

Rabbi Julie Bressler  
Yom Kippur Morning 5784  
The Measure of Your Life

Imagine you woke up tomorrow and had the opportunity to know exactly how long your life would be. Would you want to know? Would knowing the length of your life change how you lived your life today?

This is the central question raised in *The Measure*, Nikki Erlick's novel released last year, similar questions to our reflections during this High Holy Day season.<sup>1</sup> The book opens with a fantastical event - each person around the world over the age of 22 wakes up one morning to find a small, beautifully crafted wooden box on their doorstep with their name on it. And I mean everyone - remote tribes in corners of the world, houseless individuals, folks on vacation - everyone woke up to a box near where they slept that fateful night. After mass confusion, and the understandable fear that the boxes contained something dangerous, those who open the boxes discover that each box contains a single, indestructible string and the words "the measure of your life lies within" written on the box.

After a few weeks, researchers discover that the length of the string corresponds to the entire length of your life, and it quickly becomes clear these string lengths are startlingly accurate. Some who open the box find a short string, others a longer string, and others every length in between. As you can imagine, the presence of the strings leads to significant disruption and change. Some short stringers act out violently in frustration, some long stringers take on extreme sports knowing they will survive the risks, some relationships of mixed string length survive while others end due to suddenly different life trajectories, and others choose not to open their boxes at all. The strings become a political talking point with some leaders demonizing short stringers, viewing them as reckless and unfit to serve in significant positions in the military or government. Other folks enact positive change - funds created to support those with short strings to live out their dreams, support groups for those of all string lengths, and the creation of an international movement that encourages folks to come together instead of leaning into divisions caused by the strings.

While the world of *The Measure* is thoroughly fictional, we readers can ponder the same big questions as the characters in the novel. What would we do if we knew the length of our lives? Would we change our day-to-day routines? Would we take more risks? Less risks? Would we engage differently with the people around us?

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<sup>1</sup> Erlick, Nikki. 2022. *The Measure*. HarperCollins.

While the strings force the characters to answer these questions head on, the truth is, we do not know the length of our lives. All we know is that one day our life will end. Jewish tradition forces us to confront this reality head on, each year, on Yom Kippur. This day of Yom Kippur, is understood to be a rehearsal for our own death. Last night, we took the Torahs, known as the Trees of Life no less, out of the ark as we heard the haunting melody and words of Kol Nidre. While we might focus on the Torahs in that moment, the empty ark is the true central image. Its emptiness symbolizes an empty coffin... ours. As we wrestle with that image, and engage in related rituals like confessing our sins or abstaining from nourishing our bodies with food and drink, we confront our mortality. As a culture that largely fears death, Yom Kippur is Judaism's counter-cultural reminder of one of our few guarantees in life - that one day our life will end.

During these High Holy Days, this period of introspection and reflection, we ask ourselves the same fundamental questions as the characters in *The Measure*. Am I happy with my life? Am I spending my days feeling fulfilled? Where have I missed the mark? Where might I want to make change in the year ahead? We cannot know the impact of our actions on the length of our life, but we can think about what gives our life meaning and what might be holding us back from reaching that ultimate goal. Poet Mary Oliver, asks us to ponder this question in her poem, *The Summer Day*, by asking, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"<sup>2</sup>

Our Torah portion for this day of Yom Kippur reminds us that we do have the power to influence our own life. As the Israelite people prepare to begin their next step after a long journey towards the Promised Land, Moses, speaking on God's behalf in Deuteronomy 30:19, says "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, U'vcharta Ba'chayim... by loving Adonai your God, heeding God's commands, and holding fast to God." Rabbi Dusty Klass interprets this teaching by noticing the unique nature of this call from Moses. She teaches, "The verb *bachar*, to choose, is used 30 times in the book of Deuteronomy. 29 of those times, God does the choosing. But here, in the last words of Moses' book-long speech, the tables turn. 'I have given you all of the information,' God seems to be saying. 'I have provided commandments and obligations. I have presented a solid framework for ethical living. Now it's up to you.'"<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the strings of the novel, our life does not unfold in a linear manner. There are bumps and turns and unexpected circumstances that take us in a new direction. While Ecclesiastes and The Byrds famously teach there is a time for every purpose under heaven, Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai describes what may feel more true to our reality in his poem, *A Man in His Life*. An excerpt:

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<sup>2</sup> O'Connor, Carol. 2021. "'The Summer Day' by Mary Oliver." St Peter's Bookroom. August 31, 2021. <https://www.bookroom.stpeters.org.au/post/the-summer-s-day-by-mary-oliver>.

