

When Does Life Begin?

Rabbi Richard A. Block

The Temple – Tifereth Israel

Cleveland and Beachwood, OH

Yizkor 5778/2017

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi, were discussing the question of when life begins. The priest said, "We Catholics believe life begins at the moment of conception." The minister responded, "We Protestants believe life begins at the 'quickenings,' when a pregnant woman can feel the fetus moving." The rabbi replied, "We Jews see it differently. We believe that life begins when the kids go off to college and the dog dies."

There is nothing funny about losing a beloved pet, as we did last year, but while I miss Carmi's sweet presence, I see both humor and wisdom in the joke. Actually, Jewish law holds that a fetus attains the status of a "person" at birth; from a traditional perspective, that's when life begins. But birth is only the first in a series of stages and transitions through which we pass, involving both endings and beginnings, when life, as it were, begins again.

As Shakespeare famously wrote:

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages..."

Shakespeare's first five were the infant, the school boy, the lover, the soldier, and the justice.

"The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,

With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;

His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide

For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,

Turning again toward childish treble, pipes

And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,

That ends this strange eventful history,

Is second childishness and mere oblivion;

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

In a beloved, and considerably more uplifting poem, now part of our liturgy, Rabbi Alvin Fine described life's stages and passages in words that are now familiar:

Birth is a beginning

and death a destination

And life is a journey:

From childhood to maturity

and youth to age;

From innocence to awareness

and ignorance to knowing;

From foolishness to discretion
and then perhaps to wisdom.
From weakness to strength
or strength to weakness
and often back again;
From health to sickness
and back we pray to health again.
From offense to forgiveness,
from loneliness to love,
from joy to gratitude,
from pain to compassion,
and grief to understanding,
from fear to faith.
From defeat to defeat to defeat
until looking backward or ahead
We see that victory lies not
at some high point along the way
but in having made the journey,
stage by stage -
a sacred pilgrimage.
Birth is a beginning
and death a destination

But life is a journey;

A sacred pilgrimage made stage by stage - from birth to death to life everlasting.

The progression we call the Jewish "life cycle" presumes a certain orderliness and patterned predictability – birth, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, children and ultimately, death - and it offers rituals that enhance the significance, address the emotions, and deepen the meaning of each passage. But as Rabbi Fine implies, and as we know from experience, life is not always orderly, and pivotal events occur that we didn't anticipate, some joyous and others not, resulting from both choices we make and circumstances beyond our control.

In her novel, *High Tide in Houston*, Barbara Kingsolver writes, "Every one of us is called upon, probably many times, to start a new life. A frightening diagnosis, a marriage, a move, loss of a job...And onward full tilt we go, pitched and wrecked and absurdly resolute, driven in spite of everything to make good on a new shore. To be hopeful, to embrace one possibility after another – that is surely the basic instinct.... Crying out: High tide! Time to move out into the glorious debris. Time to take this life for what it is." "In my own worst seasons," she continues, "I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again."

Paul Kalanithi, a young neurosurgeon who wrote *When Breath Becomes Air* after being diagnosed with stage IV metastatic lung cancer, initially pursued a doctorate in literature. "But I couldn't let go of the question," he writes, "Where did biology, mortality, literature and philosophy intersect?" He decided medicine would allow him "a chance to find answers that are not in books, to find a different sort of sublime, to forge relationships with the suffering, and to keep following the question of what makes human life meaningful, even in the face of death and decay."

The journey that brought Susie and me to you, and will soon take us onward, has involved both choice and chance, decisions that sometimes turned out well for entirely different reasons than the ones that motivated them, happy accidents, amazing coincidences, serendipity, and God's anonymous miracle-making. On Rosh Hashanah, I described the wondrous timing that brought my dad home to my mom after serving in WWII and brought me into being. Timing also played an enormous role in the unfolding of my life. It's amazing how as seemingly inconsequential events can later prove providential.

Three examples. When I was in 5th grade, I was invited to advance to a combined 5th/6th grade class that would have resulted in my graduating grade school a year sooner. My parents let me decide and I said no. Why? Because I had my first male teacher ever and he loved sports and gave us two recess periods a day instead of one. Had I said yes, I would eventually have graduated from college a year earlier, just when graduate student deferments were eliminated, might be drafted and sent to Vietnam, probably would never have met Susie, and certainly would not have the family

we do.

In rabbinical school, being an older student, I took a crushing load of courses and was ordained a year early. If I hadn't, I would not have been eligible to become senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Am four years later, and my rabbinate would have taken an entirely different direction. My decision to leave Beth Am to lead the World Union for Progressive Judaism was a monumental mistake. Though we loved living in Israel, I hated the job. In retrospect, God surely knew that Susie would never agree to move directly to Cleveland from Palo Alto, so She sent us to Jerusalem and allowed us to be miserable. My terrible decision to take that job eventually brought us here and made possible the most fulfilling period of my rabbinic career.

Robert Frost wrote,

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

It certainly has for me.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez claimed that, "Wisdom comes to us when it can no longer do any good." As a rabbi, I have known many people for whom that turned out to be true - who discovered the preciousness of life only when stricken with a terminal illness, or didn't realize how unbalanced their work and family lives had become until their kids were grown and gone, or never told dear ones how much they loved and appreciated them when they were alive. That has always struck me as terribly sad, and I have often asked myself how I could help people figure out what matters most in life sooner than they otherwise might, in time for it to make a meaningful difference. The effort to do that by sharing the wisdom of Jewish tradition and human experience, along with whatever insights I could impart, has been my primary sermonic goal, especially at *yizkor*.

It is sometimes said that, "good judgment comes from experience and

experience comes from *bad* judgment." We can learn a good deal, but only so much, from the wisdom and example of others. Some things we have to learn for ourselves. In a wonderful commencement speech at his son's 9th grade graduation, Chief Justice John Roberts said, "From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time, so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you'll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they're going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes."

These words describe well the learning curve of my sacred pilgrimage, of yours, too, I hope, and that of loved ones whose memory we cherish, today and always. The Torah commands, "Choose life!" Our prayerbook proclaims, "*Hayom harat olam, The world is born today.*" When does life begin? Life begins anew for us each morning. As Yom Kippur draws near its end, I pray that the choices we make on life's journey will be good ones. I pray that, despite occasional obstacles and detours, the roads we take,

you and I, as we go forth, together and apart, from birth to death to life everlasting, will lead to abundant blessing. May God guard your going out and your coming in, to life and to peace, from this time forth and for evermore.