

"The Great Debate "

It was perhaps one of the longest debate in Talmudic history, an argument that spanned two and a half years. It was between the Yankees and the Red Sox of the Jewish religion of 2000 years ago: The School of Shammai and the School of Hillel. And their debate was not about anything as simple as whether something was kosher or permissible on the Sabbath, or even if an animal was acceptable as a sacrifice in the Temple. It was a philosophical argument about the meaning of life and death. Here are the words of the Talmud:

“For two and a half years, the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel debated. The School of Hillel said: “It is better for man to have been created than not to have been created.” The School of Shammai

said: “It is better for man not to have been created than to have been created.”

Talmud(Eruvin 13b)

The School of Shammai, which rarely won arguments over their rival school Hillel felt that when you think about it, life is too tough. Human existence, with its constant challenges, troubles and travails is simply not worth it. It is just too painful. With a world of sin and temptation, illness and death, heartache and heartbreak, it would have been better that G-d had not made us.

The School of Hillel? Yes, but life has its joys, its pleasures and its celebrations. We have the blessings of birth and companionship, love and affection. It is better that man was created.

After two and half years, they finally came to an agreement. In a stunning upset, the School of Hillel

agreed with the School of Shammai: it is indeed better for man not to have been created. But the passage ends by saying: however, since we have been created, it is our obligation to live and to perform mitzvot.

End of story.

When it comes to the Talmud, I am a little like a guest at an all you can eat wedding smorgasbord. I'll read a passage and say: "Oh, this is the best I have ever seen!". But then I will sample another section, and say "Oh, now **this** is the best." Well, today I hear the words from this Talmudic debate and find myself saying "Oh, now this is the best passage I have ever read!"

This is an amazing question and an incredible conclusion. If you know anything about Judaism, you know that we are a life affirming religion. It is not by accident that we wear jewelry with the word "Chai" (life) or give

charity in denominations of 18 dollars (the Hebraic numerical value of the word “life”) . Life is considered the greatest blessing in our faith. And this passage from the Talmud does not negate that view. However, it is giving us a sober assessment about life. Life is good, but it is so hard and filled with sorrow. And when life is so bitter and tough, it is, indeed, better not to have been born.

With illness and disease, the difficulty of raising a family, the bitterness of divorce, the frustrations of failure, the struggles, the death of loved ones, life can be so good, but it is so very hard to endure. And when depression sets in, when one’s existence is *loneliness*, when pain and heartache leaves a person numb, it would have been better for man to have never been born.

When life is good, there is nothing more beautiful; but when life is difficult, there is nothing more painful. And for

too many and too often, the latter is their plight and to them, the rabbis say: better never to have been born than to suffer as you do.

But the Talmud doesn't stop there. It ends by saying: "It is, indeed, better for man not to have been created but now that he is and while he is on earth, it is up to him to perform mitzvot (commandments)."

You know what that means? It is our rabbis' way of giving us a "survival mechanism". Life has to be endured and it can be made great despite the pain. Though I am not sure the founder of psychoanalysis would appreciate being quoted in a synagogue, I offer you the words of Sigmund Freud. He wrote: "In order to endure life, prepare for death". Freud said more succinctly what Hillel and Shammai debated for years. Life is hard and it can often only be endured ***by preparing for death***, by doing certain

things before one leaves this world. According to Hillel and Shammai, life is endured by doing mitzvot while one is here on earth.

What do they want us to do? Since Rosh Hashana, we have been talking about “preparing for death,” for the High Holidays are a celebration of life **and** a time of preparation for death.

Preparing for death. All week, we have been told how to prepare for death: ***Tshuva, Tefillah, Tzedakah***. If you want to endure life this year, prepare for death with these three things: ***Repentance, Prayer and Charity***. If indeed it would have been better not to have been born, these three acts, Tshuva (repentance) Tefillah (prayer) and Tzedakah (charity) allow us to endure life and prepare for death.

How do you endure life? First, you prepare for death with Tshuva. Tshuva really means to "turn", to grow, to change, to never be the same person you were last week, last month, last year.

Tshuva is the realization that the way you are living, the way of you are behaving is not the way you want to end your existence. It is the realization that you are not "stuck" in life, but that you are a creature that can **change** who you are and **what** you are, that you can overcome your nature and **become more than you think you are.**

And when you can do that, when you perform the mitzvah of Tshuva and "change" who you are, life is affirming.

Performing the mitzvah of Tshuva is the rabbi's way of telling you that you are more than you think you are. You are capable of growing and of changing as an individual **every** year. Tshuva prepares one for death by saying life

is an opportunity to always grow, and as long as you can grow as a person, you are no longer "enduring life".

