

"TO A HUNDRED AND TWENTY?"

The Yizkor services conclude with the reading of Psalm 16. The closing verses of that Psalm are a resounding dedication to life:

כִּי לֹא תַעְזֹב נַפְשִׁי לְשֵׁאוֹל, לֹא תִתֵּן חַיִּידְךָ לְרָאוֹת שְׁחַת, תוֹדִיעֲכִי אֹרֶחַ חַיִּים  
שֶׁבַע שְׂמֵחוֹת אֶת פֶּנֶךְ נְעִימוֹת בְּיָמֶיךָ נָצַח.

"For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to the nether-world; neither wilt Thou suffer Thy godly one to see the pit. Thou makest me to know the path of life; In Thy presence is fullness of joy, in Thy right hand bliss for evermore."

These verses are expressive of Judaism's high evaluation of life. It is this theme which I wish to discuss today. I am not addressing myself to the legal-halakhic aspects of any specific issue, although the Quinlan case certainly comes to mind. I merely urge a note of caution before generalizing from any one case to an over-all halakhic view.

Rather, I wish to share with you something that troubles me. I am disturbed by a perceptible change in the attitudes of our own people, a change that has in very recent years crept into ordinary language and daily conversation.

Let me explain. Not too long ago, I would say to someone, in the manner of our people, "עַד בִּיאָה יְעֻשְׂרִים שָׁנָה -- to a hundred and twenty years!" The response would normally be, "Thank you; you too." Nowadays I notice that too many people do not offer that response. Instead, they say, almost fastidiously, "Oh no, no, no thank you! I hope it won't be that long!"

What sounds like a trivial witticism, is to me indicative of a shift in perspective on the weightiest of all issues, that of life and death. It is a symptom that is deeply unsettling.

I grant that none of us wants, Heaven forbid, an old age in which we are lonely, a burden on others and especially loved ones. The Talmud records more than one case in which the Sages would occasionally pray for a speedy and painless death as a relief for a colleague burdened with excessive pain, senility, and the like. Yet unquestionably, life is an exceedingly precious and sacred value. So, instead of saying, "No thank you," to the wish, "to a hundred and twenty," better be thankful for the greeting and pray that the long life wished upon you be pleasant, independent, dignified, and honorable.

Consider what has happened to society in the last ten or twenty years. I remember preaching a sermon in which I tried to show that Judaism had long, long ago anticipated Albert Schweitzer -- the medical missionary who built the great leprosarium in Gabon -- in his grand theme of "Reverence for Life." It seemed all so obvious, so unexceptionable. Schweitzer was, after all, widely regarded as a contemporary saint, he was the darling of the liberal press. Nowadays, however, one hears nothing of "Reverence for Life." Instead, ethicists speak of "the Lifeboat Ethic" -- the right of the haves to keep away the have-nots in order that at least the haves can survive; the right of those of us in the Lifeboat of affluence to slam down our oars on the grasping fingers of drowning humanity.

A decade or two ago our major concern was the value of life. Today we speak much more of the worthlessness of life under certain conditions.

Then, a vision that inspired young and old alike was the Green Revolution, which would allow us to feed millions of people. Today we seem more concerned with the right to die.

Only a few short years ago when the New York State Legislature was discussing a liberalized abortion law, I was one amongst many who warned that if we allow ourselves to be beguiled by the moral arguments for abortion -- that we would thus no longer discriminate against the poor -- we would fall into a trap far worse and far more agonizing, namely, that it would lead to euthanasia. I remember that we were laughed at, we were condemned for applying a discredited "dominoes theory" to social-medical issues, and we were accused of being shrill, hyperbolic, and hysterical. Now, I unfortunately discover that our warnings have come true much faster than the most pessimistic of us dared fear. We now live in a society in which advocates of homosexuality -- a "non-reproductive sexuality" -- are not only successfully defending their position, but aggressively advocating it. In our culture today, suicide has a much more favorable press than ever before. And euthanasia proper has now come of age: a writer in the current issue of *Psychology Today*\* estimates that about 100,000 Americans die each year because someone deliberately decides not to give them medical care!