<sup>3</sup> Klass, Rabbi Dusty. 2015. "Beyond Survival." Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, CA. September 10, 2015.

*A man doesn't have time in his life  
to have time for everything.  
He doesn't have seasons enough to have  
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes was wrong about that.*

*A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,  
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,  
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,  
to make love in war and war in love.  
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,  
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest  
what history takes years and years to do.<sup>4</sup>*

An interpretation of our Yom Kippur Torah portion aligns with the message of Amichai's poem. We just heard the words "Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kulchem" - all of you stand here on this day. Rabbi Richard Address interprets the word Hayom, **this day**, to mean that we need to "live in the day, to celebrate each and every day as a gift."<sup>5</sup> Our Torah compels us to live in the present - to make the most of each and every day that we have.

In *The Measure*, individuals with short strings suddenly felt a newfound need to choose life each day and every day. They quit unfulfilling jobs to follow passions, they performed in plays and sang karaoke without inhibition. In contrast, most of those with long strings did not dramatically change how they lived their life. Those characters seemed to find comfort in knowing they would live for many more years, believing they had as much time as they needed. Without knowing the length of our lives, and knowing that, unlike those in *The Measure*, our lives can change in an instant, and that long-term plan we had can irrevocably change, it's on us to figure out how to best use our time. And of course, there are many responsibilities we hold and value deeply that require us to stay active in our lives as they exist today.

So what does it mean to choose life everyday in a world full of commitments and obligations and meetings and bills and global and local challenges?

How do we find that balance of "have to dos" with "want to dos"?

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<sup>4</sup> "A Man in His Life." n.d. The on Being Project. Accessed September 28, 2023.  
<https://onbeing.org/poetry/a-man-in-his-life/>.

<sup>5</sup> Address, Rabbi Richard. 2014. "Taking the Measure of Life." Jewish Sacred Aging. June 30, 2014.  
<https://jewishsacredaging.com/taking-the-measure-of-life/>.

In his book, *4000 Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, Oliver Burkeman offers advice on this elusive question. He starts by stating the obvious that is not always so obvious - we cannot do everything, we cannot please everyone, and therefore we have to let our obligations, ourselves, and others down. Or, to put it more bluntly, no one in the history of humanity has ever achieved complete work-life balance, so we should just stop trying to reach that unreachable goal. If we are lucky enough to live to 80, 4000 weeks is about how much time we will have on this earth. Burkeman believes our understanding of how to use those weeks has been upside down for a long time. “We’re obsessed with our overfilled inboxes and lengthening to-do lists, haunted by the guilty feeling that we ought to be getting more done, or different things done.”<sup>6</sup> We focus on completing tasks, filling our time with activities, and experiences, and busy-ness, ensuring we get everything done, but all of that busy-ness tends to just lead to more busy-ness, as we climb an infinitely tall mountain whose peak is forever out of view and reach.

Instead of constantly trying to fit more in, Burkeman argues that it’s not about making the most out of each moment, but actually about finding ways to be open to life happening to us, around us, and with us. He encourages us to find JOMO - “joy of missing out”, the opposite of FOMO - the more commonly known phrase meaning “fear of missing out”. He writes, “The more you confront the facts of finitude —and work with them, rather than against them—the more productive, meaningful, and joyful life becomes.” If we really want to live meaningful lives, he believes, we should actually try to live, wholeheartedly and unashamedly, limited lives. We ought to face the fact that we have limited time here and focus our energy on doing just a few meaningful things, instead of being afraid or so focused on the fact that we can’t do everything. We need to learn how to thrive within our very human limits.<sup>7</sup>

