

Erev Rosh Hashanah  
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### “My Extra Life”

Last year, on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about silver linings. Silver linings were like a salve on the wounds we were feeling from the onset of the pandemic. In Silver Linings we found solace; in Silver Linings we retrieved from lost time something we could still enjoy. But Silver Linings didn't erase the fact that we came closer to the precipice than ever before. The blunt force of COVID-19 stole millions of lives worldwide, and precious souls from our own embraces. But more than just isolating us in our homes and distancing us from each other, the pandemic also prompted ingenuity and life-saving solutions. In addition to the vaccine, which has saved millions of lives and the futures they'll build, we also created ways to connect, to thrive, and to live.

(applause for doctors, nurses, first-responders, teachers, front-line workers, and families)

Every day has become more precious. Every moment has become a new opportunity to fill with meaningful deeds. What awaits us now? What do we do with the time we still have?

In his recent book, called “Extra Life,” Steven Johnson explains how we've managed to live longer than at any other time in history, even during a pandemic. It's the result of a convergence of events and happenstance that worked in our favor, scientifically and medically. From penicillin and pasteurization, and from preventing cholera to polio, there were tectonic shifts in life expectancy. Such discoveries often began with some luck that later proved reliable in the laboratory. Eventually, they were funded by government and scaled to reach vast numbers of people. Today, we're alive and mostly well, because we survived childhood, and we've all benefited from antibiotics and medical breakthroughs.

Johnson highlights the year 1900, before the 1918 pandemic, when the average global life expectancy was just 32 years. In contrast, he writes about today, “A tiny blink of historical time later, [life expectancy] is twice that. In [any]

developed country, you will most likely live to see your grandchildren and can hope not unreasonably to see a great-grandson or daughter, too.” He’s right. But Johnson’s book is data driven. He doesn’t ask the existential question. If global life expectancy was a mere 32, just 100 years ago, and today we’re living actively and relatively well into our 90s, what will we do with this “extra life?”

Judaism is uniquely prepared to answer the question. In Deuteronomy (30), we’re told, “I, God, have given you prosperity and adversity, life and death...Choose Life!” So, it shouldn’t surprise us that, long ago, Judaism outlined what each stage of life should obligate us to do and to be, if we were blessed to live so long.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Mishnah taught, “At five years of age (begin) the study of the Hebrew Bible; At ten the study of Mishnah; At thirteen one is bar mitzvah and obligated to the commandments; At fifteen the study of Talmud; At eighteen the bridal canopy (time to get married); At twenty for pursuit of real work; At thirty the peak of strength; At forty wisdom; At fifty able to give counsel; At sixty old age; At seventy a full life; At eighty only by means of ‘strength’; At ninety a bent body; At one hundred, [nearly out of this world.]”

Times have changed since the Mishnah’s expectations --- we don’t want our children to marry at 18 --- but we still want to live long, well-lived, lives. And as Johnson observes, our 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations, barring an accident we can’t avoid or the illness we can’t cure, should be to live such lives. The extra life we are blessed to know demands our attention and preparation, and Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to begin.

### Make peace with the knife

Today, we take a cue from what we’ll read in Genesis, in the story of the binding of Isaac. We call it the Akedah. No one’s life was on the precipice more than Isaac’s. On the way up the mountain, he asked Abraham, his father, about the firestone and the wood for the sacrifice. His father told him that God would provide. Next his father bound him to the altar. He was a boy in his father’s grip. His life was at risk. Then, just as Abraham raised the knife, an angel called out, “Abraham! Abraham!” and he responded, “Hineini,” Here, I am. Isaac’s life was spared, but the image of the knife would remain forever.

In a rabbinic interpretation of the event, our Sages didn't erase the knife from the story or from Isaac's memory. They maintained that the knife made an indelible impression on Isaac's psyche. And, God, Who seeks faithfulness and grants compassion, made peace between Isaac and the knife. The knife would always be a metaphor of anything that threatened Isaac's life. But the peace Isaac would always know was faith in God. In a story predominantly about his father, Isaac became the hero who found, not in fear, but in faith what he needed to endure. The proverbial knife, though forgotten when Isaac is released from his place on the altar, nevertheless remains as an important symbol over us, as well.

Amos Oz, the famous Israeli author, taught that there are several ways to respond to such a knife over our heads, or as he put it, to life's "calamity." Take the example of a fire. "What can you do?" he asked. "You can run away. Or you can bring a bucket of water to throw on the fire. If you don't have a bucket," Oz explains, "bring a glass, and if you don't have a glass, bring a teaspoon. Everyone has a teaspoon." He wrote, "I know a teaspoon is little, and the fire is huge, but there are millions of us and each one of us has a teaspoon."

When fear burns within us, we might have only a teaspoon of faith to extinguish it. Then we gather with others who bring their teaspoons of faith, too. In the company of a congregation like ours, faith multiplies in all the teaspoons of faith that are brought together. Suddenly, fear is extinguished in favor of faith. Then the knife of faithlessness that hangs over our heads is replaced with greater hopefulness.