Instead, you are developing your soul.

On Yom Kippur, you should ask yourself: what have I done to grow as an individual this year? Have I done anything to say that the year that has past been any different from the one before it? If the answer is yes, life is ennobling; if not, better not to have been born.

Me? Last year has been my attempt to re-understand what I believe and how I view faith and doubt. It has been a year of learning to grow by being a father to teenagers who now have different needs of me. It has been a year of learning to grow alongside my wife whose life has taken her in a new career path and who has needed my support in different ways. It has been a year of change. And let me tell you, there has been heartache and suffering along the

way. However, Tshuva, growth has given me a life not just to endure; Tshuva has given me a life that has been enhanced and enriched.

Tshuva is not just repenting. It is getting out of a rut, crawling out of life's wreckage, changing, growing and being a different person than you were when you started last year. And though the difficulties of life make the rabbis say it may have been better not to have been formed, it is through Tshuva, change, that we are **transformed**.

And we are also transformed with Tefillah, prayer. This is the toughest one because there is so much wrong with the way most of us think of prayer. For many people, prayer is nothing more than wish fulfillment , asking requests of G-d. For others, prayer is an appeasement ceremony, giving G-d his "due".

That is not Tefillah. Prayer is really a way to endure and transform life. It is an attempt to reach the Divine and discover why death, pain and suffering are not an end. Prayer is reaching out and finding out that you don't have to walk this world alone.

I am utterly convinced that people who truly reach for G-d and create a bridge of communication to G-d endure life better than those who do not. Not that problems go away, but with G-d you don't have to endure them alone. In a world with a connection to G-d, even death is not frightening because one begins to understand that "*Thou art with me.*"

I think people have so much trouble praying because they still see prayer as the 'grocery list', synagogue as the store and G-d as the Cashier. I think people have so much trouble praying because they also still see prayer as just

'fan letters' to G-d. And with all due respect, that is not prayer. Prayer is not a way to get what we want out of life or an attempt to show this G-d that we love Him.

Prayers are the moments and thoughts of a person trying to make sense out of life. Prayer is the break from the difficulties and intensities of the world, the pause between the musical chords and discords to hear the Divine symphony. Prayer allows us to take a life that is so hard, filled with vulnerabilities and frailties and realize that there is a great **Strength** in this universe that is always with us, empowers us and helps bring us to the next day. I don't pray for anything specific. When I pray, I use my words and the traditional chants to literally unlock doors that momentarily allow me to bathe in the comfort of the Divine presence. When that happens, life is so much more, death is no longer frightening, and yes, life is worth

living. And I become grateful for my very existence, no matter what is happening around me.

So how do you endure life? "Prepare for death." And you do that by performing the mitzvah of Tshuva, the ability to grow and by Tefillah, the ability to reach out to G-d.

And by Tzedakah, reaching out to others. Most people misunderstand Tzedakah. Tzedakah is not charity. Charity comes from the heart (from the Latin 'caritas', "of the heart"), charity is going **beyond** your selfish nature and giving **more** than you are capable of giving. And in our tradition, that is Hesed, not Tzedakah. Tzedakah is "righteousness", obligation, and what **everyone** can and must do as humans created in the divine image.

You want to endure life? You want to overcome the difficulties of death? Do it through Tzedakah, the ability to

realize that you are **always** in a position to help someone. You must never say no to others, not out of goodness, but out of **obligation** and because Tzedaka gives life meaning. Did you know that halacha (Jewish law) says even a person who **lives** off of Tzedakah must **give** Tzedakah. Brilliant psychology at work! No one is exempt because Tzedakah is not giving over and beyond the call of duty. It is not being "good". **It is why you are here.**

Tzedakah reminds you that while life has to be endured, it can **always** be ennobling. Though trouble and travails abound, though it may have been better not to have been formed, Tzedakah gives us reason to keep going. We are always here on earth to help others.

I end with this to my children. We all die and I am not going to be around forever (no matter how much I exercise!). But when it is my time to go, I want you to know

that you should never worry about me. Because let me tell you, if I have lived a life of **Tshuva**, a life of growth where each year I have become even more than I was the year before, and if I leave this world after a life of **Tefillah**, cultivating a relationship with G-d, where I feel the arms of G-d around me, and if I leave with giving **Tzedakah**, being there for others and helping humanity, then life has had meaning and has been worth living. I'll have had no regrets.

While life may be difficult and though it may be so hard at times, I hope to one day have it declared of me that it was, indeed, better for me to have been born.

Amen