

**Yom Kippur Day
5775/2014
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

How long do you want to live?

Seriously – if you could choose, how old is old enough?

70? 90? 100? Which one works for you? How much life is not enough? How much life is too much?

It is not an easy question to answer. Like so much I guess it depends on where you sit. My 5-year-old grandson would probably tell you that 40 sounds about right – he thinks that is ancient. If I asked many young adults they probably think 80 is a ripe old age. But as I celebrated my 63rd birthday this summer, 80 no longer seems too old. And if you are 81 – well 90 probably seems a better target – unless you are 90.

Moshe Rabeinu lived to be 120 years old and when God informed him it was time to die he protested. He still had work to do, how will the people manage without him? He wanted to see the Promised Land for which he labored so hard and so long – at 120 Moshe wasn't ready to die.

We sit here on this Day of Judgment and pray for life and if truth be told most of us are praying for more than just another year of life. When it comes to life we are greedy – we want a lot more life – no matter how old we may be. *Biz hundred und tzventzik* – goes the Yiddish greeting – “You should live to be a 120 – like Moses.” To which this has become extended – you should live to 120 and one day. Why one day – so you shouldn't die suddenly! Maybe this goes with the story of the rabbi visiting the nursing home. The attendant first introduces the rabbi to Mrs. Goldberg saying “This is Mrs. Goldberg she is 85 years old!” “Nice to meet you Mrs. Goldberg,” says the rabbi, “may you live to be 120!” And this is Mr. Schwartz he is 90 years old!” “Nice to meet you Mr. Schwartz,” says the rabbi “may you live to be 120!” And then proudly the attendant says, “And rabbi this is Mrs. Levine, today is her birthday – she is 120 years old!” “Nice to meet you Mrs. Levine,” says the rabbi, “uh...have a nice day!”

Zochreinu l'chayim- “Remember us for life – God” that is our battle cry on this most sacred of days. So imagine the following – God says to you – OK – I will answer your prayer – I will remember you for life – so “nu” how much of this life do you want? How much do you need? How *much* life will make you truly happy?

Zeke Emanuel created quite a stir a few weeks ago when he wrote a controversial article for the Atlantic titled: “Why I hope to die at 75!” Zeke Emanuel, one of the famous Emanuel brothers that includes Rahm, who was president Obama's former Chief of Staff and is currently the mayor of Chicago, Ariel, known as Ari, one of Hollywood's most powerful talent agents and the model for Ari Gold on the TV show *Entourage*, and Zeke short for Ezekiel, the first born who is one of the country's most respected voices on bioethics and healthcare. What did those parents put in the kids cereal? So Zeke said 75 is enough life for him – thank you. By the way – he is currently 57.

He acknowledges that this drives his friends and family crazy when he says this and he admits he reserves the right to change his mind as his friends predict he will as he gets closer to 75. He acknowledges that he knows many people older than 75 who are doing quite well and he does not for a second want to minimize how much he loves life and how much of a loss death is. But, he insists, if death is a loss, so is living too long. As a doctor he has seen too much suffering - the loss of health, the disability, the pain and suffering that comes for too many who live too long.

You can read the article yourself – he makes a compelling argument for why he believes 75 is about right – the age that he believes he will be able to say that he lived a complete life. “I will have loved and been loved.” He writes. “My children will be grown and in the midst of their own rich lives. I will have seen grandchildren born and beginning their lives. I will have pursued my life’s projects and made whatever contributions, important or not, I am going to make. And hopefully I will not have too many mental and physical limitations yet. Dying at 75,” he concludes, “will not be a tragedy.”

Most of us believe that thanks to modern medicine not only can we live longer, but we can live longer healthier. Dr. Emanuel argues that is not quite true – that 70 is not the new 50, not as much as we might like to believe.

One of his most disturbing statistics is a graph included with the article entitled: “Productivity of People with High Creative Potential”. Dr. Emanuel argues that by 75, creativity, originality, and productivity are pretty much gone for the vast majority of us. While Einstein famously said that anyone who has not made his great contribution to science before age 30 will never do so!” Zeke Emanuel argues that studies actually show that our peak creativity and productivity is around 40 – 45 and then begins a slow age-related decline. There appears to be some variation depending on careers and certainly a lot of individual variation but when his graph suggests that the last major contribution most creative people make is around 60 – if he is correct this does not bode well for you – who have to listen to the rest of this sermon written by a 63 year old rabbi!

