

LIFE REIMAGINED
High Holy Days 5777: RH Eve
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I believe that one of the biggest fears about getting older is losing our capacity to have a rich and fulfilling life.

So as we approach a new year, let's ask ourselves:

How can we live a rewarding life into old age?

Can we stave off mental decline as we get on in years?

Can we increase our chances of being happy

in our so-called golden years?

According to a recent book by Barbara Bradley-Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, the answer to all these questions is: Yes.

Take a woman named Marge who is profiled in the book.

Marge's brain showed clear signs of Alzheimer's disease.

Yet even her sister, to whom she was very close,

did not notice any changes to Marge's behavior.

When given cognitive tests, she sailed through.

And her case is apparently not unusual.

What allowed Marge to overcome the physiological realities of her brain?

The first answer is: Education.

Marge had studied for a master's degree in history and was a reader her whole life.

David Bennett of Chicago's Rush University Medical Center explains that, "Education delays the onset of dementia."

And, the more education, the better.

The more the brain is stimulated and challenged, the more it finds alternate routes for information to travel when the plaque of Alzheimer's blocks the way.

Stimulating the brain is what researchers such as David Bennett are pursuing to deal with diseases like Alzheimer's.

'Most of the world is focused on "How do we stop that pathology from developing, or how do we reverse it...?"' he says.

"We're interested in those questions, too. But on the flip side, let's assume for the moment that [the disease is] going to happen.

Then how do you build a better brain so that *despite* the accumulation of the pathology, you don't lose your memory?

Because that's what people want to preserve. People's memories are among the most precious things that they have."

The good news is that you can benefit from education even if you get a late start. Marcus Richards, a professor at King's College in London, says our mental reserves can be boosted...any time in life."

Think about our sage, Rabbi Akiva, one of the luminaries of the Talmud. He did not even start learning Torah until he was 40! Or think about another great sage from our tradition, Reish Lakish: he began his professional life as a bandit but, upon meeting Rabbi Yohanan, he became an expert in Jewish law. In our time, Professor Richards recommends the following to boost your brain's activity: "Take an adult education course... Take up a hobby, such as playing the piano or learning Spanish: Add a few more. You go for a walk each day? Excellent: Exercise turns out to preserve your brain more than any other thing."¹

Of course, many of us resist doing new things because the challenge can be very frustrating. Have you tried programming your cell phone lately? If you are over 20, as I am, the new digital technology surely does not come easily. We prefer that things stay the same, the way we are used to doing them. "We like our routines," neuroscientist Paul Nussbaum explains.

But, "Doing something novel and complex [develops new neuron connections]."² So learning a new language or learning how to play a musical instrument are great activities for your brain. You might consider learning Hebrew or preparing for an adult Bar or Bat Mitzvah with Carolee. Or you might want to sign up for one of our Adult Education classes or Torah study here at Temple Beth El. Maybe you'll join a gym – or take advantage of the membership you already have.

Back to Marge, the woman with Alzheimer's.

When told a complicated story, and then distracted for 20 minutes, she was able to recall 16 out of 25 details, an excellent result.

Aside from her level of education, she scored really well on two other factors that lower the risk of cognitive decline: social engagement and purpose in life.³

It turns out that relationships are also key to longevity and resilience. As Bradley-Hagerty reports: "If you want to live a long and healthy life, invest in friends, particularly at midlife."⁴ Two local researchers, Howard Friedman of UCR and Leslie Martin of La Sierra University, conducted a study, *The Longevity Project*.

¹ P. 76.

² Pp. 221-2.

³ P. 124.

⁴ P. 83.

"[M]ore than an engaged work life, more than intelligence or privilege or genes or any other factor, Friedman and Martin found that *relationships* lengthened one's years...

Marriage was optional...Rather, what mattered was a person's social network: friends at church or work, guys getting together to play golf or women meeting in a monthly book club. It was not the quantity of social connections but the quality of those connections that added years to life."⁵ So ladies, please continue playing Mah Jong! And everyone, please value your family and friends because, "Friends increase one's life span."⁶
"Why would friends make you healthy?"

