

The Threat of Immortality and Living A Life Of Meaning
Rosh Hashanah
September 29, 2011 1 Thishrei 5772
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Imagine a world where nobody dies. Through some sort of divine intervention, or the miraculous discovery of the fountain of youth, we are all spared from death. Life will go on and on.

Eternal life constantly faces us in our popular culture. Think of how many movies, TV shows and books tempt us with a chance at eternity. As a child I remember reading Tuck Everlasting and dreaming of finding a spring in the forest where I could drink the waters and remain young forever. In many ways our society is obsessed with trying to remain young. Who wants to get old? Eating right, avoiding stress, taking the right medications or facial crèmes, all these strategies can push off the inevitability of aging.

Imagine the stress and worry that would leave our minds if we never feared that a loved one might be stolen from us, that a freak accident will end our life prematurely, that we would never complete our own personal bucket lists. If only we were given a gift, the most valuable gift of all – time, endless time.

Wouldn't that be..... horrible!

It's rather awesome to consider, that if you really sat down and thought about living forever, it would, psychologically, be the end of us.

This might seem counterintuitive. Don't we all want to live forever? Wouldn't all our problems vanish overnight? What do we worry most about – food, health, relationships, meaningful career, acquiring knowledge – all of these would be solved if we had endless amounts of time and never got old. But there is the crux of the matter. We don't have endless time, so we do what we can right now.

According to Stephen Cave, author of *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization*, "Immortality shapes what we do and what we believe; it has inspired us to found religions, write poems and build cities. If we were all immortal, the motor of civilization would sputter and stop".

If Harry Potter was sure Voldemort could not kill him, he wouldn't need to learn more magic at Hogwarts and dread facing him? If Abraham knew his son could not die, how would God have tested him at the Akedah? If Jack Layton knew his cancer would not take his life, would he have strived in the last few months to give every ounce of strength to bolster his political party in the federal election?

Poets and philosophers, authors and theologians, have long been attuned to the fact that the quest for immortality drives much of humanity's peculiar ways. It's what gets us up and out of bed each morning. It's what makes us work harder, drive faster, eat quicker, play harder. We want to do the best of what we can in the moment, because we might not ever be there again. It's what makes us stop and take in the sunset until the colours fade away. It's what makes the first kiss so sweet. It's what makes us kvell when a young man or woman chants Torah for the first time. It's even what causes most Jews around the world to make their way through the doors of a synagogue and sing and pray together on the high holydays – perhaps God might be listening right now. We hope and pray for another year on this earth.

And that forces us to ask the question, if indeed we will not live forever, then how are we living our life to the fullest. What do we plan to do in the upcoming year? As I asked our teenagers the other day during my upper school class, if we had only 24 hours to live what would we spend the time doing. Many answered, "*doing those things I never got around to doing*". Indeed when we look back at the year that passed we must stop and ask ourselves, why didn't we do those things we want to do? Did we live our life to the fullest? Did we do our part to make this world a better place? How have we made our life meaningful – both for ourselves and those around us.

A year ago on the high holydays I chose to speak about some of our congregants who had overcome illness and regained their spark of life – like Jack Weiss and his deep dedication to yiddishkeit even in the ICU, and Randy Menka, the Chanukah miracle who found hope out of despair.

A year later, those two lifelights have been extinguished, but I believe their spark continues on. Because what I've learned from them, what they have taught us all, is living a life that matters. When you hear the stories of all the people they touched through their lifetime, you can see how they were but a wave touching shores around the world.

One of Randy's last words to me when I went to visit him at home, and asked him to reflect back on his life, was that he looks back and sees "miles of smiles". Whether it was his wife, his kids, his extended family, or his good friends, he looked back on the high points and laughed and reminisced about what he had experienced. At some point, as the illness took hold, he told me he wasn't sure how many other people had been touched by his life. He never saw the full sanctuary at his funeral, each person there had made a connection to him. He didn't even realize how many students learned from him and took his lessons on with them wherever they go. We all have an impact on the people around us, whether we consciously realize it or not.

Jack lived his life as though every moment was special. He had a smile on his face because he knew every day was a gift. We walked a few times at his favorite spot, the Oakville Mall. He greeted all the shopkeepers like old friends, as though we were walking down the street of an old shtetl in Poland. They waved back. He especially wanted to show me the booth where Israeli's worked selling dead sea salts. His face beamed when we began conversing in Hebrew, so proud that Judaism had made it to the diaspora of the Oakville mall. As I walked along with him, being introduced to the cashier at Tim Hortons and the jeweler who gives cash for gold, I realized his secret. Instead of walking through life trying to get things done, he lived each moment like it was so amazing, like a present from God, that he could walk and talk and enjoy. Time seemed to just float away.

This past year also saw the death of one of the great Jewish musicians of our lifetime, Debbie Friedman. Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, she was a shy quiet child and found her place through her guitar. At summer camp, she began to play around with new tunes for prayers. This was basically unheard of, the tunes for prayers were set by Moses at Mt Sinai, you can't change them. A group of Rabbi's at camp Olin Sang Ruby in the mid 1970's felt her music was nice but would never make it out of camp. Well Debbie kept writing music, playing her guitar and the campers and staff responded with spirit and dancing, clapping and singing. Why did services have to be so one dimensional, at camp they participated b'kol ram, in full voice, even drowning out the leader. These kids went back to their synagogues around North America and brought the ruach with them. They wanted their prayerleaders to play guitar and sing prayers to folk music like they did at camp. It revolutionized prayer, not just in the Reform movement but for all of Judaism. Her tunes for misheberach, havdallah, Barchu, Shma, V'ahavta, Oseh Shalom have become standards. I was at an orthodox yeshiva in Israel when I heard them singing havdalah (dai dai dai, baruch ata adoshem eloheinu). If they knew a young woman composed that tune...oh boy.

