

Two Eastern European Jews, fleeing poverty and persecution in their native land, had immigrated to Paris and, during their first days there, were taking in the sights of the city. They happened to find themselves one day in the cemetery where members of the Rothschild family were buried and were especially impressed with the grandeur and opulence of one of the tombstones. “Now that,” one remarked to the other, “is what I call living.”

The story, no doubt, is apocryphal, but it does highlight a question worthy of our attention at this season and serves as a reminder that people often have mistaken notions of what constitutes “living”, that is a life that brings meaning, joy and fulfillment.

Rosh Hashanah is the season when we pray for life. “*Zochrenu l’chayim*”, “remember us to life”, “*Uchtov l’chayim tovim*”, “inscribe us for a good life” – these are the phrases from the liturgy that we repeat over and over during these Days of Awe. Life itself is of inestimable value and is to be cherished. Indeed, according to Jewish law, almost all of the mitzvot of the Torah may be set aside to save a life. And as the time worn cliché puts it, so long as there is life, there is hope. But what is it, we might ask, that transforms life into living and enables us to transcend mere existence?

I do not denigrate a concern for material well-being, nor do I begrudge anyone his or her good fortune. We are not disembodied spirits, and our concerns for health, for security from the threat of violence, for our livelihood and for the ability to provide for the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing are not misplaced. The sages of the Talmud were not self-denying ascetics, and they believed that comfortable and beautiful surroundings and possessions could enhance life and enlarge our sense of well-being. And so we pray not only for life but also for *b’rachah*, blessing, *shalom*, peace, and *parnassah*, livelihood; they, along with health, are the necessary pre-conditions for a good life. Pre-conditions, please note, but not guarantors. Baron Rothschild in his grave, though surrounded by the trappings of wealth, could not truly be called living. And we all know of people, individuals of our own acquaintance or celebrities about whom we read in the media, who, though alive and amply blessed with material goods, are not truly living in the sense of enjoying a life of meaning and contentment.

A friend of mine recently e-mailed me a cartoon depicting a man, standing at the entrance gate to heaven and being addressed by the angel in charge of admission to the celestial realm. “You know,” said the angel, “you had a pretty good life, but you were always busy looking down

at your Smartphone and you missed it.” We are kept from truly living by false and misguided notions of what will bring us joy and fulfillment, and we are likewise precluded by distractions, among which, in our contemporary setting, our addiction to our digital gadgetry and the virtual world they make accessible to us looms largest. I appreciate and celebrate the convenience (both at work and in my personal life) that my computer, i-pad and Smartphone have made possible, and I would not for a moment give them up. But I recognize how addictive they are and how prone I am to mindless and minimally productive net-surfing. There is no doubt that our electronic devices have altered our attention spans as well as the way that we experience the world and interact with others. I believe it would be good for us to put an emphasis on cultivating the art of listening to and conversing with actual people face-to-face, even if there are occasional awkward silences, good for us on occasion to read a book or magazine from a hard copy, where we might actually pause to think about what we have read rather than face the temptation to keep scrolling down or to click on a link to a related story, and good for us to venture outside, lift up our eyes from the screen and gaze out on the world that God created. I do admire our more observant fellow Jews, who manage each week on Shabbat to stay unplugged for an entire day.

The desire for more is, I believe, intrinsic to human nature from earliest childhood. It is natural to want more of a good thing and to grow jaded with simpler joys and pleasures that may have satisfied us hitherto but no longer do so. Wanting more may also explain the allure and addictive character of the digital world. I can have more “friends” by going on Facebook and scrolling through my News Feed, and I can read more books, magazines and opinion pieces on the Internet than I could possibly afford to subscribe to and without cluttering my coffee table. More knowledge is good, as is more contact with family and friends who reside far away. But more may come at a price, losing the intensity of and sense of engagement in our experiences.

The opposite of being distracted is being attentive (or to use a more contemporary term, mindful), and this is where, I believe, Jewish ritual has a significant role to play. If I recite a *beracha* before eating, I not only express thanks to God, the source of nourishment, but I also become mindful of the miracle of the earth itself bringing forth the resources I need to sustain my life. When I recite the *maariv* prayer “Praised are You Adonai, Who brings on the evening twilight”, I am mindful of the sunset not just as something that will occur some minutes after 7

pm this evening but as a phenomenon pointing to the vast, beautiful and orderly universe in which we live. Because it's easy to take for granted what the *Modim* prayer in the *Amidah* refers to as the “miracles that are with us every day morning, noon, and evening”, tradition provides us with these means of securing our attention and promoting a sense of awe and of what Rabbi Heschel called “radical amazement”.

