

ADDING LIFE AND TIME TO YOUR LIFETIME

The entire world is chasing after the secret to longevity, but I think I have figured it out.

What's Going on At Shul?

A while back, a study on longevity was published by Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel. In 1997, their researchers interviewed a group of men over age 60 on their life routines: the things they did or didn't do. In 2004, they followed up and found that over 60% were still alive.

The most surprising discovery was that among the surviving participants, those who regularly attended synagogue had a 75% higher life expectancy than those who didn't. In summary: if you go to shul, you have a 75% higher chance of living a long life.

The researchers tried to explain this phenomenon by claiming that participants who went to shul on Shabbos weekends walked by foot, which automatically gave them exercise and fitness. A second explanation was that the participants' faith and trust in G-d lent them peace of mind and less stress, which resulted in longer life. A third explanation posited that the social activity of visiting the synagogue, which entails meeting people, talking with friends and connecting to the community, gave participants strength.

Until 120

But perhaps there's something deeper missing here.

We all know the expression "until 120." Every Jew, especially older ones, like being wished "may you live until 120."

The story is told of an elderly Jew who was asked by an officer, "How old are you?" The old man didn't want to answer. The officer repeatedly asked with no success until another Jew came along and asked, "Until 120, how old are you?" The man's face lit up and he immediately responded.

Now, where did this expression come from? What's the deal with specifically 120?

Towards the end of this week's Torah portion, Noach, we read: "G-d said, 'My spirit will not continue to judge man forever, since he is nothing but flesh. His days shall be 120 years.'" Before the Great Flood, man would live for hundreds of years—but afterwards, G-d set mankind's age at 120.

So there we have it, right in the Torah. But again: why indeed 120? Why not a nice round number like 100 or 150? To understand this, let's take a look at life itself.

Life is generally divided into three stages: youth, midlife, and seniority.

The Torah teaches us that 40 years constitutes a stage. For example, the stage of Jewish history known as the Generation of the Desert—meaning, the period of time during which our ancestors wandered the Sinai Desert between leaving Egypt

and entering the Holy Land—was 40 years long. (In general, the number 40 connotes a stage: Moshe was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Torah from G-d for 40 days; during the Great Flood in our Torah portion, the rain first fell for 40 days.) In like manner, a lifetime is divided into three stages of 40 years each.

For the first 40 years, a person is still “young.” That’s why there are opinions that forbid the study of Kabbalah until age 40—because until then, one is not fully grown. From 40 to 80 is the midlife stage—until you turn 80, don’t even think about your pension. (Maybe that’s how the U.S. can get rid of the entire Social Security problem!) Finally, from 80 to 120 is the senior stage.

In the Torah we find that Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest human being to ever live, lived to 120, the ultimate age.

His life was divided into three stages. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 100:10) says that the first 40 years of Moshe’s life were spent in Egypt in Pharaoh’s royal household; the second 40 years in Midyan, to which he had fled, in Yisro’s household; and the third 40 years taking the Jewish Nation out of Egypt—which the Torah explicitly describes in saying, “Moshe was 80 years old when he stood before Pharaoh [to say: ‘Let my people go!’].” At 80 years old, Moshe started a new career.

Of the great Sages, several of the most famous ones lived to 120. One such widely-known name is Rabbi Akiva, considered a patriarch without whom the Torah would have been lost from Israel. He lived to 120. Additionally, his life was divided into 40-year periods, as we are told that until 40 he was an

ignoramus—only then did he begin studying Torah and starting a new chapter in his life. Upon reaching 80, he became the leading scholar that he is known as today.

Another famous Sage recognized by all was named Hillel, the very same Hillel who famously said, “What is hateful unto you, do not do unto your fellow.” He also lived to 120, and his life was split into three 40-year stages: at 40 he made Aliyah to the Holy Land from Babylon; he served scholars for the next 40 years; and sustained the Jewish People for his last 40 years.

