

The Elixir of Life

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If only I knew the secret of life. I could bottle it, mass produce it, and make a fortune.

There is a passage in our classic texts about a peddler who would walk the dusty streets of the villages of Northern Israel. He was selling something irresistible. “Who wishes to buy the elixir of life,” he cried. “Come, one and all, discover the elixir of life.”

Of course he drew huge crowds wherever he went. Throughout history, traveling salesmen always attracted throngs drawn to the latest miracle cure. Today, they no longer amble into the village square or ride into town on a donkey. The internet is a far better way to ensnare us. But modern salesmen know what the ancients knew: there is a permanent market for miracle cures. It is why appeals to buy this or that product ensuring our physical, mental or financial health are still so seductive.

Modern miracle cures even promise immortality: freeze us now and melt us when scientists discover how to reverse aging. Snake oil was always present on earth. The snake was created first, before human beings.

One day, the ancient peddler shuffled into the town of *Tsippori*, the crowd surging toward him, hankering to discover the elixir of life. The commotion jarred the concentration of the learned rabbi, Yannai, who could no longer focus on the text he was studying. He emerged from his room to see what all the excitement was about, and viewing the peddler, said to him: “Come, sell me the elixir of life.”

Despite a lifetime of study, Rabbi Yannai never discovered the answers to life’s basic questions: What is it all for? Why am I here? How do I ensure longevity, prosperity and immortality? He thought that, perhaps, this peddler might reveal the secret.

The traveling salesman reached into his sack and pulled out the Book of Psalms – and pointed to the verse: *Mi ha’ish he’chafetz hayim* – who is the person who yearns for life; keep your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from deceitful speech.

Rabbi Yannai said to himself: “All my life I have been studying this passage but did not know how to explain it until this hawker came around and clarified it for me.”

(Leviticus Rabbah 16:2)

The text of the Psalms - now a popular Jewish spiritual song to a haunting melody – is this:

Mi ha'ish he'chafetz hayim ohev yamim l'ir-ot tov?

Who is the person who desires life, who seeks many days of goodness?

Netzor leshoncha me'rah u'sefatecha mi-dabber mirma;

Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech.

Sur me'rah va'asseh tov;

Avoid evil and do good.

Bakesh shalom ve'rodfehu;

Seek peace and pursue it.

Here we have what our tradition calls – *sam hahayim* – the medicine – or the elixir of life. It is a potion that requires four daily doses:

Avoid wrongful speech;

Avoid wrongful acts;

Do good;

Seek peace and pursue it.

Our tradition insists that a good life, a meaningful life – the elixir - the secret of life – lies in a mixture of restraint and action. We must avoid doing wrong – but not only that. We must also do good.

So let us explore together these two elements – avoiding the wrong and doing good – that are so indispensable to those who yearn for a meaningful life.

I. Restraint

On the general question of avoiding, deferring or foregoing certain behavior - if you were to ask people today the same question the ancients asked - what is the secret of life - most Americans would not think about restraint. They may think of an elite education; ambition, acquiring technical skills, hard work – but they would not usually think of forbearance first.

To be an American is to be proactive; it is to have it all. It is practically un-American to ask me to refrain and restrain.

When our daughter was younger we visited the shooting gallery at the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. You know – if you hit the rabbit with an air gun you get a prize. I wanted my daughter to get that stuffed animal. As I grasped the air rifle – the first time I had held even a toy gun since my military days – it dawned on me that there was a lesson of

life I could teach her. Grasping the rifle, I said to her: You know, Abigail, here is the secret of life – always remember: “Work hard, play to win and shoot to kill.”

Ever since, whenever I get into one of my preaching modes with her, I give her this Tivoli Gardens look and start saying, “You know Abigail...” “Yeah, I know,” she responds, “work hard, *yada, yada, yada...*”

Needless to say I didn't hit the rabbit or win the prize – it must have been those Danish toy rifles; they either don't know how to build them to shoot straight, or they purposely want you to miss. But now, looking back on it all, perhaps the advice was flawed as well. It is not only about being proactive – working hard, ambition to be the best, and aiming straight.

Success is also about what not to do. But who ever thinks of what not to do when contemplating future success? The psalmist, however, insists that that a good life requires not only commission, but also omission. And he mentions restraint first.

Sur me'rah – he writes. When you come to the crossroads of right and wrong - *sur* – circumvent the wrong path – go around it - take the longer way. Avoid the road that leads to wrong. Find another way. Don't be tempted to take even one step on the wrong path. It will be hard to get off. The road to deviance begins with the first deviant step: As the book of Deuteronomy warns: “One sin leads to another.” (4:2)

The 19th century Viennese writer Peter Altenberg wrote: “There are only two things that can destroy a healthy man: love trouble, ambition, and financial catastrophe. And that's already three things, and there are a lot more.” (Clive James, Cultural Amnesia)

There are so many temptations in our lives. How many of us know people who had that one stumble - that one surrender to temptation – that caused a cascade of unintentional and unintended damage? Without meaning to go as far as they did – and without anticipating the consequences - that one initial misstep – on family matters, financial matters, professional and other relationships – on ethical and moral questions – created a hairline fracture in the pillars of their lives that kept spreading, eventually causing the collapse of the entire framework they built and cherished over so many years.

