

Parashat Vayigash

So, who wants to live forever? Human beings have been pursuing immortality from the earliest, primeval times. The idea that there is life after death developed simultaneously with man's first conscious recognition that he is mortal. As Hashem said to Adam and Chavah after their sin, "For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return." Ever since then humans have been trying desperately to defer the moment of death, lengthen their days and establish the means by which they may attain to, not just an after life, but a blessed one. After all, who wants to live forever if that forever is *gei hinnom*? According to the Bible the life span of a human being was initially huge. The Torah tells us, for instance, that Adam lived for 930 years. Indeed, at least up until *ha mabul* - the flood - people are said to have lived to a similar ripe old age: Kayin at 730, Shet 920, Yered lived to be 962, while Metushelach, Yered's grandson, died at 969 years old. After the flood, so the Torah tells us, lifespans dropped rapidly. Shem, Noach's son, died at 600; his son Shelach died at 438, but Shelach's grandson died at just 239. Nachor, Avraham's grandfather only lived to be 148, while, as next week's parashah records, Yaakov, Avraham's grandson, died at 147. Moshe was 120 when he died. As the Torah tells us, even at 120 Moshe's "eye was undimmed, and his vigour was unabated" Interestingly, this Moshe died at precisely the same age as predicted by Hashem just prior to the judgement of the flood. As we read in Bresheet 6:3: "My Spirit will not live in human beings forever, for they too are flesh; therefore their life span is to be 120 years." And yet the lifespan of humans, as recorded in the Bible, did not remain fixed at 120, but they continued to fall after Moshe. Thus King David died at age 70, when he was "old and advanced in years." The drop in lifespan was such that Moshe not only felt compelled to lament man's lot in this respect, the shortness of his life, but to observe that in future a good lifespan would be just 70-80 years old. As we read in Tehillim 90,

"A prayer of Moshe the man of God:
Adonai, you have been our dwelling place
in every generation.
Before the mountains were born,
before you had formed the earth and the world,
from eternity past to eternity future
you are God.
You bring frail mortals to the point of being crushed,
then say, "People, repent!"
For from your viewpoint a thousand years
are merely like yesterday or a night watch.
When you sweep them away, they become like sleep;
by morning they are like growing grass,
growing and flowering in the morning,
but by evening cut down and dried up.
For we are destroyed by your anger,
overwhelmed by your wrath.

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You have placed our faults before you,
our secret sins in the full light of your presence.
All our days ebb away under your wrath;
our years die away like a sigh.
The span of our life is seventy years,
or if we are strong, eighty;
yet at best it is toil and sorrow,
over in a moment, and then we are gone.
Who grasps the power of your anger and wrath
to the degree that the fear due you should inspire?
So teach us to count our days,
so that we will become wise.
Return, Adonai! How long must it go on?
Take pity on your servants!
Fill us at daybreak with your love,
so that we can sing for joy as long as we live.
Let our joy last as long as the time you made us suffer,
for as many years as we experienced trouble.
Show your deeds to your servants
and your glory to their children.
May the favour of Adonai our God be on us,
prosper for us all the work that we do —
yes, prosper the work that we do.”

Why, you may ask, does any of this matter? Why are we even talking about this, this morning? I have to admit that my interest has been piqued this week by a BBC news report that simply asked, “How Long Could We Live?” The BBC’s Medical Correspondent, Fergus Walsh, asked, “How long do you want to live - to 85, 90, 100 or beyond? More important than how long we live is the state of our health in old age. The oldest verified person to date was Jeanne Calment of France, who died in 1997 aged 122. Now scientists in the United States believe drugs could be on the horizon that delay the diseases of old age and increase the healthy years of life. But could such treatments also mean we live longer? Undoubtedly, according to Aubrey de Grey, a biomedical gerontologist and probably the world's leading advocate of life extension - the belief that medical advances will enable humans to live for hundreds of years.” Wow! Hundreds of years! If science could pull that one off, it would be as if humans had returned to the ante-diluvian lifespan. Imagine all those candles on your birthday cake. I don’t know about blowing them out; you would surely need a fire engine on hand to douse the flames! Would you like to live for 800 years? I’m not so sure myself, certainly not if my quality of life was significantly diminished. It’s one thing living to a great age, but what about all the diseases and disabilities that usually attend the elderly? Apparently Aubrey de Grey “has ploughed millions of pounds of his own money into ageing

