

Live Long and Prosper

Yom Kippur - 5783

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In the 96 years of Queen Elizabeth II's lifetime, she lived through a great deal: the Great Depression, WWII and the Holocaust, 14 US Presidents, six Popes, six Satmar Rebbes, man's ascent into space, the Kennedy assassination, the dawn of the Internet era, 9/11 and COVID. But another person passed away recently who was considerably older than the late sovereign. In fact, at the time of the Queen's birth, she was almost Bat Mitzvah. Her name was Mimi Reinhardt, and when she passed away a few months ago outside of Haifa, she was 107 years old! What she did in her life was so noteworthy that a film depicting her story went on to win seven Academy awards, and is regarded by many as one of the greatest cinematic triumphs of all time. And yet, in all likelihood, you've never heard of her, except for maybe recently, due to her remarkable longevity.

The long lives that Mimi Reinhardt and Queen Elizabeth lived are not something we can take for granted these days. In fact, for the first time in nearly a century, life expectancy of the average American has *dropped*- from 79 in 2019 to 76 in 2022².

¹ I thank my *derasha chavrusah*, Rabbi Shaanan Gelman, for his partnership in developing this sermon.

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/09/america-mortality-life-expectancy-pandemic/671350/>

There are many factors that help explain this upsetting and precipitous downward trend. Chief among them is the ravages of Covid, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. Factoring in as well are the effects of mental illness, gun violence, loneliness, obesity and sedentary lifestyles, especially since many working adults don't have to leave their homes, let alone their chairs, to perform their jobs. Such a dramatic decline in life-expectancy hasn't been seen since World War I, leading The Atlantic magazine to refer to the United States as a "Rich Death Trap". As this terrible reality is unfolding on our watch, it behooves us to ask: how may we reverse the trend? Could there be a more appropriate time to contemplate our mortality, and the trajectory of our lives, than Yom Kippur (especially before Yizkor)? We sense that our lives hang in the balance; we dress in white to evoke a burial shroud, and we utter the words מי יחיה ומי ימות, who will live and who will die. Even if we *are* blessed with long years, we still beseech God regarding the quality of those years- hence the refrain , אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה , - do not cast us aside in our old age. How many good years do we have left? What is the secret to a long and good life?

This question was asked of our Sages by their students, who, like us, were preoccupied by longevity³: במה הארכת ימים - How did you manage to live a long life?"

³ Megillah 27b

Rabbi Nechunya ben HaKannah answered that, in his entire life, he never received honor from the downfall of others- מימי לא נתכבדתי בקלון חברי. We often view success as a zero sum game; we can only rise up when someone else falls. There is a chassidic story⁴ told about Rav Zalman Aharon Schneerson, known as the RaZ”A, and his younger brother, Rav Sholom Dov Ber, the Rebbe Rashab, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe. As children, the two brothers would often play *Rebbe*, one wearing the traditional shtreimel and the other wearing the gartel, seeking “the Rebbe’s” counsel. There was quite a bit of competition between them, exacerbated by the fact that Rebbe Rashab was taller than the RaZ”A even though he was younger. One time, the two brothers were playing and the RaZ”A snuck up behind his brother and pushed him into a shallow ditch, crowing “Look who’s taller now!” The boys’ father, Rav Shmuel, observed the whole incident, and brought a chair over. He ordered young Zalman Aharon to stand on the chair, and then asked him, “Tell me, who’s taller now?” Pausing for a moment, he said “See- there you are. To be bigger than your friend, there is no reason to push him down. Elevate yourself instead.” Rabbi Nechunya was telling us that a life that is viewed as an endless competition is- to quote the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes- nasty, brutish and short.

Unfortunately, corporations and institutions often fall into this way of thinking. It’s not good enough to be a successful company- we need to be the leading brand, and crush our competition. It’s not enough to be a vibrant shul, or a terrific school- we

⁴ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/132416/jewish/Superiority.htm

need to be the largest shul, the first or only one to offer some service or program, and no one better horn in on our territory. It's not enough to have a beautiful home- we need the nicest one with the newest gadgets that others don't yet have. Today, we ask God to give us the tools to lengthen our days. That means health- not just to be healthier than someone else, but to be completely physically and mentally healthy. We ask God for wealth- to give us the amount that *we need*, not an amount that exceeds what we think someone else has; the same is true for tzedaka. We have to give based on what *we* can give, not based on what someone else does. When we measure our religious success, it's tempting, and easy, to be satisfied by being just observant or knowledgeable enough to be the authority on Judaism at work, or family gatherings...even if that may not be a particularly high bar. But that isn't enough; we have to evaluate our own potential and ability to grow, not relative to anyone else's.

Rav Elazar ben Shamu'a offered a different explanation. He merited a long life, he said, because he never used a shul as a shortcut.

מימי לא עשיתי בית הכנסת קפנדריא

On a simple level, this means that you should not just traipse through a shul on the way to another location. This is even codified in halachah; if the shortest route to another part of the building, for example, is through a shul or a Beit Midrash, you must pause for a moment, ideally reciting a verse of Tanach or studying a Torah