The fact is that Dr. Emanuel acknowledges that these are statistics and they really say nothing about individual lives. He admits that he has collaborated on complex and creative papers with colleagues who are in their 90’s! But he claims they are outliers – exceptions, that for the majority of us, the older we get the more we are rolling the dice that sickness and debility will be our lot rather than health and creativity. For him 75 is when he wants to stop rolling the dice.

Do you agree?

Look, I think the good doctor would be the first to agree that the purpose of his controversial article was not to sell us on any particular age but to get us to start asking – how much life is enough?

Since are all in for the ride, none of us (Dr. Emanuel included) are planning on killing ourselves when our magic age is reached. The real implication of Zeke Emanuel’s question is when are you prepared to say I have reached the point that if I die today, I have no regrets. If I were to die today I am satisfied that I have loved enough, lived enough, seen enough, done enough,

laughed enough, sang enough, celebrated enough, hiked enough, tried enough, danced enough, accomplished enough, so that you can say with a full heart – I have lived enough?

For those of you who were in shul last Shabbat – (which most of you weren't) we read and studied the portion of the torah where Moshe Rabeinu's had to confront this question. (By the way – if you like this stuff – these sermons where we explore some fascinating and challenging issues about life and meaning – you should know – we do this each and every Shabbat – you are more than welcome to join in on the conversation)

We are in our cycle of torah readings at the very end of the torah – next week at Simchat Torah we will once again have the privilege to finish the torah and begin again. At the very end of the torah the people of Israel have arrived at the Promised Land. They are just about to enter and the action is interrupted with the story of Moshe's death. Moses is 120 years old and God informs him, it is time.

Is Moses ready? Does he accept that 120 is old enough? To walk this earth for 120 years is enough life? Does he survey all of his incredible accomplishments and say – I have lived enough, accomplished enough, I am ready to die?

Nope – no sooner does God say to Moses – “your time is up” – then Moses pleads with God for a little longer. Moses implores God, “Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan,” (Deut 3:25) but when the final word from God comes telling him to ascend Har Nevo, Mt Nebo and there he will die – Moses reluctantly accepts his fate.

The midrash though, is not nearly as acquiescent – the rabbis in their wonderful creative genius expand on the Biblical text and put words into Moses' mouth and create an entire conversation between Moses and God – “*Ribono Shel Olom*, Master of the Universe, after I have worn myself out in serving You, You tell me, ‘The time is drawing near for you to die?’ And then Moses in this rabbinic imagination quotes scripture against God: “*Lo amut, ki echye, v'asaper maaseh ya!*” “I will *not* die, but I will live and I will continue to declare Your glory – oh God!” (Psalm 118:17) But God is adamant – “Sorry Moshe, you cannot, because this is the fate of all human beings.”

Moshe's request is interesting. God's response is even more interesting. Moshe says “after all I have done for you all I am asking is for a chance to cross over and walk the Promised Land.” God says “No can do, you are human, and death is the fate of all human beings.” Interestingly, Moshe was not arguing his mortality with God, he was willing to die. He just didn't want to die NOW. He still had things to do. What was Woody Allen's famous line? “I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.” Moshe didn't want to head for Mt. Nebo – he wanted to head for the Promised Land.

And it was not that physical capacity was the issue, it is not like he was one of those washed up 120 year olds who might as well have been dead, that he was a burden on Joshua and the kids, no, the bible makes a special point of saying that when he died, “his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated.” (Deut 34:7)

Another midrash poignantly imagines Moshe asking, “if it might be Your will, O' Lord, might I enter the land, live there two or three years, and *then* die. (Tanhuma Ve-etchanan 6). But, God does not budge. His only concession is that he will allow Moses to climb Mt. Nebo and **see** the

Promised Land before he dies – but there will be no tomorrow for our hero - his life is over, 120 is enough - it is his time to die.

So what does God understand that Moses is having such a hard time grasping? If Zeke Emanuel seems a little silly placing life's limit at 75 doesn't Moshe seem a little greedy pleading for even more life at 120?

Zeke Emanuel says he will be ready to die at 75 because he is afraid of the vulnerability that living beyond that entails. He worries about the risks of old age: sickness, disability, loss of vitality and alertness, Alzheimer's – these things are so frightening that he has calculated the longest he can live with the greatest assurance not to lose life's vitality and once the tipping point has been reached and the risk outweighs the benefit – he is prepared to die. Of course Moses wanted to keep living – if you were 120 and your eyes were not dimmed and your vigor was unabated – why not keep living – even Zeke Emanuel would agree with this.

