

Eternal Life
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In a wine store in Niagara on the Lake I saw a tee shirt that read, “Not drinking wine won’t make you live longer, it will just make it feel longer.” Rachel’s, plaint throughout Dara Horn’s newest novel, **Eternal Life** is similar, but more poignant: “Not dying, “she says,” doesn’t make it better, It only makes it longer.”

Horn’s novel explores the question of what it would mean to live forever — is death a gift or a punishment? Would it be better not to die? Although this is an oft-used literary trope, Horn delves into this question through a different lens — what would it mean to live forever if you were a woman — in particular, a woman who had married dozens of men, raised generations of children, and spent life after life caring for others only to watch them die?

Horn’s heroine, Rachel, is based on Rachel in this morning’s haftarah, which we just read. In the haftarah from Jeremiah, the Rachel of Genesis, buried on the side of the road, is reborn and transformed into Rachel Imenu, Rachel, our mother, the eternal mother, weeping endlessly, as her children go off into exile, watching eternally for their return. Horn’s character Rachel literally lives for 2000 years, reborn periodically from life to life but always age 18. Because of a vow she took as a young woman in her first life, or “version,” as she calls it, when the Temple stood, in order to save her dying son, she cannot die. Like the Jewish people, she lives on and on, through inquisitions, expulsions, and pogroms, burying her children, generation after generation.

The novel opens with Rachel’s pithy challenge: “Either everything matters, or everything is an outrageous waste of time.” That is the proposition the book sets out to explore. At the outset of the novel, set in the present in a New York suburb, Rachel contemplates various possible explanations for the meaning of life:

To serve others: Rachel estimates the “thousands of times she had nursed an infant, the number of meals she had cooked for others, how many spoons of medicine she had raised to other people’s lips, how many withered hands she had held at bedsides, how many bodies she had buried in the earth.” She concludes, “The sacrifice was boundless, heavy labor cast into a void.” Service seems more burdensome than noble to Rachel when it becomes eternal.

Rachel goes on to posit other theories of life’s meaning: to experience joy, to build for the future, to correct mistakes, to avoid regret, to change. She rejects each of them because they are either impossible or fail to obtain if you’re living forever. Building a legacy matters precisely when one is facing death, but loses its poignancy when there is no death. Even moments of pure joy get swallowed up in the vastness of forever. For most of the novel, Rachel seems to conclude that life has no purpose, and she wants nothing more than to die.

There is one more theory of meaning that Rachel explores throughout the novel. Horn writes, “Many days and years and people had passed before she understood that the details themselves were the still and sacred things, that there was nothing else, that the curtain of daily life was holy, that behind it was only a void.” In a moving scene in the middle of the book, during Rachel’s first incarnation, when the Temple stood, her young son, Yohanan, without being asked, sweeps the ashes from the oven. This is not usually man’s work and Rachel is touched by his thoughtfulness. “Cleaning out the ashes made me feel like a priest,” he tells her. “It doesn’t make me feel that way,” she murmurs, in response. Yohanan continues excitedly, ex-

plaining to her that this is the first thing the priests do in the Temple in the morning, that every single action in the Temple is an act of total devotion. Rachel ponders his words, offering that if that is true then every parent who ever lived is, effectively, a priest. Yohanan, reading her thoughts, presciently offers, “Maybe we wouldn’t need a Temple if more people knew how to be priests.”

Attending to the daily business of life is both tedium and sacred devotion. The details themselves can be meaningless or they can be still and sacred things. Love illuminates and makes beautiful what might otherwise be drudgery. I will return to this idea a bit later.

In her current incarnation, Rachel has a granddaughter, Hannah, who works for Google on a project to enable people to live forever. Rachel, given her situation, vehemently opposes this project — she can think of nothing worse. Toward the end of the novel, Hannah and Rachel attend a performance at Hannah’s son’s school where Hannah ends up in tears. Explaining her feelings to Rachel, as they drive together afterwards, Hannah says that despite a wonderful and full life and all the happy moments in it, “it’s as if there’s this tunnel of sadness flowing through it. That’s how I imagine it, like a secret passage underneath everything that’s always flowing with this constant stream of sorrow, and no one can see it, but we all know it’s there. And I just keep thinking that if no one had to die, that tunnel would dry up and disappear, and all these happy things wouldn’t be so sad anymore.”

Rachel ultimately stops the car, drags Hannah by the hand into the nearby woods, and yells at her, “You need that tunnel, Hannah. Nothing means anything without it.”

