

ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

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Fleshy Existence and Life Everlasting

I want to share this piece of Torah in memory of our member, Claudine McClure who passed away this year, may her memory be a blessing.

This summer I read Philip Roth's latest novel.

Its title, Everyman, is the name of a shop owned by the book's protagonist. It sells diamonds.

We are told the shop's founder, our hero's father, chose the name 'Everyman' because he wants every man to feel they can buy a diamond, the father believes in diamonds.

'It's a big deal for working people to buy a diamond,' the father tells his son, 'no matter how small. When the wife wears it, this guy is not just a plumber – he's a man with a wife with a diamond. Because, beyond the beauty, the diamond is imperishable. A piece of the earth that is imperishable'

Buy a diamond and become imperishable. Buy a diamond and live forever. Everyone, says the shop-sign, Everyman, can do it.

Roth is, of course, playing with us.

None of us lives forever.

And the real truth of 'Everyman' is rather our inevitable mortality.

Just as the contents of the book chart not immortality but the journey of a man into death.

Mortality is the reality of 'Everyman,' diamonds or no diamonds.

So on this day, at this time when we stand remembering those who have gone before us, who have passed away.

We bump up against our mortality.

And I ask this question -

Of what purpose is life?

I want to offer two models.

The first is Roth's prescription for the 'best of life.'

The second is a more religious, Jewish way of approaching our own inevitable Everyman moment.

Roth is not a man of faith.

He might write like an angel, but when he looks to understand the question, 'what purpose is life?' he has nowhere, other than life itself, to go.

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Roth's Everyman thinks that the best that life gets to offer is the memories of the glories of our own temporary existence.

And in the most important moment in the book, Roth's Everyman looks back on his own youth and speculates that the memories of youthful pleasures are 'as good as it gets.'

This burst of memory is ultimate for Roth's Everyman.

I want to share an extended extract from the book, a pivotal extract which expresses what is, for Roth, the very heart of existence.

'Maybe the best of old age was ... the longing for the best of boyhood, for the tubular sprout that was then his body and that rode the waves from way out where they began to build, rode them with his arms pointed like an arrowhead and the skinny rest of him following behind like the arrow's shaft, rode them all the way into where his rib cage scraped against the tiny sharp pebbles and jagged clamshells and pulverized seashells at the edge of the shore and he hustled to his feet and hurriedly turned and went lurching through the low surf until it was knee high and deep enough for him to plunge in and begin swimming madly out to the rising breakers – into the advancing green Atlantic, rolling unstopably toward him like the obstinate face of the future – and, if he was lucky, make it there in time to catch the next big wave and then the next and the next and the next until, from the low slant of inland sunlight glittering across the water he knew it was time to go. He ran home barefoot and wet and salty, remembering the mightiness of that immense sea boiling in his own two ears and licking his forearm to taste his skin fresh from the ocean and baked by the sun. Along with the ecstasy of a whole day being battered silly by the sea, the taste and the smell intoxicated him so that he was driven to the brink of biting down with his teeth to tear out a chunk of himself and savour his fleshy existence.'¹

The best of life, says Roth, is remembering the times we threw ourselves at the breakers, intoxicated with the 'ecstasy of a whole day being battered silly by the sea.' The purpose of life is its own 'fleshy existence,'

It's a sensational piece of writing.

But I don't share the outlook on the best that life can be.

It's too shallow, too selfish, ultimately too lonely.

I wish I could write even half as well, but I want no part in the theology.

Because I know there is more than this.

For Roth, savouring fleshy existence is ultimate.

¹ Pp 126-7

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And I claim he is wrong.
There is something more.

As many of you know, I practice Yoga.
I enjoy it, it's good for me. It's good for my Rabbinite.
But every now and again, I get a little jealous of my Yoga teachers.
Yoga, like Roth, brings our consciousness to the 'this world,' to the now, to the moment.

