

**Shabbos Shuva Sermon/Drasha -- 'Curiosity' , 5774
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ – 7-sep-2013**

Did you read the news item earlier this month about a man in Bolivia? Carmelo Flores Laura turned 123 a month ago, and they say he is the oldest living person ever documented. He walks without a cane and doesn't wear glasses. To what does Flores owe his longevity? He walks a lot, lives in an isolated village 13,000 above sea level, and stays high -- literally, as well as figuratively -- by constantly chewing coca leaves.

I don't think many of us would want to live forever. When on occasion I give people the traditional blessing, 'May you live to be 120 -- in good health', a common response is, "I don't want to live that long!" I'm not sure why people respond in that way. And even when I emphasize, "I said, 'in good health!'", they still usually say, 'No thanks.'

If someone offered you a magic pill that would grant you good health until the age of 150, would you take it? For those of you who shook your heads, 'no' -- why not? Such a pill might not be as far-fetched or far-off as you think.

Maybe you saw a recent news item: Researchers at the National Institutes of Health found that by reducing the activity of one type of gene, scientists said they increased the average life span of mice by about 20%. In people, that's like extending the average life span by about 15 years.

How do you know when you're old?

Bernard Baruch said, *"To me, old age is always 15 years older than I am."*

George Burns said, *"Retirement at 65 is ridiculous. When I was 65, I still had pimples."*

And then there's the approach of Bob Hope who said, *"I've discovered the secret of eternal youth. I lie about my age."*

But in a serious vein, I find wisdom in the words of former U.S. Senator Ted Green:

"Most people say that as you get old you have to give up things. I think you get old because you do give up things."

One thing that quickly makes people old is when they stop being curious about the world around them.

If you look at the characteristics of successful inventors -- da Vinci, Ben Franklin, Thomas Edison -- curiosity is a personality trait that is essential for inventors to possess. Inventors tend to be curious people always asking questions and seeking answers to problems, even when the answers seem impossible. If they are not able to understand something, the successful inventor will keep trying to figure it out in different ways and will never give up until they arrive at an answer.

Moshe Rabbanu (Moses) was curious. Upon encountering the burning bush, Moshe said, *"Let me please come close (Asura Nah) to investigate this amazing sight - why is the bush not consumed?" [Exodus 3:3].*

If not for Moshe's curiosity, Hashem wouldn't have revealed Himself.

Avraham Avinu (Abraham) was, if not curious, certainly aware of his neighbors in Sodom and Gemorrah, and prayed on their behalf.

And Noah was a biblical character who was an essentially decent person but who also possessed some personality flaws. Acclaimed Torah lecturer Dr. Aviva Zornberg said that Noah had the flaw of being incurious. We never find Noah -- not even once -- expressing concern or even curiosity about why his corrupt neighbors lived the terrible way that they did.

Sir Julian Huxley, Secretary of the Zoological Society of London, told the story of a woman visitor to the London Zoo who asked a keeper whether the hippopotamus was a male or a female.

"Madam," replied the keeper sternly, "that is a question that should be of interest only to another hippopotamus."

But that hippo keeper was wrong! Curiosity doesn't kill the cat. It keeps us alive, and keeps us young.

What makes people curious? How can we maintain -- or cultivate -- an active curiosity?

A few moments ago I shared the example of Moshe and the Burning Bush. The Midrash says that when Moshe merely turned his head. G-d responded, "'You troubled yourself to investigate, I will reveal Myself to you' and He called out 'Moshe, Moshe.'"

How was it that Moshe's 'effort' to investigate made him worthy of Divine prophecy? All he did was turn his head!

The Medrash is teaching us that Moshe merited receiving Divine prophecy because he had a life-long thirst and curiosity for spiritual growth and for seeking out knowledge of G-d. He never thought to himself, "I've already seen enough." The constant striving to always learn more and grow more and be more was Moshe's essence.

When a man walks into a crowded room, a barber will look at his haircut and a tailor will look at his suit. Moshe had an insatiable curiosity and desire for a relationship with Hashem. And so Hashem was forced, in a sense, to reveal Himself to Moshe.

We see what we want to see. And what we want to see, Hashem will show us.

There's another aspect to developing and maintaining a healthy curiosity.

Alfred North Whitehead, English mathematician and philosopher, was called "The greatest speculative mind of the 20th century." In an address to the Mathematical Association of England on the importance of education in 1917, Whitehead argued that

"the basis of invention is science, and science is almost wholly the outgrowth of pleasurable intellectual curiosity."

Nurture your curiosity by taking pleasure in challenging yourself to see how much you've got -- or how much you've got left -- like in the following story about Itzhak Perlman

On November 1995, the violinist Itzhak Perlman performed at the Lincoln Center in New York City. He had polio as a child and walks with crutches. The audience waited patiently as he made his way slowly across the stage to his chair, sat down, put his crutches on the floor, removed the braces from his legs, settled himself in his characteristic pose, one foot tucked back, the other pushed forwards, bent down to pick up his violin, gripped it with his chin, and nodded to the conductor to indicate he was ready.

"Just as he finished the first few bars,' one critic who was present, wrote,"one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap – it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do. It was obvious – he had to put down his violin, replace his braces, pick up the crutches, heave himself to his feet, make his laborious way offstage and either get another violin or restring his crippled instrument."

He didn't. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then signalled the conductor to begin again. The audience was spell-bound.

Everyone knows it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. He played with such passion and such power and such purity... You could see him modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece in his head... At one point it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get... sounds from them they had never made before.

When he finished there was an awed silence, and then the audience rose, as one.

We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering – doing everything that we could to show him how much we appreciated what he'd done. He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, tone, 'You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music he can still make with what he has left.' "

Strive to accomplish and always do your best. With that attitude you'll always be curious to challenge yourself to see how much you've got -- or to see how much you've got left.

And it's human nature that we see what we want to see: To the degree we are curious about something we'll eventually find it.

In conclusion:

Joe was 54 years old when he had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital.

While on the operating table he had a near death experience. Seeing G-d he asked "Is my time up?"

G-d said, "No, you have another 43 years, 2 months and 8 days to live."

Upon recovery, the Joe decided it was time to really start living and make the most of the time he had left. He arranged to have a face-lift, liposuction, and tummy tuck. Then he bought a custom-designed toupee, starting working out at a health club and bought a little red convertible sports car.

Then one day, Joe was riding down the highway with top down to pick up a 24-year-old woman he had invited out to dinner. Out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning came out of the sky, struck Joe, and he died.

Arriving in front of G-d, Joe demanded, "I thought you said I had another 43 years? Why did I get hit with the lightning bolt?"

G-d replied: "Joe -- was that you?!? I didn't recognize you!"

With modern science and medicine we've added years to man's life. Now, we face an even greater challenge: Adding life to these years. We're living on average considerably longer than our ancestors did. We have an obligation to do more than just 'being alive'. Our challenge is to really live.

Most people say that as you get old you have to give up things. I think you get old because you do give up things. We can fend off old age by keeping and nurturing our curiosity to become lifetime learners, and keep growing.

Like Moshe, we see -- and will be shown by Hashem -- what we want to see. And like Itzhak Perlman, it is the artist's task to find out how much music he can still make with what he has left.