Avoid even the first step on that path, because it may be impossible to resist the next step. Odysseus ordered his men to tie him to the mast as their ship passed the island of the Sirens. Even he, the commander of men, could not command himself to resist the temptation of the Siren Song. He knew that even one alluring note could lead to his downfall.

Resist the taunting tunes of temptation on the high seas of life. You know what I mean. A little cheating, whether on principles or partners, often leads to a lot of cheating. “It is the first wrong steps that count.” (Mark Twain)

Most of us know what is wrong. We feel it. Morality starts as an intuition: its fountainhead is the simple feeling that “this is not right.” That emotional wellspring that begins as a trickle, ultimately flows into the strong currents of philosophy, law, standards, codes and expectations. We intuit that betrayal, cowardice, cruelty, oppression, falsity, theft, hate – are wrong. This intuition is implanted into our very essence.

We know - as we recited the litany of our sins a few moments ago - that gossip, narrow-mindedness, fraud, falsehood, arrogance, insolence, irreverence, hypocrisy, exploitation, bribery – are wrong. We do not need doctorates of divinity to know these things. All of us know them. For that reason, the psalmist does not go into detail about what he means by avoiding wrong – we all know: Except for one specific emphasis:

Netzor leshoncha me'ra, usefatech mi'dabber mirmah

Seal your tongue from speaking the wrong words. Avoid wrongful speech.

Why, from among all the wrongs that could be cited, does the Psalmist focus on wrongful speech? It is because words are the beginning of everything. In the beginning there was the word. God spoke, and the world came into being.

To be human is to speak. No other living creature uses language as we do. Actions begin with words. Words create and destroy. Words enhance feelings. They formulate and define beliefs. They frame our concepts and ideas; they create and raise awareness. From this perspective, words are the most powerful things on earth.

They can enrage and harm. They can inspire and give hope. They can cause fear and loathing. They can soothe and comfort. They can be both a blessing and a curse. Words launch crusades – of both – kindness and killing. The same words can inspire the oppressor and the liberator. “Liberty, fraternity, egalitarianism,” inspired both Rousseau and Robespierre; they led to freedom, but also to the guillotine.

Netzor leshoncha – warns the psalmist. Seal your tongue – guard your lips. Rather than giving advice on what to say, the psalmist realizes that – what not to say - is often more important. Don't open your mouth before thinking. You don't have to comment on everything. Watch what you say.

We live in an era of unrestrained words. Social media has unleashed a torrent of exuberant verbosity. We say whatever is on our minds; we can't help ourselves. We find like-minded lackeys in the echo chambers, who can excrete every foul word or thought ever devised in human vocabulary. We do not even have to identify ourselves; we can hide behind the anonymity of cyberspace.

Biblical and rabbinic sages, who lived millennia ago – before the telegraph, telephone and television – and before the internet and social media – they knew “What's App.” They knew what we often ignore: violent action begins with violent words. Malignant minds are revealed by malevolent messages.

Especially now, we should take care to watch what we say. Taunting on Twitter has led to suicide. Fear-mongering on Facebook has fomented fanaticism. We can train ourselves; we can discipline ourselves to avoid wrongful speech.

There is a beautiful teaching of an 18th century Hassidic master – Rabbi Dov Ber ben Avraham – known as the Maggid of Mezeritch. He said: “Take special care to guard your tongue [even] before the morning prayer. A person who wakes up in the morning is like a new creation.” (As cited in *Your Word is Fire*: Green and Holtz)

Beginning your day with unkind words affects the entire day. The master emphasized that all of our words are related to one another – and they are all rooted in the first words of the day that we speak.

People ask why pray; does God listen. The sage teaches us that one of the purposes of prayer is to discipline ourselves – whether God listens or not. Don’t speak to anyone, the rabbi teaches, until you have spent time disciplining yourself – from the first moment of consciousness in the new day. It should be part of our routine. You get up, take a shower – groom and prepare yourself physically for the new day – but that’s not all. The Maggid teaches – groom and prepare yourself emotionally as well. As you are about to go to school, work, attend to children or see friends – say to yourself that morning and every morning:

Netzor leshoncha me’ra u’sefatech me’dabber mirma

When you speak - seal your tongue from the wrong words, and your lips from deceitful speech.

II. Doing Good

But of course, refraining from wrong is not the only element of a good life. Avoiding behavior is never enough in Judaism. There is always the deed – the good action – that counts even more than good words. That is why the psalmist makes sure to emphasize:

Asseh tov. Do good.

Sam hahayim - the elixir of life - requires, not only avoiding bad deeds – we must also actively do good deeds.

In Judaism, it is the deeds that count the most. A good person is defined – not by what she thinks but by what she does. Piety is in performance. Good intentions are desirable, but good outcomes are required. Action is the result of every sound philosophy. “Action is eloquence.” (Shakespeare)

We need to practice morality, not merely think about it. We need to habituate ourselves daily to moral living and train ourselves daily for moral discipline. In the real world, it is not altruism, but duty and habit that motivate most people. The word “mitzvah” in

Hebrew does not simply mean a good deed – but describes obligation – commandment – a sense of duty: the law of moral behavior.