Judaism finds this situation abhorrent and repulsive. Our great theme is *נחלת חיים*, that the Torah was given in order to enhance human life. Our Torah is known as *תורת חיים*, a law of life. One of the reasons we are forbidden to wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur is because on the day when we pray *זכרון נחיים*, "remember us unto life," we must not wear anything for which another life, even that of a dumb beast, had to be sacrificed. According to one interpretation, all of kosher law is really a partial reversion to primordial vegetarianism of which the Bible speaks in the days before Noah, and the vegetarianism that will prevail when the Messiah comes -- surely a token of our respect and reverence for the sanctity of life.

I know all the arguments about the "quality of life." Judaism, in all its manifestations, is as concerned as anyone else with the quality of life. All of Jewish Halakhah and Aggadah, all of Jewish morality and ethics, has as its goal the sanctification of life and enhancement of its quality.

But this question is crucial: who is to determine what "the quality of life" is, how it is defined -- and, as a result, *מי יחיה ומי ימות*, "who shall live and who shall die?" Which authority shall legislate such issues for us?

I am not prepared to say how Judaism defines this elusive "quality of life," the absence of which presumably will determine who shall die. But this I am prepared to say: It does *not* subscribe to the unspoken hedonistic definition that is assumed in the contemporary discussions about "quality of life." It does not agree that such quality is absent or severely diminished if one can't swim or play tennis or dance or jog. Moreover, Judaism cannot even subscribe to a basic functional definition of the quality of life. One does not have to *do* things, he does not have to be mobile, he does not have to fulfill an assigned function in society, in order to experience quality of life. Judaism does not regard the athlete as the embodiment of all virtue...

Our Torah and our Tradition teach that man cannot and must not play God. Pharaoh, whose defeat we celebrate, did -- and that is why he devised a euthanasia program for the ancient Hebrews: *בן הבן הינוד היאורה תשכיכוהו*, "Every male child that is born shall be thrown into the Nile." The Torah, the law of the erstwhile slaves of that Pharaoh, teaches that *אין דוחין נפש בנפשי נפש*, every living being has an absolute claim on life, and we dare not destroy one life in favor of another.

Before we take up the cudgels sentimentally on behalf of physicians and others who do play God, and proclaim our admiration for their "courage" and "bravery" and

\*Our Failing Reverence for Life," by Elizabeth Hall with Paul Cameron, *Psychology Today*, April 1976.

say that they are messengers of mercy and not merchants of death, think first of whether all those doomed to euthanasia really wanted to die!

In the same article referred to above, it is reported that a Hawaiian medical technician who had hooked up more than 600 patients to life-sustaining machines, told a researcher that 400 of them had been able to communicate their wishes. Yet, *not one of them* asked to be allowed to die; instead, they usually asked to be attached to the machines as quickly as possible.

Are we not all too prone to impose our values, which may be corrupt and rotten, upon those who do not have the power to assert their own values, which may be more sublime? Is such euthanasia really "mercy-killing?" Physical or mental defects do not necessarily mean that people are miserable. The researcher I alluded to earlier surveyed people suffering from paralysis, muscular diseases, missing limbs, blindness, and deafness, and he found that they were as satisfied and optimistic as a comparable group of normal people. Indeed, the handicapped were less likely than the normal groups to have contemplated suicide! Moreover, mentally retarded children turn out to be happier than normal children. So that *even by a hedonistic standard*, euthanasia can turn out to be outright murder.

A far more cruel illustration of how far society has travelled in recent years is the report published on March 10, 1974 by the *Washington Post* of interviews with a group of physicians at the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medicine, who had participated in the killing of quadriplegics -- patients who are paralyzed from the neck down. These are people who can often talk -- certainly they can think and read and watch television. How was this done? Without the patient's knowledge or consent, he was drugged so that he will not know what is happening and will not feel the terror of dying. Then he was unplugged. These doctors felt it would be "inhumane" to ask the patient if he wants to live or die since, as one doctor put it, "everyone dearly loves life."

So now our compassion leads us to deny life to those who "dearly love" it!

If this is not murder, what is? Is this not a form of "Final Solution" -- not qualitatively different from that of a Pharaoh or a Hitler? And whom will the bureaucrats reward next with their "mercy" by denying them access to advanced medical technology? -- Left-wingers? Conservatives? Retired people? People on Welfare -- and thus solve the economic problem in urban areas? Zionists -- and thus do away with those meddlesome Jews?

