

SEASONS OF THE MOON

THE MONTH OF IYAR

No. 9 VOL. 2

Most people think of life as a trip through a treasure house of experiences.

“Living it up” is synonymous with living itself: White-water rafting, paragliding, sipping Margaritas around the pool, seeing the Mona Lisa or the Pyramids or climbing Everest – that’s what life is all about! This view of life sees existence as a compendium of possibilities, and he who dies with the most toys - or the most trophies - wins. According to this view, someone who lives his life without tasting any of life’s countless experiences hasn’t really lived. The eulogy “He had a good life” usually means that the person used his time to maximize his experiences in this world. Someone who hasn’t experienced any of the life’s myriad delights is considered to have wasted his life.

Judaism’s view of the world is the total opposite.

Life experiences are like Cinderella. They last, by definition, for as long as one experiences them. However sweet, however exciting they may be, there comes the moment when the gilded coach turns back into a pumpkin. Every moment of life is constantly passing and vanishing forever. As soon as the taste of one moment has expired, we must seek a new taste, a new experience. If life is the sum total of our experiences then life is really a kind of ongoing death, running from moment to moment, never being able to possess the moment itself.

Judaism understands that all the pleasures, all the experiences of this world are given to us for one reason only - that we might feel, that we might sense to the smallest degree, the taste of life itself.

But what is this “taste of life?” And what is “life itself” if not those experiences that it contains?

THE TASTE OF LIFE



the world will undergo a fundamental change. At that time, all activity will cease. That world is known as *Olam Haba*, literally “the World-to-Come.” If we were to try and imagine that future world, it would be like one continuous Shabbat. Shabbat is really a hint of the future world, the faintest whisper of that reality². On Shabbat, we are bidden to refrain from very specifically defined ‘creative’ work, and through

doing this, we are able to make contact with something that is beyond this world.

The essence of the future world is that it is an existence devoid of activity. When all activity ceases, we will be able to perceive being itself. In the world in which we live now, we cannot distinguish between life experiences and life itself. We understand reality as being identical with our experiences. This is not true.

The activity of the world in which we live now masks the perception of life itself, but when all activity ceases, then we will experience the taste of life itself. And when we experience that, it will be the sweetest thing that can be. That is what is known as the World-to-Come – existence without activity.

Apart from Shabbat, there’s another time when we can glimpse the incredible sweetness of the perception of life itself.

Imagine that you are standing in front of a firing squad.

THE TASTE OF LIFE *continued*

You are staring down the long black tunnel of the barrel of a rifle. "Squad! Take aim! And..." Just at that second, a messenger comes running into the square. "Stop the execution! The prisoner is free to go!" Imagine how you would feel at that moment!

When our life hangs in the balance, when we are saved from a life threatening experience, that euphoria that we feel is the perception of life itself, of existing. Obviously, that feeling fades. However, at that moment, the feeling of being rescued from death is the sense of life itself. That feeling is the constant pleasure that a person experiences in the World To Come. Existence itself. Existence without action.

Living - without living it up.



Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai, who passed from this world on Lag B'Omer, was an implacable critic of the Roman occupation of the Land of Israel. On pain of execution, he was forced to go into hiding along with his son Rebbe Elazar¹. They fled to a cave in the Galilee. There they lived an otherworldly existence for twelve years. When the Caesar died, the decree against Rebbe Shimon was rescinded and they emerged into the light of day. Their enforced isolation had given them a unique perspective of this world. They saw people going about their business: reaping, sowing, planting and harvesting, seemingly engrossed in their day-to-day lives, oblivious to all else. They were outraged that people could be so involved in this

temporary life and neglect the eternal life. So intense was this feeling that everywhere they cast their gaze immediately became engulfed in fire.

What perception caused this intensity of feeling?

We tend to think of this world and the next world like two chapters in a novel. One finishes and the other begins. This is not the case. There is nothing in the next world that is not in this world already. One of the blessings that we say on the Torah says "*and He has planted within us eternal life...*" A plant does not make an appearance out of nowhere. The plant will never be more than what the seed contained. Similarly, our eternal existence is no more than what God has planted within us in this world.

Every moment lives and then is no more. If we live for the moment by perceiving life as a series of fleeting experiences, then the taste of the moment lives on our lips for but a second and disappears forever. However, when we take all those moments and connect them to the Source of Life itself, when we understand that our entire life, our entire existence, is just one facet of what the Creator wishes to express and reveal in His creation, then in the next world all those passing moments return to live eternally. When those moments are used to create something that can never be eradicated or lost, that's called living an eternal life *in this world*. The seed that was planted within is nurtured and flowers into eternal life.

This is the taste of life itself and nothing can be sweeter.

TWO SPRIGS OF MYRTLE

*hurrying between the twilight's embers
to welcome the Shabbos Queen.
in his hands, two
sprigs of myrtle
to guard, to remember
the Hand unseen.
and all those years we spent
up to our necks,
our souls were clothed
in nothing more than sand;
we could burn the world
with eyes of fire,
but it's enough,
it's enough,
that there are two
such as you and i.*

¹ Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana 31a; Avoda Zara 9a

² Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 59b

³ Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 33b

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