

1. One of the dominant themes of R.H. seems to be Life. Whatever else we pray for or think of, life itself is uppermost in our minds. For ten days, beginning today, we shall ask the Almighty for the gift of life: zakhrenu le'chayyim.... Be'sefer chayyim...

2. What is the meaning of this constant repetition of our prayer for life? Is the request of zakhrenu le'chayyim, "remember us unto life", merely the pious expression of the natural and desperate striving for self-preservation?

3. I believe that three themes issue from this emphasis on chayyim, themes which teach us something of the Jewish outlook and which address themselves to the hearts of each and everyone of us.

4. The first thing we learn is that Judaism regards life as a good thing. That sounds terribly obvious, the kind of truism which no one doubts. Yet that is not so.

5. We live in an age when life as such has been reduced in value. We think big, with our penchant for statistics, and when we talk of lives in large numbers, then an individual life and life as such is reduced in our esteem and estimation. A generation which has seen 18 million people killed in one war, and which now speaks of nuclear holocaust in the language of "overkill", by which we estimate the wiping out of entire populations, a generation of this sort does not really take the value of life very seriously.

6. Furthermore, we live in an age when people mistakenly think that because intelligent life may exist elsewhere in the universe, that therefore life here on earth is not as worthy and momentous as was once thought. We beam our great "radio dishes" to the stars, and our scientists seriously expect that we may receive interstellar messages. And the layman concludes that if so, man is no longer unique and his life no longer quite as precious.

7. This is a dreadful error, a false conclusion that forebodes terrible consequences. Is a gorgeous sunset any the less beautiful because the sun sets every day everywhere? Is spring less inspiring because it arrives regularly every year? Is friendship any less marvelous for the fact that a large number of people engage in it?

8. So it must be emphasized again and again: despite the fact that we speak of life in large numbers; despite the fact that the Creator may have planted the seed of life on distant stars; despite the fact that living itself becomes more and more burdensome in this progressively more complicated world of ours, nevertheless -- life is good! It is good, and we want more of it, zakhrenu le'chayyim, because melekh chafetz be'chayyim, because G-d, our King willed that we should live, and what G-d wills and creates - is good.

9. Indeed, I believe that our generation speaks too loosely, too permissively, and too carelessly about life. Our newspapers tell us of recurrent public controversy over such issues as sterilization, abortion, and euthanasia.

→ Because life as a biological fact is good, therefore animal life too - and even vegetable life - must not be wantonly destroyed.



And most of us express opinions fed to us by sensationalist papers, bolstered by a dilute and unreflective liberalism, dashing off opinions without analysis and without considering a broad view on the great questions of existence. We have placed so much stock in the comforts of life, that we have downgraded life itself if those comforts are lacking. I am not saying that we Jews ought necessarily oppose, in all cases, therapeutic abortion or sterilization or euthanasia. I say merely that the decision of Judaism must consider that G-d is a melekh chafetz ba-chayyim, and that the value of life as such is of momentous importance in our religious tradition, and that we ought not therefore repeat empty opinions without careful thought. Yasor yisrani yah ve'la-mavet lo netanani, said David... even living in narrow straits, punished by G-d, is better than dying. No wonder that on RoshHashanah we affirm and beseech G-d: zakhrenu....

10. The second fact is that the High Holiday emphasis on life implies the superiority of man, of the human being, over lifeless things no matter how much contemporary society may value them. To believe in life is to believe in one's self, in the divine Image in which one was created.

11. Perhaps this can best be illustrated negatively. The Torah records, in the tokhachah, the list of curses to which Israel will be subject if it rejects the Almighty, the climax of all the dreadful consequences of a G-dless life: ve'lo taamin be'chayekha, "you will not believe in life." What does that mean? Rav Bibi, in the Talmud (Men.103b) answers: zeh ha-somekh al ha-palter, one who doesn't believe in life is he who relies on the baker! What strange words!

12. What Rav Bibi meant was that when a man fails to rely upon himself and his G-d-given qualities and talents and inner resources, but trains himself to rely upon others, their favors and their opinions, he has lost faith in life itself. One man may be prosperous by the standards of society, yet he may be thoroughly miserable. His whole life is dominated by the next deal, all his standards based on how much he can make, how well his wife is dressed, how fancy the school his children attend, how exclusive his neighborhood and how expensive his golf club. This man lacks any faith in his own life. He is a somekh al ha-palter -- he relies, if not on the baker's goodness in doling out a few rolls to him, then upon the generosity of his customers, the rating of his banker, the opinion of his neighbors, the standing of his wife's dressmaker and decorator, his children's school's reputation. He himself becomes merely a pawn whose value and happiness is determined by others. Another man may be poor by commonly accepted standards. Yet if he doesn't allow his privation to crush him, if he can smile despite his "tzores", if he wants material comforts but they are not the whole story for him -- he relies on no palter, he relies on himself, his own values, his own life, and the G-d Who gave it to him. He believes in life.

