

The Secret to Eternal Life
Kol Nidre 5778
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What if I told you that I discovered the secret to living forever? Would you be interested? And let me be clear, it is not the Holy Grail, eating from the Garden of Eden's Tree of Life, an infomercial that I watched at 2 in the morning or a new paleo carb free raw diet.

Cleveland Clinic's Dr. Michael Roizen proposes that in the next 20 years we most certainly can increase our life span to 120, and furthermore, we will be opening the door to lives lasting to 160 years. How soon will it be that we indeed can live forever?

I recently read a book which opened with this scene: "We've gone through your will and think it's about time to sign it because no one lives forever." And the main character responds, "I'm the head of this company and have made an executive decision not to die." Jewish novelist Dara Horn's soon to be released book *Eternal Life* questions the meaning of death and our reasons for living. The main character Rachel is immortal; she cannot die. Obviously fiction, Rachel is two thousand years old living forever as a result of a spiritual bargain she made with G-d to save her dying first child. After many marriages and hundreds of children over two millenia, she simply wants die. The irony of the story is that her latest granddaughter is a medical researcher focused on discovering the secret to immortality, studying gene sequences and splicing mutations in order to make us live longer.

Rachel has a forbidden lover who also cannot die and uses twitter to express his thoughts on eternal life in 140 characters or less. Here is one of his tweets to consider: "#Eternal Life= extremely overrated. You do realize that for all that time, you have to live with yourself. Is this something you really want?" The book offers thought-provoking views on the quest for eternal life and these thoughts on what life truly means, "I wasn't afraid of dying. I was afraid of no longer changing." "I was afraid of no longer changing."

We do not live in the fictional world where immortality is obtainable. We should follow our doctors orders for living a healthy lifestyle, getting plenty of sleep, a proper diet and regular exercise which the rabbis consider one of the 613 commandments called Sh'mirat HaGuf. The reality is that our lives will come to an end, G-d willing many, many, many years from now. As the Machzor strikingly reminds us: Each person's origin is dust and each person will return to the earth as the Bible compares our lives to withering grass, passing shadows and a fleeting breeze. So how can we live forever if this is our destined end?

Yom Kippur is a day when we bargain with G-d for the chance to live another year. Our bargaining chip is the promise to search our hearts, pushing ourselves to re-evaluate and re-prioritize our lives. The rabbis use the traditional image of three huge ledgers open in Heaven- on one side there is the book of life and on the other there is the book of death waiting for our name to be inscribed, and currently our name is on the middle ledger- the undecided column- the waiting list for our fate to be determined for the next year.

The Machzor advises us:

Mi Yichye U'Mi Yamut

Who shall live and Who Shall Die?

Who in fullness of years and who with a life cut short?

On Yom Kippur, we feel vulnerable and are reminded not to take our lives for granted. Abstaining from any worldly pleasures for 25 full hours, it is as if death is close at hand for each of us. We are reminded of our mortality and the fragility of life. With the horrors of the Hurricanes and Earthquakes these last few weeks, we have real motivation to change our ways. In response, we are advised to take a deep look at our own lives, through introspection and self-evaluation- methods to change and improve ourselves. In the Mishna, Rabbi Eliezer taught, "Repent one day before your death. His students asked: Does one know on which day they will die? He responded, "No one knows the day of their death, so one should repent today

for perhaps he should die tomorrow.” (Pirkei Avot 2:10) Through teshuvah, we undergo a process of self-improvement, listing out our good and bad attributes, reviewing our relationships, actions and words of the past year. The rabbis use a healthy dose of fear to motivate us to make our lives better.

When we look back at the past year, we all carry regrets or “what if” thoughts. Amy Summerville runs a regret lab at the University of Ohio and found that regret is the second most common human emotion. Regret compares what really happened to some imagined alternative, how we could have acted or spoken differently. There are two types of regret- ruminative- like a cow that chews its same cud over and over again- we sometimes chew over the same thoughts of regret resulting in repeated negative feelings and responses. Summerville suggests there is also a positive and hopeful type of regret- where when replaying out our “what if’s”- we learn from the past and strive to do better in the future. These thoughts can help us understand and gain control of experiences that seem inexplicable. Regret is one of the stages of teshuvah, one of the necessary ways that we identify and make improvements and changes to our lives. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov used to tell his followers that they should treat their regrets like gifts: “The agony of regret is not like other kinds of agony, for it increases your days and adds to your life.” Each regret is actually an opportunity to learn about ourselves and explore a concrete change for the future.

Rabbi Kenneth Berger of Tampa, Florida, delivered a Yom Kippur sermon in 1986 following the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger entitled “Five Minutes to Live.” He stressed how we go through our days living like we have an eternity and then as we near death, we say to ourselves, “If only I realized what I had, when I had it” or “If only I had known, it would be the last time.” He advised his congregants to live like we have only one day left in this world for we are here today and gone tomorrow. Young and impassioned, Rabbi Berger saw in the space shuttle disaster how life could end so fast without closure, leaving regret, remorse and lives incomplete. The irony and lesson played out as tragically, Rabbi Kenneth Berger and his

wife Aviva not three years later died in a plane crash in the Rocky Mountains while on vacation.

As we are once more reminded of our own mortality, Yom Kippur refocuses us to live like we have one day left, to seek to repair our relationships, improve ourselves, show appreciation and express gratitude to those who give us so much, and to prioritize the essentials in life each moment.

I have to admit, I do not know the secret to living forever but I have learned from our sources the real question that we should ask ourselves in order to truly live each day. In the Talmud, when discussing an abstract matter for pages and pages and pages, the Talmud ends the discussion with this Aramaic phrase- “Mai Nafka Mina? What difference does it make?” Immediately, the rabbis focus in on the problem and provide a legal ruling applicable to our lives. “What Difference Does it Make?” That Talmudic question, “Mai Nafka Mina”- translates literally as “what comes out of it for us”- or better “why does it matter?” I know the secret to living is living a life that matters. When we strive to change each day for the better: By not counting the days of our lives, but as we say, making each day count; by not being afraid of death but being motivated to make new changes this year- that is how our legacy and memory will be even stronger. Mai Nafka Mina, why does it matter? Because in order to live forever, we have to live a new and better life each day and each year.

Last year as Elie Wiesel was nearing death, his son Elisha would visit and sit with him. What life-changing parting message did Elie Wiesel pass on his son, he told him, “Just Be.” As his father advised him throughout his lifetime as a role model and leader- the voice for all those who no longer can speak- a voice of survival, responsibility, activism and courage.

Elie Wiesel never told Elisha, “He wasn’t good enough.” He simply said, “Just Be.” “Be a good student, be a good son, be a good Jew.” Elisha writes that since his father’s death, he is grappling with his own mortality and how he wants to be remembered. He asks himself, will my children remember me for being crazy in love with them and believing they can accomplish whatever they dream? Now is the time that we all have to decide who we

want to be and how we want to be remembered. That is the message for us this Yom Kippur. How we live forever is really how do we want to be remembered forever. How we live our lives right now determines our lasting imprint on the ones we love the most and our world- that enables us to live forever. So, whether we live “Ad Meah V’Esrin” to 120, to Dr. Roizen’s future 160, to kine hora 2,000 years old- the most important lesson is to live each day with intention, love and kindness, and honesty.

Shabbat Shalom & G’mar Chatimah Tovah- May we all be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for a year filled with health, happiness, generosity, inspiration and peace.