why our greatest prayer on this day, throughout the 10 days of Tshuva, and on Yom Kippur, is, "Write us in the Book of Life" We don't ask for wealth of fame, stardom or success. We don't even pray to be spared trials or tribulations. We just ask for life.

That is what Judaism is: a life of love and a love of life. All the rest is commentary

Life's too full of blessings to waste time and attention on artificial substitutes. Live, give, praise, grow, transform. These are still the best ways of making a blessing over life, thereby turning life into a blessing.

With the beginning of the new year, may Hashem renew us in the Book of Life.

La Shonah Tovah Ticausavu, may your mouth enjoy the taste of honey and your neshama enjoy Hashem's Blessing of Life.