Of course there are times when death is preferable to some forms of tormented life. As I mentioned, we ought pray to be spared such torment, and pray that death take us before such agony afflicts us. But Heaven forbid that we take life and death into our own hands! The Rabbis taught: *לצעז כרתך אתה חי ובעץ כרתך אתה מת*. We are born and we die against our will, not by our leave, for this is a divine and not a human decision. The moment man usurps the prerogative of God and dispenses death, he is nothing but a *שיוכך דמים*, a murderer, and his good intentions can neither excuse nor redeem him.

Jews have a long memory. So let us remember. It was only in the Middle Ages that Torquemada burned Marranos at the stake -- and he sincerely believed that it was for their good, for the good of their souls. Transpose from the context of the medieval religious bigotry of a Torquemada to that of the sophisticated "quality of life" rhetoric of the euthanasia people, and you have the identical attitude.

I do not trust man, any man, physician or Rabbi or shoemaker, to declare who shall die on the basis of ideology or reason or good intentions.



I am not addressing a legislature or a medical convention, and therefore it is impossible to go into the details of the Halakhah and to present any of the criteria when important decisions must be made, as physicians must so often do. I am deeply concerned, however, by our own eroding values. I am concerned that we as Jews have suffered an assault upon our axiology, upon our scale of values and structure of thought. Our vision of the sanctity of life has suffered a great setback.

Again I must say that I do not deny that there are problems, severe ones. But I would like to foster amongst us a more affirming, positive, constructive, attitude to life itself -- a Jewish attitude towards the sanctity of life. Yes, **יָד בִּיצָה וְיָשָׁרִים שָׁנָה**, may you live "to a hundred and twenty years" -- in health and joy and dignity and honor. And don't "settle" for less!

I recognize that this change in attitude has many sources. I should like to refer to three of them.

The first is the result of advances in medical technology. More than ever before, we run the risk of prolonged anguish in the twilight zone between life and death and it is that which we so fear, and which makes us prefer an early death.

But that is a neurotic response. Is ours the first generation that had spectres of suffering to mar our vision of old age? Is not the future always dangerous and frightening? Did not our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents pray, **אֵל תַּשְׁלִיכֵנוּ זֶמֶת זָקְנָה**, "Do not abandon us at the time of old age?" Must we shrink and recoil at the prospect of living on a respirator? -- is this already the norm for most elderly people? Must we not have some modicum of **בְּטַחִין**, of faith and confidence that God will be good to us? Life was always precarious, and people of faith always approached it with confidence, even if with underlying fear. And people of faith today too should not become neurotic!

A second reason that I can discern for this fear of "to a hundred and twenty," is caused by the structure of society today. Older people at or near retirement are often afflicted with a mood of impending uselessness and hence resignation and weariness and loneliness. But this is an error -- a profound theological and existential error.

I wish to address myself not only to elderly people, or those near retirement, but to young people as well -- as young as 12 and 13. Start planning for your retirement when you are still in your 'teens! If you will train yourself only for a professional career and a business, and put all your energy and vitality into that, then know right now that when you reach retirement age you will feel that there may be nothing worth living for! But if you start now in developing other dimensions of your life, without necessarily detracting from competence and proficiency in your careers, then you will find that life has a meaning that far transcends the money-making and reputation-building part of your active life. Judaism bids you define yourself as the **צִלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים**, as the image of God, unutterably precious just because you are who you are, singularly and individually, and not merely as a replaceable functionary or cog in the machinery of society. A genuine Jew should not expect that after he leaves this earthly scene, the Angel Gabriel will proclaim his arrival as, "Here comes Mr. Goldman the stock-broker," or "Behold, here arrives Mr. Rabinowitz the diamond-polisher," or "Mrs. Cohen the housewife," or "Miss Gordon the Chairperson of French Literature."

We are not our jobs! Our occupations are just that -- occupations, not the essence of our lives. If Passover is indeed **זֶמַן חֵירוּתֵנוּ**, the season of our freedom, then remember: only slaves are defined by their work, evaluated by their occupations. Free men must transcend their occupations. Slaves who can no longer work are ciphers. Free men retain their humanity in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of others, even if they no longer can produce profitable labor.