Losing loved ones is unbearably sad; sweet, precious moments make us long to hold onto them forever. Still, Rachel cautions, it is only death that gives life meaning. It is death which pushes us toward our goals, death which gives service and joy meaning, death which makes all of life’s transient delights — from erotic love, to raising children, to a summer’s day — sweet and poignant. If they were to be endlessly repeated, these noble pursuits and pleasures would become forms of torture, rather than sources of joy. The fact of death ennobles life.

So does anything last forever? Should it? Over the course of the novel, Rachel reaches two surprising, albeit tentative, conclusions.

The first is a distinctly Jewish one. Rachel’s first son, the one whose life she saves by taking a vow renouncing her own mortality, is Yohanan ben Zakkai. Yohanan ben Zakkai is a historical figure who lived at the time of the destruction of the 2nd Temple and who became the first Nasi or Head of the Sanhedrin after the Temple’s destruction. As such, Yohanan was instrumental in reinventing a new Judaism after the destruction of the Temple, a Judaism that would replace the Temple rituals around which Judaism revolved, with prayer, learning Torah, and the many rituals that we practice until this day that define Jewish life.

During the final siege of Jerusalem, the Jewish zealots wanted to keep fighting the Romans; the moderates sought accommodation; fighting between the two groups was intense. As legend has it, Yohanan, a moderate, faked his own death, arranging to be carried out of Jerusalem in a coffin to escape his Jewish rivals. Once outside the city, he secured an audience with Vespasian at which he told the general that Jerusalem would soon be destroyed and that he, Vespasian, would become the new emperor. Three days later, Yohanan’s prophecy comes true: Nero is deposed and Vespasian indeed becomes emperor. Vespasian has Yohanan brought back to his tent and offers to fulfill his any wish. Yohanan famously responds, “Give me Yavneh,” a small hamlet outside Jerusalem where he will establish an academy and a rabbinic court. Although his choice seems foolish, Yohanan believes, correctly, that Yavneh will be the foundation of a new Jewish future.

In the novel, Rachel, in her second incarnation, visits Yohanan on his death bed and rails at him: “Yohanan, you idiot...You could have saved the country. You could have saved the city. You could have saved the Temple. You could have saved the Holy of Holies, the House of God. And instead you saved — a story?” Yohanan responds, “nothing matters but the story.” He tells her that she taught him what mattered most and that that is what he saved — the future. Rachel, angry and desperate, yells at him — “I gave up my own death for you, with a vow in the Temple. And now the Temple is gone, and I’m never going to die, Yohanan. You’re dying, but I’ll be here forever in an eternal life.” He responds, “Then maybe you’ll find out if I was right.”

Throughout her many lives, Rachel tests this proposition. Often she criticizes Yohanan who, she says, “threw away two thousand years of civilization in exchange for some pathetic shadow version of it, trading in all those rituals that had formed a connection to God for the chance to study and discuss and write about all those rituals...” At other times, though, as she reincarnates in different eras, in different cities, Rachel is struck by the “elaborate edifices of religious rituals and institutions and customs and laws that were nearly identical in every town or city they chose to live in, including women’s baths and children’s schools and prayer-houses and study-houses ...and homes full of people who said the same blessings and knew the same stories, each town or city an astonishing miniature portable Jerusalem, all thanks to Yohanan.”

By the novel’s end, Rachel seemingly accepts Yohanan’s wisdom. Temples come and go, buildings are built and destroyed, as are cities. But stories live forever. The Jewish people are still here because we keep telling our story — we tell it at seder, we tell it every day when we pray, we tell it when we read Torah and when we celebrate holidays and simchas. Jewishly speaking the ultimate apostate — the one who walks away from Judaism — is the rasha, the wicked child at the seder table. She says, “what does all this mean to **you**?” excluding herself from the community, saying, in effect, “I am not part of the story, the story does not apply to me.” Apostasy in Judaism is not eating cheeseburgers at McDonald’s or believing there is no God — it is saying that I am not part of the story.

To be Jewish is to be part of a larger story than yourself. It is to be defined by that story, to live that story, and to be responsible for passing that story on to the next generation. As Jews we say that life has meaning because, even if our lives are small and transitory, we are part of a larger story.

I would venture to guess that many of you in this room have your doubts about God, and many of you don’t keep kosher, or don’t read Hebrew or learn Torah regularly. But I believe that everyone in this room believes that the larger story of the Jewish people is of utmost importance to you, that telling that story and seeing to it that your children and grandchildren continue to tell that story is one of the defining goals of your lives. As we read last year in Amos Oz’s, “jews and words,” “Ours is not a bloodline but a textline. .. We are not about stones, clans or chromosomes.” We are about stories, a vast multi-faceted chorus of stories told across the generations.