One more famous person, who lived in the period between Hillel and Rabbi Akiva, also lived to 120 and lived a three-part life: Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai, whom the Talmud says ran a business until 40, studied the Torah for the next 40 and taught Torah for the final 40.

The Kabbalah teaches that all three—Hillel, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai—were the reincarnation of Moshe Rabbeinu, which is why they also led the Jewish People in 40-year periods.

The Jewish Secret to Longevity

But we’re still left with the question: what is the secret of longevity? What must we do to merit long lives? Why do shul-goers live longer?

Everyone complains about the expense of Jewish education. How can it be that we must pay \$10,000 or \$15,000 for just one year of tuition, or thousands to send a kid to a Jewish camp? Beyond that, it’s expensive all around to be Jewish—for

example, kosher meat costs far more than its non-kosher equivalent, and holiday expenses rack up monstrous bills.

But I have news for you—the Talmud (Tractate Beitzah 17a) says something very interesting: “A person’s entire sustenance is set between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, except for Shabbos and holiday expenses, and tuition expenses. If these are less, less is given to him, and if these are excessive, more is given to him.”

If Heaven decides on Rosh Hashanah that a person will earn \$100,000 this year, and his Jewish-education expenses amount to another \$20,000, he has nothing to worry about—that \$20,000 will not come out of the stipend allotted to him by G-d for this year. It’s nothing but an extra. Likewise, if this person incurs sizable expenses at the holidays, these are not included in the allotment—at the end of the year he will earn precisely \$100,000 dollars, despite tuition and other expenses. Why? Because when you spend on something G-d wants, it’s not your own money that you’re spending but G-d’s.

There was well-known Chosid named Rabbi Leizer Nanes. This Chosid lived in Soviet Russia during the worst Communist years, traveling at the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe’s behest to establish secret Jewish schools all across Russia. He succeeded in his mission and saved many Jewish children from spiritual destruction. But the KGB slowly caught up with him and finally arrested and tried him, exiling him to twenty years of hard labor in a Siberian work camp.

Somehow, Rabbi Nanes survived the dreadful suffering and

returned to his home and family in Russia itself, meriting to emigrate from Russia in the mid-60s to Israel.

At the first possible opportunity, he traveled to the Rebbe in Brooklyn, New York. When he entered the Rebbe's office for his private "yechidus" meeting, the Rebbe gave him various duties such as talking to the yeshivah students. He told the Rebbe apologetically that the work was not easy and that he was already almost 70. So the Rebbe said: "I'm not counting your years in prison." (In other words, 'your years in prison don't count')

What does that mean? Let's say that a Jew was destined to live 80 years. The 20 years of slave labor, then, would not be counted; the 80 would not include them. Indeed, Rabbi Naness lived to 100: he was born in 1897 and passed away one century later, in 1997. Why? Because his twenty years in Siberia weren't part of the math. (On a personal note—my father, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, spent six years and three months in Soviet prison, and he passed away at the age of eighty-six and three months...)

Sometimes people complain that they've wasted 5 years of their life volunteering or building a Jewish organization. My friends—the years which we invest in Jewish matters do not count! Just the opposite—every moment you spend on something Jewish is added to the set number of years you've been given to live.

Maybe that's why those shul-going Israelis live longer. If you add up all the time they spent in shul over a lifetime, that time

will be added to their lifetime. Let's say it adds up to five years. That means that they will live five years longer than those at the same station in life—because those five years were never theirs in the first place. They were added by G-d.

By the way, this is the reason why the Talmud (Tractate Taanis 31a) says that from the 15th of the Hebrew month of Av onward, when the nights begin getting longer, one who learns Torah makes his life longer—because, as Rashi explains, the time spent studying Torah is not one's own time but rather, time granted by G-d as an extension, thusly literally adding life to one's life.

So the next time they ask you to volunteer to a Jewish cause, don't say "I don't have time." Just the opposite—giving to Jewish causes gives you more time, time you won't find in your calendar.