Live Forever

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The extraordinarily long life spans in the later chapters of this week's Torah portion have troubled scholars for generations. What are we to make of Adam's 930 years or Noah's 950 years? Could they have counted years differently in those days, some suggest? Or as Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan notes, are we not meant to accept these numbers as factual accounts?

The existence of a pattern in these numbers gives us a clue. There are ten generations from Adam to Noah, with Noah being the last person to live longer than 900 years. Then life spans decline until the time of Abraham, with his father Terach being the last person to live more than 200 years. At the beginning of Genesis Chapter 6, God proclaims: "My spirit won't stay in humankind forever, since they're also flesh; and their days shall be a hundred and twenty years" (Genesis 6:3).

One suggestion is that these extraordinarily long life spans were meant to be a reminder of how earlier generations were so much greater than we are today. There may also be some tension here between infinite perfect spirit, the godly part of human beings, and finite prone-to-disorder flesh.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were long lived by current standards, 175, 180, and 147 years of age respectively, but as my son argued in his science fair project years ago, these numbers seem to be more interesting as patterns than as

reflections of years of life. Abraham's life span, 175 years, is 5 squared times 7, Isaac's 180 is 6 squared times 5, and Jacob's 147 is 7 squared times 3. Note the 5, 6, 7 going up, 7, 5, 3 going down. They prepare us for Moses's perfect age of 120, i.e., 5x4x3x2x1

Leon Kass, in an article in Firsthings, argues that Jews especially, because of the value we place on life, should be enthusiastic supporters of anything that extends one's time on earth. After all, the Bible celebrates life in this world and sees long life as a reward and blessing. Later that continues in the rabbinic literature, where we are permitted to break almost all the commandments for the sake of saving a life. In addition, the Biblical injunction *lishmor et nafshoteichem,* to take guard of our *nefesh,* our life force, is interpreted not only to give us permission to seek medical advice, but as an obligation to care for our bodies and preserve our lives.

Up until the most recent period, most of the effort around extending life has gone into extending average life expectancy through improved sanitation and public health measures like inoculations, and has been significantly effective. For example, life expectancy for white men and women in the U.S., the easiest statistic to grab, rose from 47 and 49 in the year 1900, to 75 and 80 in the year 2000. This is paralleled by increases in the life span, not quite proportionally, around the globe and in every demographic.

Today there is some backward movement on communal life spans, increases in infant and maternal mortality particularly among people of color, as well as declining life spans among white men due to deaths from suicide and substance abuse. They reflect our investment or lack thereof in the general welfare. But

there is also a lot of interest in life extension, especially among the top 1% of the top 1%, perhaps because we live in a period of intense individualism and even self-centeredness, where death feels entirely like a tragic interruption. Some people are already injecting themselves with human growth hormone, an expensive endeavor that they believe will extend their lives. There is also the stem cell research going on that might allow us to replace not only joints, but other tissue and organs, more easily. Finally, and this remains more in the field of science fiction at the present time, what if the genetic switch in our cells that causes aging could be reset? Kass notes that medicine sees each death as a failure and so is on a path to prevent death as much as possible. Would this mean ten more healthy years for all of us, or infinite life for a select few? The impacts on society would be profound.

What would Judaism say about this different path, about extending the maximum human life spans for individuals and treating death as a disease which we can try to cure? The Greek myths deal with this question in some ways, by positing a grandeur in the human that they do not see in the gods who live forever. For example, for those who have read the recent best seller *Circe,* which presents Greek mythology in contemporary language, the gods are callous and amoral, their infinite lives often a pursuit of trivialities while finite humans show courage and compassion. I think Judaism also sees our finitude, our limitedness, as part of what creates the glory of our humanity. The tension identified in the Psalms between our immortal spirit and our frail body, which is expressed also in Jewish philosophy, the emphasis on making our days count because we recognize that our lives are but a puff of breath, all prompt us to focus and to act in ways that

transcend our brief appearance on earth, whether in courage, in arts and science, or in our engagement with the world. One scientist, writing on this topic, notes that our confrontation with our mortality prompts us to develop positive qualities like empathy, which turns our concerns from our own death to the well-being of others, and gratitude, which allows us to focus on the goodness of what we do experience, both of which add greatly to the good of the world. Others note that the human desire for eternality prompts us to worry about the welfare of the next generation, and to attempt through cultural contributions to leave an enduring mark on the world.

In this week's Torah portion, the tree of infinite life remains off limits, not only to Adam and Eve, but to all future generations, guarded by the cherubs with flaming swords, perhaps for good reason.