For me, these are not just hypothetical lessons. I recall dire moments when I was called to the hospital because a loved one was between life and death. In one instance, the knife was the palpable fear that overtook the family. Faith was needed, but it was in short supply. My role wasn't to provide copious amounts of faith. My role was to empower the family to find faith among them. Like the knife that hung over Isaac, it was time to make peace with the possibility of death. Though they would have done anything to save their loved one, it was not to be. The choice they could make, and did make, was to give him the permission, the gift, to let go. It was merciful. It reflected great faith accumulated in each family member's contribution of amazing support and unconditional love. They made peace with the knife.

I remember a member of our congregation who, at age 96, came to see me. She sat down and asked me, “Why am I here?” Truly, she couldn’t imagine why her life persisted. What was the meaning of her “extra life?” In all honesty, I couldn’t tell her God’s plan for her, either. But the knife remained dangling over her without a clear reason. Then, sometime later, when her grandson and his wife had a baby, they asked her if she would be offended if they named their child in her honor, rather than in her memory. Ashkenazi tradition holds that we name for those who have departed this life. It’s Sephardic tradition to give a name for those who are still living. With her permission, and months later when the baby was born, they did name their child in her honor. Days later, the great-grandmother died. They didn’t cause her death! Yet, the family was overwhelmed with both sadness and wonder.

At the baby naming, I cited a Midrash about Jacob, also called Israel, whose sons gathered around him before he died. Jacob was concerned whether his faith would endure. In response to their father’s fear, they said before him, “Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad,” Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God [too], the Lord is One. To which their father replied, “Baruch Shem K’vod, Malchuto L’olam Vaed,” Blessed be God’s glorious Name, God’s kingdom will be forever and ever. Israel died when he was assured that his faith would endure. He knew peace. And so it was, their dear grandmother, now a great-grandmother, died when she knew in her heart that her faith would endure in the name that her great-granddaughter would bear. She knew peace. The answer to the mystery of her “extra life” was found in the perpetual faith reflected in her great-granddaughter’s name.

For young people today, I want to speak to you, directly. There’s good news for you. It’s not that you’re invincible --- sorry about that, but there’s a knife you need to make peace with, too. The good news is that living into your 90s and 100s will be an expectation rather than an anomaly. But such an outlook comes with the same challenge many of us are asking ourselves, now, “What will you do with your extra life?”

To you, I would offer this. As Torah commanded your parents and grandparents, Torah commands you, too. “Choose life,” it says. Fill your days and years with wisdom and deeds. The Mishnah also teaches, “Who is truly wise? Those who learn from all people.” You’ll learn from those who have something to teach you, and from those you think have nothing to say to you. You can learn from social

media, but you can learn from history books, too. Mishnah also asks, “Who is truly rich? Those who are satisfied with their portion.” Wealth is not a number; it’s a way of life that includes taking care of yourself and supporting the community that supports you. The rush to acquire wisdom and the hurry to be rich is not as satisfying as acquiring wisdom through experience; and the best kind of wealth is earned through opportunities to build and improve yourself and those who are touched by your life.

If the knife means nothing to you, or you think that you’re different than anyone who has ever lived before, including Isaac, who laid on the altar, then beware. Your encounters are filled with choices. Which way you choose may either prolong your life or threaten it. And when you have no choice, remember today, because the Jewish New Year, is optimistic like you are, but not without hedging your bets with Judaism’s urgent request of you. When we ponder, together, “Who shall live and who shall die?” and “Who shall be secure and who shall be driven?” contribute to the answer with safe choices and greater patience to reach the age of 90 or 100, in good health and full spirit.

George Bernard Shaw, who lived to be 94, famously said, “Youth is wasted on the young.” Oh, to have the experience of 94 years at the age of 20 or 30. Then, presumably, the years would be lived with slow grace and deep gratitude. I don’t expect this generation or any generation, for that matter, to do it perfectly, but the extra life that all of us can expect should prompt us to consider the meaning of our days.

Making peace with the knife is a life-long effort. Isaac made peace with it and so can we when we see it, not as a threat to our life, but as a reminder of what is at stake. Human salvation --- the purity of our soul --- is not at stake in Judaism. We are born with a pure soul. What is at stake is life, itself. In Judaism, we find no comfort in death that comes prematurely. Only in life can we do a mitzvah. Deeds filled with wisdom, patience, gratitude, and purpose provide us the space to say of ourselves and others that, now or later, we are enjoying a life well-lived.

At the end of Isaac’s ordeal, God provided the ram for an offering. Isaac was spared. Though the knife wasn’t meant for him, it remained indelibly fixed in his memory. He made peace with it. So can we. It teaches us that life is hard. Life isn’t forever. It isn’t without risk. But as we live longer than ever before what will we do with our extra life and time? Don’t rush to answer the question. The New

Year is just beginning. For the next ten days, before Yom Kippur, perhaps you and I can commit ourselves to one teaspoon of change, as Amos Oz would put it. If we all commit to bringing one teaspoon of change to our home and synagogue, to our city and our nation, what profound change can we make for the better? The results could be sensational.

Make peace with the knife. Though it hangs over us, let it compel us to be freed from that which binds us, to fulfill the meaning of our days, in all the years we are given, and the extra life we are blessed to know. Amen.