When we were in Israel in August on our solidarity Mission that I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, we had the opportunity to meet with Rabbi Elisha Wolfin the Masorti Rabbi of *Kehilat Ve'ahavta* in *Zichron Letzion* and he led a session about how Masorti Rabbis are helping Israel's children and adults deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – as a result of this summer's war. Our own Dr. Norman Fried who was with us on the trip, ended up doing a session weeks later via skype sharing his expertise on PTSD and was moved to publish a guide titled: "Reclaiming Humanity – A Guide to Maintaining the Inner World of the Israeli Child Facing Ongoing Trauma."

One of the challenges that Rabbi Wolfin shared with us was that this summer presented parents and community leaders with an unusual problem. Israel is no stranger to war, and trauma and stress but, he observed, in every other instance there was a beginning and an end. There was a moment when the war was over and the healing could begin in earnest. The challenge of this particular crisis, suggested Rabbi Wolfin is that there is no end in sight. The threat is ongoing and so the trauma is ongoing and has now become a permanent part of their life and their consciousness. "How," he asked, "do children live in a constant state of vulnerability?"

It is a good question – one that Dr. Fried tackled in his guide. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was not only a question that confronts Israeli children emerging from the trauma of war – it is the existential question that confronts each and every one of us every day.

Remember us for life – is our prayer - but what moves most of us to pray on this most sacred of days, is not so simple as the hope we will be granted yet another year, but the *kind* of year we hope we will be granted: a year of health, a year of joy, a year of awareness, a year free from pain and suffering and loss. As much as we fear death, we fear living... too long, even more.

Normally we fill our days with busyness. We are so busy – we don't have to occupy our thoughts with such heavy questions. But, on this Yom Kippur Day, we stop, and in the quiet of these moments we contemplate the nature of life. Who shall live and who shall die, how shall we live and how shall we die? These are the questions we ask on this most sacred of days. It is life's vulnerability that is placed front and center by this Day of Judgment and unless we are

Moshe Rabeinu – unless we are 120 and confident of our health and soundness of mind – well the rest of us mere mortals, we are vulnerable. We are like Zeke Emanuel – we are scared, we are worried that we might outlive our usefulness, worried that pain and disease, loss and diminished capacity awaits us –

Like Moses, we want to live

But like Moses, we want to live life fully – we want to embrace life with gusto and enjoy life fully but truth be told on this most sacred of days we are afraid. We wonder; will this be the year I die? Or worse, will this be the year I stop living fully?

Life expands and then it contracts. And the way down is not nearly as much fun as the way up. My mother, may she rest in peace lived to the ripe old age of 96. And if she was not quite Moshe-like, her eyes were not completely dimmed and her vigor was not completely unabated. But, how she hated the decline. How she fought giving up her apartment and moving into the Assisted Living, giving up her car, making peace with the walker. As we were approaching my daughter's wedding, I remember asking her, "Mom are you excited?" "Yes, of course," she replied, but I am also so worried." "What on earth are you worried about?" I asked. "I hope nothing happens to me – I so don't want to *farshteir* your *simcha!*" (I don't want to mess up your *simcha*). It seemed to me my mother had reached a point where she was not so afraid of dying – but she was so afraid of living with the uncertainty.

How does one live with such uncertainty? How does one live life when we are all so vulnerable? The cancers, the Alzheimer's, the car accidents, the sudden heart attacks that come out of nowhere and leave us speechless or worse, how do we navigate a world filled with such terrible and frightening curses?

Who shall live and who shall die? That's the least of our worries?

Who shall live with bracca 1 and who shall live with dementia, who shall live with ALS and who shall live with Parkinson's, who shall live with depression and who shall live with Chrons Disease – now you are talking about the prayers that really move us this day.

I go to my doctor and I say – can you make me healthy?

I go to my rabbi and I say – can you make me safe? Can you make me secure? Can you make me less frightened?

And I come before you today to say:

I think so

I hope so

There is a teaching in the Talmud (Shabbat 153a): Rabbi Eliezer, one of our great sages, taught his students: " *Shuv Yom Echad Lifnei Mittatcha* -Turn (repent) the day prior to your death." His students responded, "Master, how can anyone know which day is that day - the one day that is *the* day before you die?" His response to them was, "Therefore turn today because tomorrow you may die."

When I first studied that story as a young rabbinical student I thought, "Yuck, what a terrible story! How depressing," I thought; "to live thinking that tomorrow you might die!" But now, I actually find it quite liberating. The more I thought about Rabbi Eliezer's teaching the more I

realized his intent was not to get us to worry about dying tomorrow, his goal, was to get us to focus on living today! If you live life assuming you will live forever (which truth be told – most of us do) the result is that there is no need to rush with anything –if I will live forever, there is time to do the important work of life - tomorrow. Need to tell someone I love them – tomorrow, need to take a walk and enjoy the warmth of the sun – there will be a nice day – maybe even a nicer day tomorrow. But, to view each day as the very last one you may have – is to see it as precious – a gift to be treasured and not squandered – this might be the very last chance I have to say I love you – it might be the very last walk in the warmth of the sun – there is work that needs to be done and it needs to be done today! That, I think, is what Rabbi Eliezer was trying to teach us.