Free and mature people must bear in mind that there is much to do after they retire from their official duties. There is your education, long neglected; talents that are not yet atrophied, and others that remain still undiscovered; there are people whom you can help, causes you can advance, and an inner life waiting all these years for your attention. The inner life -- that which never appears on a job profile, and for which no company awards a silver watch, and yet is the most important thing of all!

A little over a month ago there died in Jerusalem a modern sage and saint, Dr. Yehudah Even Shmuel (originally Dr. Yehudah Kaufman). I remember visiting him at his home in Rehavia, Jerusalem, some fifteen years ago. A thin, hunchbacked old man with a wisp of white beard and dancing gray eyes, with a big black skullcap on his head, he was able to get around only by grasping tables, furniture, or sideboards. Yet this little deformed man sparkled not only with wisdom and insight, but with hope and cheer and humor. He was the co-author of one of the greatest Hebrew dictionaries, and one of the men who helped fashion the modern Hebrew language. He wrote the greatest modern commentary on Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*. Only this past year there appeared his monumental retranslation into Hebrew of Yehudah Halevi's *Kuzari*, together with his illuminating commentary on the work. He is a man who was an intimate friend of the greatest people of this generation.

The week of his death, the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* told the following fascinating anecdote. In his later years, Even Shmuel prayed in the Yeshurun Synagogue, where he occupied the pew next to Rabbi Kelmas, who had previously been the Chief Rabbi of Moscow. They became close friends. But they had a different style of prayer: Rabbi Kelmas "davened" quickly, whereas Even Shmuel was very slow in his prayer. Why so? Explained Rabbi Kelmas to Dr. Even Shmuel, "I do not pretend to be a Kabbalist, and so I do not entertain these long *kavvanot* or meditations. I only concentrate upon the simple meaning of the words, and that is why I pray quickly."

"And I," said Dr. Yehudah Even Shmuel, "pray very slowly. The reason is, that for many many years I left Judaism and was one of the founders of Social Zionism, and I was a confirmed secularist. But later, when I came back to Judaism, I discovered that I now have to make up in my intention and contemplation for all the prayers that I missed those many years that I was alienated from Torah. That is why I pray slowly."

"In that case," said Rabbi Kelmas to Dr. Yehudah Even Shmuel, "you will never finish praying!..."

That is something that all of us must know about those post-retirement years -- which, as time goes on, will constitute a larger and larger segment of the lives of our population. If we use those years to make up for what we lacked in our inner lives during our physically active years, if we extend our energy in our later years in the realm of prayer or study of Torah or charity or other development of our inner resources, we shall have so much to do, so much to make up for, that even 120 years will not suffice.

But the third reason for our sudden shyness at longevity, is perhaps the most pernicious of all. We no longer respond favorably to the greeting, "to a hundred and twenty," because we have assimilated the devaluation of life in contemporary culture. And this devaluation is attendant upon economic factors -- a growing population of more mouths to feed, and dwindling resources to feed them; more people who seek jobs, and less jobs available. That may be the unfortunate economic truth. But Judaism adamantly refuses to subscribe to the proposition that economics should determine our view of life. On the contrary, our perspective on life and its meaning must determine our economics! Never, never, must we allow this desacralization of life -- whether in the form of benevolent euthanasia or free and easy abortions or greater sympathy to deliberate suicide, or any of the other manifestations of this fundamental antagonism to life -- to influence us.

Here, we must stand firm! It is not the first time -- and it will not be the last -- that Judaism has had to hold on to an unpopular opinion in the face of most of the rest of the "civilized" world. But for us it is important now to gird ourselves, to rededicate ourselves to the Jewish affirmation of life, and to reflect that dedication in our practice, our actions, our thoughts -- and even in our speech.

As we proceed to Yizkor, we are grateful that those whom we memorialize had an opportunity to do all they did with their lives. But we know too that, as King David put it,

שֶׁל הַמֵּתִים יִהְיוּ וְשֶׁל יוֹרְדֵי דוֹמָה

"The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence,"

וְאֵנָּחֵנוּ בְּכֵךְ יְיָ בְּמִצְתָהּ וְעַד עוֹלָם הַשָּׁמַיִם

"But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forever" (Psalms 115: 17-18), and if not from this time forth and forever, then at least -- from this time forth until a hundred and twenty!

Hallelujah!