Debbie on her own remained a somewhat shy and private person and suffered from a debilitating illness that prevented her from living a healthy life. This inspired her to write the misheberach healing prayers, leading to the creation of a whole healing service and its tune permeates almost every synagogue I've been to. She taught us to sing, to let our voices out, inspiring prayer and song leaders for generations to come.

This summer I read an article in the NY Times by Rob Walk, about the unexpected treasures found in social media. Jacqueline Moore lost her son Jordan when he died in a car crash in the fall of 2008 on his way back to Amherst to begin his sophomore year. The unexpected tragedy gave her no chance to talk to him a final time, yet later she went through her email box and reading each message from him made her smile. Each was a treasure no matter how banal. Then she accessed his Facebook page to read his friends messages. They set up a "Rest In Peace" page and there are messages like "jordy! been blastin the cool thinkin bout u, missin u and lovin u." A post from the Amherst newspaper online obituary said, "[Jordan] was one of the coolest, most chill dudes on campus. He had a way about him that was quiet, but he never let you forget he was in the room. He just never said anything that didn't need to be said. He was real at all times and he was an honorable person that was fair and loyal." Her other son Merrick, having trouble verbalizing his grief to his parents, wrote on his wall, "Merrick is lifeless. A piece of him died." Here in two sentences were the echoes of grief that Merrick couldn't say, but could send out with some keystrokes.

As Jaqueline said recently, "I have now become a voyeur in my late son's world. Looking through the messages left by Jordan's friends since his death have provided comfort and community on days when all I want is for Jordan to be a sophomore in college preparing like his friends to come home. I am so gratified to know that by dropping in on his Facebook page I'm connected to his friends who let me know with heartbreaking beauty that they miss him too and that he has not been forgotten".

Increasingly we're not leaving a record of life by stowing away diaries or shoeboxes of letters and photographs. Instead, we are, collectively, busy producing fresh masses of life-affirming digital records: five billion images Flickr; hundreds of thousands of [YouTube](#) videos uploaded every day; oceans of content from 20 million bloggers, 500 million Facebook members; two billion tweets a month." Sites and services warehouse our musical and visual creations, personal data, shared opinions and taste declarations in the form of reviews and lists and ratings, even virtual scrapbook pages. In some ways these can be part of the legacy each one of us social media users leave behind.

There is actually one digital-mortality business, [DeathSwitch.com](#), which gives the idea of speaking from beyond the grave a Web-era update. DeathSwitch was founded in 2006 by the neuroscientist and writer David Eagleman to coincide with a short story he wrote for Nature magazine. In his fictional story, a service gets developed that allows its users to send messages after they die. People can use it to reveal secret bank accounts, confess to sins or settle scores from beyond the grave. DeathSwitch.com, in real life, is basically the same as the fictional one: some final words from you, to whomever, after you've gone.

Living a life of meaning means making the most of our lives and leaving behind a legacy to those who loved us, whether through words, on paper or even online. This summer in the face of seemingly consecutive natural disasters across north America, tornadoes, floods and hurricanes, many were faced with their own mortality and how they reacted in the face of danger. In addressing a group of people in Joplin, Missouri, after their entire town was wiped out by a tornado, President Obama said something quite beautiful and meaningful to the survivors and those that volunteered to help clean up the city. He said, " In a world that can be cruel and selfish, it's this knowledge -- the knowledge that we are inclined to love one another, that we're inclined to do good, to be good -- that causes us to take heart. We see with fresh eyes what's precious and so fragile and so important to us. We put aside our petty grievances and our minor disagreements. We see ourselves in the hopes and hardships of others. We remember that each us contains reserves of resolve and compassion. There are heroes all around us, all the time. And so, in the wake of this tragedy, let us make each day count.

As we contemplate the new year ahead, lets take some of these messages home with us and make each day count. Unless we find the spring of youth in the forest, or the secret to immortality on the internet, we have a short but significant time here on this earth. Let us strive to make the most of it, and leave our own legacy behind.

Morrie Shwartz, of Tuesdays with Morrie fame, in his book that he dictated before his death, shares this story about a life. "There's this little wave, who's bobbin up and down in the ocean off the shore, having a great time. All of a sudden, he realizes he's going to crash into the shore. In this big wide ocean, he's now moving toward the shore, and he'll be annihilated.

"My God, what's going to happen to me?" he says, a sour and despairing look on his face. Along comes another wave, bobbing up and down, having a great time, and says to the first wave, "Why are you so depressed?"

"You don't understand. You're going to crash into that shore, and you'll be nothing." The 2nd wave replied says, "no, you don't understand. You're not a wave, you're part of the ocean."

We are not just individual waves, we're part of all humanity, part of a larger whole. What's going to be your contribution? The menshlikeit of Jack Weiss, the miles of smiles of Randy Menka, or the music of Debbie Friedman. It could be in a simple email to let someone know you care, a thank you note for a job well done, or an unsolicited donation to a worthy cause. Let us use our precious time to make our life, a life of meaning.

Shana Tova.