Rabbi Zalman Schacter Shalomi the father of the Jewish Renewal Movement died this past July at the age of 89. Rabbi Schacter, or Reb Zalman as he was known to his many disciples, was a fascinating character. He survived the Shoah, became a hasid of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, but then moved very far from those roots as he began to teach at Camp Ramah and ultimately give birth to what has become known as the Jewish Renewal Movement. Jewish Renewal seeks to reinvigorate modern Judaism with Kabbalistic, Hasidic and musical practices. It embraces mysticism, meditation and gender equality and ecstatic prayer as critical to its approach. Those of you who know me know that I am not by nature the type to get up and start dancing in the middle of my prayers. But what you may not know is frequently I am dancing – inside. So I have always admired Reb Zalman and his disciples from afar – I am a Jewish Renewal wannabe, I'm in their Secret Service.

So just before his death, Reb Zalman wrote a book titled, “The December Project,” about the winter season of our life. Reb Zalman, like Rabbi Eliezer so long ago, posits that there is work to be done, spiritual work to be done in the final chapter of one's life – and he set about doing it.

He tells an amusing story – how when he first came to this country as a young man he made a living as a *shochet* – one who ritually slaughtered chickens. In fact, that is the meaning of his name – Schachter – he came from a long line of *shechter's* – ritual slaughterers. When he first came to this country – he worked in a shed behind a butcher shop in Providence, Rhode Island. He said how the farmers used to bring the chickens and treated them callously, as if they were merchandise, as if they were already dead. But not young Reb Zalman – he said that when he saw that the chickens were thirsty – he gave them water. Even though he was about to kill them! And he used to speak to the chickens - -I told you, Reb Zalman was a character, what did he say? He said that he told the birds, “I'm not here to hurt you, or to be your enemy, but you have an opportunity,” he would explain to them, “you have an opportunity to go from the level of being an animal to the level of human being by becoming food. I will help prepare you for that and try and do it in the most painless and sacred way.”

Can you picture this guy back in the 50's speaking to the chickens just before he *shechted* them? The mostly Afro-American chicken pluckers – who took over once he was done with his work – thought he was a bit crazy – but he bonded with these men and women and Reb Zalman says they loved to sing as they worked and he remembers one song – a black spiritual that he learned from them. It was called ‘Travlin Shoes’ - and here is how it went -“Death comes a knockin’ at my mother’s door, Hey old women, is you ready to go? And he said the song had a lot of stanzas – death keeps coming and knockin’ at different people’s doors – the mother, the father, the sinner, the preacher – and asking each one if they are ready to go –

and in the song each one replies, “Yes, I done my duty, I been redeemed, I got on my travlin’ shoes.” But when death comes knocking on the sinner’s door, the song changes slightly – Death comes knockin’ at the sinners door – Hey sinner, is you ready to go? “Oh no, I ain’t redeemed, I ain’t ready, I ain’t got on my travlin’ shoes.” Reb Zalman smiled and said, “That’s my song, that’s what I’m aiming for- when Elijah asks, “Are you ready? I want to be able to say: “Yes, yes, I’m ready.” Then he stood, did a little soft shoe dance and with a twinkle in his eye began to sing, “I got on my travlin’ shoes.”

So his last book, “The December Project” was his conversations with Sara Davidson a New York Times bestselling author about the spiritual work he thinks we all need to do in order to make sure, “we have our travlin’ shoes on” – or as Rabbi Eliezer might put it – to make sure that we are faced in the right direction when our life comes to a close. There is a lot of sweet advice that Reb Zalmen tries to impart to us as a going away gift – and I’ll share just a few with you as we struggle on this most sacred of days to do the spiritual work we have come here to do. In fact I have chosen just three. Let’s call it our Yom Kippur Project – for as Reb Zalmen ultimately learned and Rabbi Eliezer tried to teach us so long ago – it is only when you are prepared to die that you can really begin to live.