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research, and is chief science officer of the SENS Research Foundation, which has laboratories in Silicon Valley, California." As Fergus Walsh reports, De Grey has said, "I've yet to meet someone who wants to get Alzheimer's - ill health as a result of ageing is the biggest problem facing the world." He believes medicine is close to solving the problem: "There will certainly be no limit on how long people might live when we bring ageing under control. "People will still die - there are still trucks to be hit by - but the fact is people will on average live much longer unless some bizarre thing happens like we get hit by an asteroid." Crucially, Dr De Grey believes medical advances will mean we will spend those extra years in robust good health." Well that's a relief! But the idea that ageing can be vanquished like this is very definitely a minority view. While scientists have found that they can massively increase the lifespan of simple organisms such as yeast, fruit flies or worms, it is apparently inordinately harder to achieve increases the further you go up the evolutionary ladder. In the laboratory they have increased lifespans of these simple organisms by up to 500%. Mice have had their lifespans extended by 20-30%. But humans? Whatever De Grey says, progress in this area has been frustratingly slow. Though Facebook creator, Mark Zuckerberg, (yes, one of ours!), has vowed to "cure, prevent, or manage all disease," by the end of the 21st Century, the fact is that for most of us here, that'll be way too late. In all likelihood most of us here will have Moshe's three score years plus ten, twenty or at most thirty.

Perhaps you think all this talk of lifespans is a bit morbid and depressing. Perhaps it's something that you'd rather not contemplate. After all, none of us really knows definitely what awaits us in the next world. Indeed, as Kohelet mused, "I have seen the task God has given humanity to keep us occupied. He has made everything suited to its time; also, he has given human beings an awareness of eternity; but in such a way that they can't fully comprehend, from beginning to end, the things God does.... Concerning people, I said to myself, "God is testing them, so that they will see that by themselves they are just animals. After all, the same things that happen to people happen to animals, the very same thing — just as the one dies, so does the other. Yes, their breath is the same; so that humans are no better than animals; since nothing matters, anyway. They all go to the same place; they all come from dust, and they all return to dust. Who knows if the spirit of a human being goes upward and the spirit of an animal goes downward into the earth?" So who knows? And yet, as Kohelet added: "For everything there is a season, a right time for every intention under heaven - a time to be born and a time to die." Coming to terms with our mortality is a very human struggle. It is partly what marks us out from the animals. Which other species has so contemplated their mortality, and peered into eternity as we humans? All religion has ultimately spawned from this pre-occupation and, each, in its own way, has sought to give reassurance to us. How reassured you may or may not feel as you reflect on your future may depend upon your religion. In the end, I suppose, because as Kohelet says, none of us definitely knows, it is emunah, or trusting faithfulness that we are left with. All true religion is based on this emunah. Emunah is what remains when our knowledge fails, as it most definitely does when it comes to knowing about the afterlife. We tend to confuse faith with knowing, particularly with doctrines, with being sure, with 'seeing the light,' but actually faith

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is all about not knowing, and it exists side by side with doubt and darkness. And thus, like Avraham who was called to leave Haran without knowing where he was going, we continue to trust in spite of our being kept completely in the dark as to where we are headed. Avraham's walk into uncertainty reminds us that courage is also a hallmark of emunah. Rather than faith being a crutch, and easy path, as some atheists might chide, trusting faithfulness requires courage with a good old dose of chutzpah. In the Bible we find that there are many opinions expressed on what happens to us after our lifespan here on earth has ended, and to be honest, it's difficult to synthesise them all since the Bible isn't just a single book, but a library of tens of books which span thousands of years of Jewish thought and experience. And yet, if we were to find a common theme running through these books, it is this - try and relax and trust that the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the God whose love overflowed and compelled Him to create the heavens and the earth, can be trusted to catch you on the other side. He has made a way through the apparently impenetrable barrier that is death so that, as the Sages say, "All Israel has a share in the Age to Come."

The Torah offers us a vision of familial restoration and of blessed companionship with all those whom we love. As we read, "Avraham breathed his last, dying at a ripe old age, an old man full of years; and he was gathered to his people." Of Yishmael we read, "This is how long Yishma'el lived: 137 years. Then he breathed his last, died and was gathered to his people." Yitzchak too, "breathed his last, died and was gathered to his people, an old man full of years." And in next week's parashah we shall read of Yaakov, "[That] When Ya'akov had finished charging his sons, he drew his legs up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people." Speaking of Aharon Hashem said that, "[he] will be gathered to his people — he will die there." And similarly, Hashem told Moshe that, "you too will be gathered to your people, just as Aharon your brother was gathered."

Fear of death is natural and instinctive. It is, after all, a Rubicon, a wide river, that none of us have yet crossed or can see beyond, and that's somewhat disturbing. We like to know where we are going, especially as we live in an age of information, where Google is at our fingertips. Such knowledge gives us the semblance of control over our lives. But it is only a semblance of control. And that is perhaps why the end of our lives is so fearful. It is completely beyond our control and understanding. And yet from across the other side of the river, echoing gently through the pages of our Torah, if we listen attentively, we may hear a still, small voice, the Ruach, reassuring us that all is well and will be well. In fact, receiving this reassurance is vital if we are to attend to the matters that, throughout the Scriptures, Hashem repeatedly insists that we address *now, today* - the not so small matter of living well. In truth none of us knows what our lifespan will be, but it is clear that we cannot live justly, humbly or graciously in the present if we are too pre-occupied with a future that is beyond our vision. For as Messiah said, "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."