Back in our novel - nearly two decades after the strings first arrived, a Gallup poll reveals that, for the first time, the number of people deciding not to view their strings had risen significantly. More and more boxes were remaining closed, especially among the newest recipients. One of the main characters notes: “the world had seen enough strings - short and long and every measure in between - to know that any length was possible, and so, perhaps, the length didn’t matter. That the beginning and the end may have been chosen for us, the string already spun, but the middle had always been left undetermined, to be woven and shaped by us” (348). We get to write what happens in the middle - we determine the details that permeate the fibers of our lives. Not every moment needs to be extraordinary, but we do get to ask ourselves if our

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<sup>6</sup> Burkeman, Oliver. 2021. *Four Thousand Weeks : Time Management for Mortals*. New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux.

<sup>7</sup> Moran, Joe. 2021. “Four Thousand Weeks by Oliver Burkeman Review – a Brief Treatise on Time.” *The Guardian*, September 1, 2021, sec. Books.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/01/four-thousand-weeks-by-oliver-burkeman-review-a-brief-treatise-on-time>.

priorities and themes of our lives align with the legacy we wish to leave behind. Or, as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches, “By becoming conscious of what we are doing, by being willing to change, we turn from serving time to living life. We create a new self, more loving, more vital, more connected to others.”<sup>8</sup>

But of course, it’s easier said than done. This reminder of our mortality on Yom Kippur reminds us to not wait, to not let what we hope for to wait for another day. Choosing life, living our limited lives fully, does not require huge life shifts. Of course we find the value of choosing life in the big moments - on vacation, celebrating milestones with friends and family, or screaming our heads off at a sporting event. But choosing life happens in small moments too. It's just a matter of changing perspective.

This past Saturday, I spent a few hours of my weekend celebrating a friend’s daughter’s first birthday. There were many folks at the party, and, like most events involving toddlers, it was relative chaos, but the hug I received from my friend and her husband at the event, their genuine gratitude for my presence, reminded me that the inevitable to-do list can wait, that showing up for someone else means more than most other obligations. It reminded me to say yes to more moments of connection in the year to come.

Last week, my grandma, who we call GG, turned 98 years old. To celebrate this big birthday, my mom came up with the idea to create a gift listing 98 things we love about GG. She solicited the list from the whole family - including her six great-grandchildren - and created a beautiful piece with an Etsy artist displaying the list. Some of the items shared specific stories or memories, including how GG always makes us feel like we are the most important person in the room whenever we see her, how she continues to learn new things, like how to use Zoom and Netflix, well into her 80s and 90s, or how her filter has totally disappeared in her older years. Many others talked about her character - she is the world’s best listener, she is the kindest person we know, she loves unconditionally, and she expresses gratitude for her life’s blessings over and over and over again. What a gift to get to share these words with her while she can still feel them. It is a great reminder to us all that if there is something you want to say to someone - say it. Don’t wait. And GG knew it. After receiving the art piece, she shared with my parents that she was so grateful for these words because it helped her tangibly see the impact she has made - she has this clear feedback that she matters. My grandma says frequently that she has no regrets. We tell her that’s because she truly, and with her whole heart, chose life.

Pirke Avot teaches us to “do teshuvah now, for tomorrow you may die.” I’d like to amend this statement to also include, “live life now, for tomorrow you may die.” Of course, we hope

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<sup>8</sup> Elkins, Dov Peretz. *Moments of Transcendence: Inspirational Readings for Rosh Hashanah*. Aronson, 1995. 118

tomorrow is not our last, but in truth, we do not know which day will be our last. We hope we get to experience all that tomorrow will offer, and many tomorrows after that. The unknown of the length of our life can be scary, but instead I hope we acknowledge this reality by choosing life, choosing to make the most of each day. To take our actions and words seriously and try to live each day with as much intention as possible. To truly b'charta ba'chayim - to choose life each and every day that we can.

We were all born. We will all, someday, die. What will you do in between those two points? How will you truly, and with your whole heart, choose life?