Here are the things Reb Zalmen found essential for his December Project and I would like you to consider for our Yom Kippur Project:

1. **Give Thanks.**

There is no meaningful life without gratitude. Begin each new day with an attitude of gratitude. It is no coincidence that the first prayer every Jew is supposed to recite in the morning – right when we open our eyes - -the first prayer that we teach every child when they first learn to speak Hebrew is *Modeh Ani – Thank you God*. “Source of Creation, thank you for restoring my soul to me, for the gift of being alive this day, and renewing me with compassion.”

Each day, make a short list of some of the things for which you are grateful. If you are feeling depressed take a gratitude walk. You can do it anywhere - in a park or on a busy city street or in your home. As you take your walk take time to notice all the things you pass that are worth a moment of gratitude. If your life is filled with anger and frustration and resentment – you are turned the wrong way – *Shuv* – repent, or more accurately – turn around and embrace gratitude and the way of thanks.

2. **Forgive, Forgive**

Do you want to leave this earth with anything or anyone un-forgiven, including yourself? I hope not. Forgiveness was an important part of Reb Zalman’s December Project, it of course needs to be a crucial part of our Yom Kippur Project – forgive, forgive.

If R’ Eliezer is correct – then forgiving has to be not only the work of Yom Kippur, but part of every day. What is the Vidui, confessional prayer we recite today? “Source of creation, I hereby forgive anyone who has angered or hurt me. And may I be forgiven for the hurt I’ve cause others and myself – help me to do no harm.

Make two lists today: people I’ve harmed and people who have harmed me. If possible tell them you are sorry, talk to them if you can, write to them if you can’t -- if you are lucky they will tell you the same. And then – forgive them and forgive yourself. *Shuv* - repent, turn around and make this truly a day of forgiveness.

3. **Let go, Let go, Let go**

How sad it is that so many of us have defined life as being about acquisition. We spend a lifetime acquiring things. We pile on the possessions, the diplomas; our children and grandchildren become like those little charms we wear on those bracelets – acquisitions to posses and brag about to others – but the ultimate truth is that meaning is found not in what we have, but who we are after we have let all that stuff go, in being able to let it all go. Edy and I have started to purge. I found a cartoon from the New Yorker that sort of captured where we are at, I put it on our fridge: It pictures a husband and wife in the midst of all their stuff – the caption has the wife saying to her husband, “I’ve decided to purge our material goods, starting with *your* crap!” But it’s not only the stuff we need to get rid of. If there is anger in your life – let it go. If there is sadness in your life – let it go. That’s what so many of these prayers on this most sacred of days are trying to get you to do. Those long list of sins we sing about so often this day – let them go, they are in the past – acknowledge them, learn from them, don’t do them again – but then let them go. Isn’t that what the kids have been singing about this year? “Let it go! Let it go!”

The more stuff we acquire, the harder traveling through life becomes. Our arms get filled with stuff so we need a box to help carry our stuff, then a second and a third and then we need trucks to move around the boxes until one day we have so much stuff – the simplest of trips becomes a major enterprise. Let it go, let it go. There will come a day when you will have to let it *all* go – the lighter our load -the easier that day will be.

But this is not a sermon about how to die, it’s a sermon about how to live – how to live with gratitude, how to live with forgiveness, how to live by letting go.

How long do I want to live?

One more day;

I want to be one day older than today!

I hope and I pray that God will give me one more day.

And then tomorrow – if my prayer is answered today – tomorrow, if I am still of sound mind and body, tomorrow I can also pray for one more day. That’s what Rabbi Eliezer taught me. That’s what Moshe Rabeinu taught me. That’s what my mother taught me.

I remember one of the last times I visited my mother, when she told me she was tired and had enough, she was done. I started to argue with her. I began to tell her not to talk like that, but I realized mom was teaching me one last lesson – that there is such a thing as enough. That was not her last day, but it was close. A couple of weeks later, my brother called me from Cincinnati and told me to come home, Dr. Goldman said there was not much time left. I got there late that night, I went straight to mom’s room; she was sleeping, so I just sat by her bed. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes and said, “Oh, I thought you wouldn’t be here til’ tomorrow – then she smiled and said, “I’m glad you’re here.” Then she shut her eyes and went back to sleep. Those were mom’s last words – I guess her prayers were all answered. She had on her travlin’ shoes.

I think it would be nice if I, like mom, made it to 96 in pretty good health and very sound mind and died with my children at my side. I think that would be very nice. But that is not my prayer today.

Today, all I ask for God – is one more day! And God, if I get one more day, I promise not to squander it, not to waste it on grudges or anger, not on resentment or sadness.

One more day, God, that is all I ask – one more day to live and laugh and love – one more day to treasure and be treasured; one more day to celebrate.

How long do I want to live? One more day.
What are you praying for?