Jim Coan at the University of Virginia says that having friends (and other close relationships) prompts you to turn off stress hormones, lower your blood pressure, reduce your levels of inflammation, and boost your immune system."⁷

The third factor that helped Marge stave off Alzheimer's is purpose in life. Marge lived through the death of two husbands and her two children, in addition to which she developed a debilitating back problem. Yet she did not fall into depression or despair: she was resilient. Purpose in life was the message of Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Victor Frankl who maintained that, "no matter what is happening to you, you have the opportunity, and indeed...you have the responsibility, to actually find some meaning in it. And if you do that, it will probably not only improve your subjective experience; [research] is showing it may also have benefits for various aspects of your health."⁸

Finding meaning begins with knowing who you are, what your values are, and what you were meant to do here on earth. There is a Hassidic tale about a sage named Zusya. Zusya was dying and his students found him weeping. "What is the matter?" they asked. Zusya replied: "I am worried about what I will say when I appear before God." "But Zusya," they replied, "you have been a wonderful Torah scholar and you have engaged in acts of loving-kindness. Why would you be worried?" "Because," Zusya said, "God will not ask me: "Why were you not more like Abraham?' Nor will God ask me: 'Why were you not more like Moses?' God will ask me: 'Why were you not more like Zusya?'"

⁵ P. 36.

⁶ P. 95.

⁷ P. 96.

⁸ As told by Carol Ryff of the University of Wisconsin p. 136.

In other words, we are meant to develop our own particular talents and gifts. Discovering our purpose in life, what special qualities we have to offer and what unique path we are to follow, what God expects of us, are perfect explorations for this time of year. After all, it is during Rosh Hashanah that we are meant to do what is called a *cheshbon ha-nefesh* – an accounting of the soul. And it turns out that discovering our mission in life can help us thrive in old age. Robert Waldinger, the director of a Harvard study, says: "The people who seem happiest are the people who feel like they're able to express aspects of themselves that feel vital to them, that make them feel alive. It's not any particular path you have to take, it's being able to express the core of who you are."⁹

Finding your purpose can mean switching careers in mid-life, or volunteering for a good cause because you want to help others. Barbara Bradley-Hagerty tells us that, "If you want a healthy glow and a happy midlife, here's a secret. Give it away: your time, your money, whatever is at your disposal, give it to someone else. Especially your time. Volunteering prolongs your life. It makes you happier and spares you depression. And heart attacks. It helps you stay sober, and boosts your immune system. It cures burnout. It fires up your dopamine system, giving you chemical rewards. It lowers your stress level and reduces chronic pain. It gives you purpose in life."¹⁰

So here is a summary of the internal resources that make someone resilient and happy as they age:

- "1. Positive relations with others.
2. The ability to create or choose environments where you thrive and handle events as they come along
3. Self-acceptance, or knowing your strengths and weaknesses...
5. Personal growth, meaning that you keep evolving and learning throughout your life
6. Purpose in life, or the search for meaning in everyday life, even when things go horribly wrong; a sense of direction and a zest for life."¹¹

We might get inspiration from the famous Hassidic rabbi of our tradition, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav. In one of his stories, the tsaddik, the righteous one, goes in search of the lost princess – the princess represents God or our life's mission. He searches and searches, through wildernesses, fields and forests. And he finally finds her. But Rebbe Nachman does not tell us where she is.

⁹ P. 41.

¹⁰ P. 300.

¹¹ P. 135 (as per Carol Ryff).

And that is because each one of us must find the lost princess ourselves.
Each one of us has our own path and our own purpose,
and no one else can find it for us.

Let us keep on that path until we find her. Let us spend these Days of Awe
in pursuit of discovering what is our special purpose here on earth.
Let us hear the call of the Shofar as it awakens us to our journey.