teaching before continuing. On a deeper level, though, a shortcut means that you are in such a rush to get somewhere else that you lose sight of *where you are*. Perhaps a shortcut through a holy place means that we are bypassing the most sacred moments, the ones that take place along the journey itself. This past summer, I had occasion to travel quite a bit. Baruch Hashem, the travel was for happy occasions, and virtually all my flights and connections went flawlessly. Even the multiple flights that got me into with little time to spare before weddings, arrived on time and went off without a hitch- no pun intended. My good fortune held out until the very last flight. Shaya and I (and Joe and Shachar Ravitsky) were traveling back from New York, where I picked him up from Camp Dora Golding. In the final 30 minutes of our flight home, we encountered a series of unfortunate events. A storm over Dallas caused us to circle, as a result of which we needed to refuel, rerouting us to Oklahoma City. While we were waiting to refuel, a passenger experienced a psychiatric emergency that required immediate medical attention. All these delays caused the crew to time out, and we had to spend the night there, and despite my elite status with Emerald, there were no rental cars anywhere in Oklahoma City for us to make the three hour drive home. Shaya was really worried, and when we landed, before we knew what would happen, he began saying Tehillim. The moment they announced that we would be spending the night, he turned to me and said, "I guess Hashem doesn't want us to be in Dallas tonight..." Now, Shaya made it abundantly clear that being his father's roommate in a grungy airport hotel

room was not his idea of an epic adventure, but he accepted that there was value, somehow, in the journey, in being present in the moment. I wish I could say that I was this present in that moment- or in any interactions I have with the most important people in my life. How many of us are, though? It isn't just the intrusion of technology in our lives that distracts us from paying attention to the people we care for the most. No, it's that we attempt to dispose of problems our loved ones are facing by jumping right to potential solutions for the future, without tending to their emotional needs in the present. Men are stereotypically the biggest offenders in this department. Dr John Gottman, famed psychologist and relationship guru, preaches about the importance of becoming an emotional coach. For example, your child refuses to get ready for school one morning. There are two simple responses to encouraging her to get moving; you can yell at her and threaten punishment for non-compliance or you can bribe her in the hopes that she will relent. There isn't much time to psychologize, but only by addressing the underlying issue- academic performance, social anxiety, bullying- can the problem be addressed and the child be healed. When you fail to identify the underlying cause, everything else is a bandaid, קפנדריא , skipping over the most hallowed moments of an essential relationship.

Finally, when asked what he did to merit a long life, R' Preida commented:

מימי לא קדמני אדם לבית-המדרש

No one ever beat me to the Beit Midrash

At first blush, this statement seems to be at odds with Rebbe Nechunya ben haKana who cautioned against turning life into a competition with others. Why does Rebbe Preida seemingly lord himself over his colleagues - bragging that “you’d have to wake up pretty early in the morning to beat me to the Beis Medrash”? What makes his actions so meritorious?

I think the answer might be that most people only decide to do something once they observe others doing it. Rebbe Preida challenges us to be the person who sets the tone for others, even if no one follows suit. Be the one who turns on the lights in the dark room, the one who invites others to study with you, the one who opens their home for guests even if others are reticent, the one who advocates for a cause before it is popularized. When we consider that the bulk of the Yom Kippur service consists of a man who carries out the *avoda* in solitude, with no one else around, we are reminded that good deeds need not have an audience or a following to be deemed worthy. Case in point- Mimi Reinhardt. Long before making aliyah at age of 92 (you heard that right), she was a secretary in a factory. She was not the world’s most proficient typist- she could only peck away with two fingers, so when she was given an assignment by her boss, it took her a while, but she did it meticulously. The assignment was to type a list, consisting of a few hundred names, and when the list grew, she added more names to it- but had to retype the list again each time because there was no Microsoft Word. Eventually, the list grew to about 1,100

names, who shared one thing in common: they all belonged to Jews who had been marked for death in the Plaszow camp, but were also able to work. As you have probably guessed, the list was being prepared at the behest of her boss, Oskar Schindler.

במה האריכה ימים? We are not God's accountants, and we don't actually know why some merit lengthy and fulfilling lives and others don't. But if length of years corresponds in any way to a life well lived, we have a pretty good guess as to how she made it to 107.

Allow me to take you back to a moment that took place right here at Shaare Tefilla a few months ago. It was one of the most powerful moments of this year and, indeed, one of the most powerful moments I can recall in recent memory. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein- he should live and be well- long time senior Rabbi of Kehilath Jeshurun and principal of Ramaz, spent Shabbos in our community, to join the Wolk and Cinnamon families for the aufruf of Shimi, his newest grandson. As a student of his, having the opportunity to welcome Rabbi Lookstein and introduce him was a great personal privilege, but what left the most powerful impression on me, and so many of you, was the mussaf he led. During Chazarat HaShatz, he departed from the usual nussach of which he is such a consummate master. During the Modim tefillah,

rather than singing the words, he said the words instead- slowly, deliberately and with great feeling.

נוֹדָה לָּךְ וַיִּסְפֹּר תְּהִלָּתְךָ עַל־חַיֵּינוּ הַמְּסוּרִים בְּיָדְךָ וְעַל נִשְׁמוֹתֵינוּ הַמְּקוּדוֹת לָּךְ וְעַל נִסֵּיךָ שֶׁבְּכָל יוֹם עֲמָנוּ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ
וְטוֹבוֹתֶיךָ שֶׁבְּכָל עֵת עָרֵב וְבִקְרֹן וְצָהָרִים

Many of you took note of it, as did I, and came over to me afterward and mentioned it to me. At kiddush, I asked him why he did it. He replied, “I am, thank God, 90 years old. I'm doing stuff that I'm not supposed to be doing! I'm studying and teaching Torah, I'm playing tennis, and I'm traveling for family simchas. So when I say the words of *Modim* thanking God for daily miracles, and for wonders he performs daily, I mean it. I don't take *any* of it for granted.”

Rabbi Lookstein is keenly aware that a long, healthy, fulfilling life is not guaranteed to any of us. Yet, as we make the case for why we deserve one, let us take a moment to pause and remember what we are really asking for. A long life means a life where we can grow without others shrinking; it means a life without shortcuts, in which we appreciate each moment of the journey; it means a life in which we set the standard, and don't require the approval or initiative of others before acting. If we can live up to these ideals, may God add our names to His list, in His book of life.