Maimonides taught that it is better to give one coin to the poor on a thousand different occasions than a thousand coins all at once, because we need to train ourselves to do good. (Telushkin, *Jewish Ethics* p. 38; on Avot 3:19) The act of giving *tsedakka* day after day after day – for a thousand days – trains and disciplines us to do acts of goodness. And even if we do not understand why we are giving away this money – and even if we disagree – Judaism insists - do it anyway – perhaps over time – you will come to understand.

Mitoch she'lo lishma ba lishma – states the Talmud: From something that started out as having nothing to do with good intentions, through the act of doing – the motivation to do good is born. (*Pessachim* 50b) As no one becomes a good musician without practicing music; no one becomes a good fencer without practicing fencing; no one becomes a good doctor without practicing medicine; no one becomes a good writer without writing – so - no one becomes a good person without doing good – day after day after day. As you cannot become a good chef simply by reading cookbooks, so you cannot become a good person simply by reading philosophy books.

The Psalmist assumes that we have a general understanding of what is good. We do not really need specifics. We intuit that love, justice, truth, virtue, beauty, kindness, decency – are good. This intuition is implanted into our very makeup.

For that reason the Psalmist does not go into detail about what he means by doing good. We all know what “good” means: Except for one specific emphasis:

Bakesh shalom ve'rodfehu

Seek peace and pursue it.

What he likely means by this is not peace among nations – although that, too, is a central Jewish aspiration; rather, what he urges is to search for inner peace – *shalom* – from the word – *shalem, shleimut* – wholeness, completeness, inner integrity.

Why, from among all the good things that the Psalmist could have cited, does he focus on inner peace?

I think it is because everything about a good life and a meaningful life begins inside. As we are instructed on a plane to put on our oxygen mask first before we help others – so – the Psalmist understands that we are incapable of being agents of goodness if we, ourselves, are incapacitated by inner turmoil. Inner peace does not simply come to us. We must seek it; we must pursue it.

Modern peddlers constantly hawk the elixir of inner peace. There is a multi-billion dollar industry of tranquility. Learned specialists of biology, physiology, psychology,

pharmacology, anthropology, sociology, cosmology, technology – produce stacks of articles and books – often making a fortune in the process - urging us to acquire this or that elixir; and that not having this or that elixir is the only impediment to happiness.

Let me ask you something: In your most reflective moments – what do you really want: more money, more stuff, more recognition, more respect, more influence, more power; fewer problems, fewer challenges; fewer frustrations? Really – is this what you really want? It's good to have stuff – and who wants problems? But is it really the case that if you only had more stuff and less challenges – you would be at peace?

Judaism teaches that God placed us in a world of unending challenges. Over and over our tradition tells us - that for one reason or another - and for better or for worse – God placed us in an imperfect world; a world that needs improvement. And that the human task is to improve the world. Over and over our tradition teaches – that for one reason or another – and for better or for worse – God created human beings imperfect – in constant need of improvement. And that our task is to improve ourselves.

The way to improve is to contend. We get better through struggle. Judaism teaches that there is no such thing as a life without struggle. It is an illusion – snake oil. They sell us delusional visions of happiness that are inconsistent with the very nature of the universe and our human personality. This happiness delusion is peddled by perfidious, pandering, pattering prophets of perpetual perfection. We do not really want a world without struggle. And even those who do - tough! You can't have it.

Problems beget problems. They never end. No sooner have you resolved one problem, a host of additional problems arise. You may spend your whole life studying. But like Rabbi Yannai, you will never know enough. An uneducated peddler may reveal to you the secrets you have been studying your entire life. You may dedicate your entire life to the goal – you are bound to fall short. We always end our journey this side of the river, the Promised Land glimpsed only in the distant horizon.

It is the struggle that defines us. Our goal is not to live lives of ease. Have you ever seen someone who appears to have everything? They are so comfortable that they are miserable. Our goal is to live in creative tension, our grasp constantly exceeding our reach. Movement, not rest, is the goal of life. Lack of movement is death. We have a term for it: Rest in Peace. Motion is the cause of all life.

And therefore – what we should really want – is not a challenge-free world – but the strength to contend with challenges. What we should really want is not to empty challenge from our lives, but to challenge the emptiness of life. What we should really want is not to escape struggle, but to struggle with escapism.

What we should really want is for our fight to count; to mean something. Inner peace results from growth, strength, purpose and dedication. If we work and work and work – but this work is aimless – it doesn't count for anything and it doesn't mean anything – this is what causes our deepest depressions.

What we should really want is what the Psalmist emphasized – *shalom* - an inner contentment, born of the self-knowledge that we are doing what we were meant to do; that we are maximizing our potential – for good – for life – for length of days.

Mi ha'ish he'chafetz hayim

Who is the one who yearns for life?

The one who loves life – who understands its failures and disappointments, and frustrations and pain and suffering and who – nonetheless – *ohev yamim li'rot tov* – who nonetheless – despite it all - loves every moment of every day and yearns to see the good.