13. This man who believes in life, who doesn't rely upon the good graces of his neighbors or stockbroker or those who determine social status, he has a reason to live, and he truly lives. The other kind, who no longer believe in life, in their own capacities and worthiness, he unfortunately represents the majority of our society today. What a dismal existence! Dorothy Parker once summed up their tragic situation in a verse which is much sadder than it sounds: "Razors pain you/Rivers are damp;/Acids stain you;/Drugs cause cramp./Guns aren't lawful;/Nooses give;/Gas smells awful;/You might as well live." Indeed, the man who no longer believes in life, lives on only because suicide is too drastic.



14. To attain meaning in life, one must believe that man, because he was created in the image of G-d, is important to G-d, and that his inner life is infinitely more precious than the external trinkets he has made for himself. That is what we mean when we say, zakhrenu le'chayyim....melekh chafetz be'chayyim....not only because life as a biological phenomenon is good, but because the life of man, the record he can make, is unique: katvenu be'sefer ha-chayyim, inscribe us in the BOOK OF LIFE. We ask of G-d not to be inscribed in a checkbook or bankbook, not in a credit-book or even in the Social Register. We ask for the Book of Life, the book which records the genuine human achievements of men; their inner life, their own lasting values.

15. The third thing about the prayer for life, beyond the biological fact of life and the superiority of human life, is ~~the~~ what we do with our lives. We may leave it to the biologists to argue about the definition of life. Whatever their decision, we know of two kinds of life: a physical and material kind, which must die as surely as it is born, and a spiritual kind which endures forever. Perhaps that is why the word for life is almost always in the plural in Hebrew: CHAYYIM, actually: lives. Not only must a man live because life is good; not only must he live humanly and inwardly; he must also live a full spiritual life, a selfless life, a great life, ~~so that G-d will be~~. A man who preserves life has fulfilled MELEKH CHAFETZ BACHAYYIM. He who lives a decent, independent, inner life has fulfilled the KATVENU BE' SEFER HACHAYYIM. But only one who is prepared to do something idealistic with his life, something noble and generous and meaningful can ask G-d for the gift of life LEMAANKHA ELOKIM CHAYYIM, "for Thy sake, O living G-d." To live fully, one must live for G-d's sake - lemaankha Elokim Chayyim.

16. I would address myself this morning particularly to the younger people here, those under 40. Not only because youth is more idealistic, not only because it is more vital and energetic, but because it is this generation which is now taking over the leadership of the world and will determine the future course of history.

17. What should be our goal, our purpose? - Life in its full sense - CHAYYIM, living both ways, not only for ourselves, but for others as well. For living for others is indeed LEMAANKHA ELOKIM CHAYYIM.... To live fully means to do something great and daring, something lasting and enduring with our lives. It means to get away from the rigid, morally paralyzing framework into which most of us have fallen, the rut of obsessions with convenience and security, the empty and petty satisfactions with the smattering of sex and money and popularity. It means breaking out of this mold and being true Jews, in the heroic and historic sense of the term, living LEMAANKHA ELOKIM CHAYYIM, living for G-d, for His Torah, for His creatures.

18. LIFE magazine recently had an issue devoted to this, our generation as it begins to make its mark in the world. It entitled the article, "THE TAKE-OVER GENERATION" I don't like that term. I think there's much we ought not to take over. A good part of what we find ought best be left to rot on the vine. Not a TAKE-OVER generation, but a generation which will UNDER-TAKE, which will accept great challenges, which will ferret out daring tasks, which will undertake great missions, which will allow itself to be grasped by great ideals which will make life worth living. There are young people here today: capable, talented, generous, searching for a cause, waiting for the challenge. Well, the Torah offers it to you: LEMAANKHA ELOKIM CHAYYIM. For God's sake, undertake great deeds: Israel, education, build synagogues, build schools, build hospitals, build libraries....

19. If we will properly evaluate life as such; if we will reverence man as such

and above all, if we will live for G-d's sake, then we will be remembered for life:   
אנחנו צריכים להגיד   
לכל הדור הבא   
ועל פניו ירוח   
אנחנו צריכים להגיד   
לכל הדור הבא   
ועל פניו ירוח