A century ago, Mordecai Kaplan wrote about the three “b’s” of religion: believing, behaving, and belonging. Kaplan argued that although we usually associate believing with religion, in reality, it is the least salient of the three, while belonging matters most. Our lives are richer when we belong to something larger than ourselves, when we are able to transcend our narrow lives. The Jewish people are about a story, told parent to child, lovingly, across the generations, a story told through rituals, song, and food, sung in our darkest nights and at our most joyous moments. We are defined by the story to which we belong.

At the very end of the novel, Rachel, in yet another new version of her life, is a young mother in Jerusalem, with a baby on her lap. She turns to the baby, and in the final words of the novel says, “Yohanan, I am watching.” The reader catches her breath. In that moment, we discover that her new baby Yohanan is named after the first Yohanan, and we also hear her echoing the words her own mother spoke to her on her deathbed: I am watching. Rachel is watching to see what will become of this baby Yohanan’s future, just as she is watching what the next chapter will be in the original Yohanan’s dream of a story that spools out forever, more precious than a Temple, more enduring than rubies and gems. The two stories, the personal and the national, we realize, coalesce. This baby Yohanan is the newest chapter in the 2000-year-old story of the Jewish people that the original Yohanan chose to save. Past and future come together as Rachel realizes that she is watching the story that the first Yohanan chose to save unspool in the life this new baby Yohanan will live — the story gets another chapter.

Before I close, I want to return to the issue of love. What is striking about Rachel, in contrast to Elazar, her immortal boyfriend, in contrast to all the other immortal heroes throughout history, is that she is a mother. Although she often resents the drudgery of motherhood and caretaking and the endless repetition of it all, it is also abundantly clear that she deeply loves all of her children — she remembers them all, she knows the particulars of their lives, she holds each in her heart. Looking back across her lives and her children’s lives she acknowledges, “there was a stunning majesty in seeing it all.” Even as she wishes to die, love defines her life.

Something profound shifts in Rachel at the end of the novel. She believes that her granddaughter, Hannah, might be able to alter her genes and enable her to finally die, as she has longed to do these past 2000 years. Ironically, the fact of her imminent death affords her both relief and excitement — she feels truly alive. Leaving Hannah’s clinic, she arrives home only to find her house on fire. Learning that her young great-grandson is inside the burning house, she plunges headlong into the flames, saving him, knowing that she will burn, that she will lose the possibility of dying, and that she will be condemned to live yet another version of her life.

Surprisingly, though, the next and final chapter of the book finds Rachel, a young mother again, in Jerusalem, married again, a baby in her arms and happy. She no longer wants to die. She is in love, she has a new baby, everything is bathed in light. We see Rachel returning to her earlier thesis, posited throughout the book, that the small details of life are luminous and sacred. She looks at her young son and imagines his future — smiling, crawling, walking, running, growing, learning, laboring, loving, his own tunnels of joy and sorrow until he too would suffer and die and she would endure it all. But then she says, “it was worth it was worth it, all of it was worth it.”

Why has Rachel, at the very end of the novel, suddenly changed? Why has she given up her death wish? Why does she see the beauty and radiance of life instead of its endless drudgery? Perhaps this is just a younger, more optimistic version of herself, but I think that when she jumps into the flames, when she sacrifices her own death to save her great-grandchild, she understands the depth and meaning of love, a love stronger than death. This is the second time she has made this very sacrifice — her death for her child’s life — but this time she makes it with full knowledge. Love, she understands, is infinitely elastic — it extends across generations, you can love new partners, suckle new children, give more than you ever thought you could. Like the story of the Jewish people, love is infinite and precious and changing and deep. Love, like the story, like Rachel Imenu always watching out for us, is eternal.

This final chapter of the novel is called Days of Old, even though it describes a brand new incarnation and a young Rachel. The chapter title is taken from the words at the end of the book of Lamentations, the words we say every time we return the Torah to the ark: Hadesh yamenu k’kedem — renew our days as of old. These words express the paradox of life and its blessing, the joy Rachel feels so fully at the novel’s end. We long to feel the newness of each moment

and to feel its familiarity, the sense that it is new and that things have always been this way. Horn's novel suggests that love, like the Jewish story, is both new and timeless.

May we be blessed to renew our days as of old, to taste the sweetness of each moment and feel the comfort in knowing that things have been so forever and will be yet again. May we be blessed to see our lives as a chapter in the ongoing saga of the Jewish people, always new and yet the same. And may confronting our mortality, as we do on these High Holidays, give our lives meaning and purpose, so that our stories will be told, and our love felt, long after we are gone.