Beyond keeping us attentive and forestalling distraction, prayer serves other vital purposes as well, purposes that could, admittedly, also be achieved by other types of meditative or contemplative practice. Life is continually calling on us to act and to make decisions, something we often find difficult. Either we can't seem to summon up the energy to act. Or we aren't able to resolve our perplexity and our confusion regarding which, among a number of alternative courses of action, might be the best one to pursue. Even after we act, we are prone to second-guessing ourselves. Maybe I should have done this instead of that. Or we feel discouraged, believing that we are incapable of achieving our goals or that what we do or don't do ultimately won't make a difference. And so many of the decisions we make and the actions that we take are impacted by negative emotions – fear, anger, envy, insecurity, and grudge-bearing – which, if we act on them, invariably have hurtful consequences for everyone affected. Prayer, as Rabbi Brad Artson noted in a recent article, is the antidote for our negativity, our confusion and our discouragement. It has the potential to channel our energy, release negative emotion, relieve our sense of loneliness, and serve as a source of clarity and encouragement. True piety involves engagement in a life of prayer combined with action that serves God and our fellow creatures.

Allow me here to make a confession (even though Yom Kippur is eight days away): I am what one would call a creature of habit; it is one of my personal quirks, and it has worked well for me in many respects. But in our spiritual life, what Rabbi Sharon Brous calls routinization is an obstacle that needs to be overcome. The Sages tell us that the words of Torah should be as fresh and new to us every day, as if they had that day been given at Sinai. They also warn against making one's prayer *keva*, a fixed obligation that is discharged in the same unvarying manner each time we worship. Indeed the rabbis recommend that each prayer, while still adhering to the basic outline and formula of Jewish worship, contain within itself something new and different. Rabbi Brous points out that prayer and Torah study are intended to recall and, we hope, recreate

the encounter our people had with God at Sinai; and to that end prayer should be infused with *kavvana*, with focus, intention and inward devotion. Resisting routinization is sound advice in other realms as well, if we wish to be truly alive, and I acknowledge that I, on occasion do need to venture out beyond my comfort zone. Living things don't remain static; they grow.

The middle section of the weekday *Amidah*, which is made up of petitionary prayers, begins by acknowledging God as the gracious giver of knowledge and asks that we might be granted wisdom, knowledge and understanding. The wisdom that I seek for myself and that would be beneficial for all of us is the capacity for knowing ourselves. So much of what we do, of how we react to situations, of the patterns of behavior that we reenact are determined by fears and strivings buried in our unconscious. To be truly alive requires being self-aware, bringing to light to the extent possible what is hidden within, which in turn enables us to identify traits of character and behavior and to avoid acting in ways that are self-destructive and that distance us from others.

In Genesis, God proclaimed that it is not good for a human to be alone. Living fully requires us to be in relationship with others. We are intended to be social animals. One of the great tragedies of life is when older people are widowed and lose their life-partner and/or when their adult children move away. Jewish Federations as well as governmental agencies that provide senior services devote significant resources to remedying such isolation. Even at a younger age, having a facility for friendship and developing a circle of friends with whom one interacts are vital to our emotional well-being. As a corollary to that, I would add that being truly alive includes not only interacting but also being alive to the feelings of others, knowing what pains them and what brings them joy, and being able to put ourselves in their place – in sum, the quality of empathy. A famous saying of the rabbis is that a righteous person, a *tsaddik*, even after he or she dies is referred to as living, while a wicked person is called dead, even when they are still among the living. Let's leave aside the first part of the quote, which touches on matters unrelated to my present concern, and focus on the second part of the rabbis' words. Perhaps what they meant is that one who leads a self-centered life, who lacks empathy for others, and who is insensitive to the presence of the sacred and miraculous in the world is not truly living. Life is precious, because it is our sole and unique opportunity to function as a unity of body and soul, to

use our senses to experience the world in all its beauty, diversity and grandeur as the dwelling place of the Divine and to use our limbs to carry out mitzvot, acts that link us to the sacred.

And so, to come full circle, whom would we characterize as exemplifying a life that is worthy of being called “living”? The person, I would answer, who is less focused on and less readily distracted by the superficial, more attentive to the wonder and miracle of life and of our place in the universe, more open to new experiences, more self-aware and more confident of his or her values and of his or her ability to make a difference in the world, more engaged with fellow persons and more empathetic toward them. It is to such a person that we should be looking in admiration and saying, “Now, that’s what I call living.”

To all of you at this New Year season I extend my heartfelt prayers and good wishes. May you be inscribed in the book of life, and may you fill that life with wonder and joy and with meaning and fulfillment.