And while I am twisted deep into one asana or another and while my teachers are busy instructing me to bring my consciousness to this moment and this world, I keep getting weighed down by all the Jewish stuff.
I reach my hands out towards the sun and feel weighed down by all the *mitzvot*, and the books, God help me, the books.
There are books I schlepped out to Israel to begin my Yeshivah studies, and the books I schlepped to New York to begin my Rabbinic studies and the books I schlepped back here when I began my congregational work with you, dear friends.
And Jewish books are heavy.

And the memories, they weigh even more heavily than the books; memories of '73 and '67 and '39 -'45. And older than those memories, memories of '92 - 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue and the Jews were expelled from Spain, and 70 – not 1970, not 1870, the year seventy – when the temple was destroyed.
And memories of Sinai and Egypt and the binding of Isaac.
My memories are heavier than my books.

And the *mitzvot* – the obligations – the whole fabric of thou shalt and thou shalt not.
The more uniquely Jewish obligations of tefilin and kashrut and Shabbat and
The more universal obligations to my family and friends –
You shall honour your father and mother,
I am my beloved and my beloved is mine,
You shall repeat these words to your children,
- And the obligations to the stranger
You shall not wrong the stranger.
The obligations, the *mitzvot* – weigh heavily.

I'm a Jew.
I don't travel light; I schlep with me my stories, my memories, my obligations and values.
It gets a little heavy, every now and again.

So after one Yoga class, I was feeling particularly weighed down and my teacher, a lovely guy, mentioned that his guru was coming into town. He was hosting an evening, would I like to come?

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I Googled the guru.

The video clips twinkled into life on my computer screen and a white bearded cheery looking man spoke out

'Live life moment to moment,' opined the guru,

'You need to let go of everything you think you know,'

'The only way you will be happy and have fun is if you stay in the moment. One tiny thought about the past or future and you are lost.'

It was Roth speak.

I had been invited to an evening dedicated to 'savouring our fleshy existence.'

And I was tempted.

It was, after all, going to be lighter than another evening with my books, my memories and my obligations.

I was going to go,

I wasn't planning on giving up the Judaism thing, I just wanted to ease off on all this weight and 'savour my fleshy existence.'

And then someone died.

A member of this community, a friend.

And instead of going to an evening with the Guru of 'fleshy existence' I picked up the phone and went to visit, to offer a hand – just like so many other members of the community – and, being the Rabbi, I prepared for the funeral and the shiva and all the weighty rituals that accompany the end of a life.

But they didn't feel heavy any more.

They felt desperately valuable. For the family, but also for me.

For there we stood.

At the Cemetery at Cheshunt, this family – of blood relatives and friends, members of this community and other communities.

And we were joined, standing around the coffin, by all the memories.

And all the obligations; the Jewish obligations and the simple obligations.

There was an ancient Exodus, and a new-born grandchild.

And a husband whose love had stood firm through horrible illness.

And colleagues and friends and members of SAMS, and other shuls, and no shul.

And we stood around the coffin.

We stood around the life that had gone as if we were part of a mould, a cast.

A cast of a life – forming a structure, around the hollow where their life should have been

And together we carried the weight, a little unevenly, it must be admitted, those closest to coffin carrying most - but we carried the weight together.

The life had ended, but the weight was still very present.

As it is today.

And the weight doesn't feel heavy anymore.

It dances a little, at least sometimes.

It tutt-tutts as we fall short of the values that we should be living up to.

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And it smiles when we show each other the sort of kindness that our friend would have wanted.
And it makes me know that life has meaning beyond savouring our fleshy existence.
Reminding me that there is more to life than running after waves.
Reminding me that I am part of a narrative that will outlive me.
For long after the fleshy existence is over, the weight; the responsibilities and values, the stories will live on.

Defying mortality.
Defeating mortality.

And this is the Jewish way.
Our teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote powerfully about death.
'Our hope for eternity,' he said, 'presupposes there is something about [us] that is worthy of eternity.'
I want to put it more strongly.

We get to live forever, we get to transcend death, if we live suitably weighty lives.
When we transcend selfishness, when we allow the needs of others to become our responsibilities.
When we live well in the shadow of responsibilities we inherit from our parents – to whom we owe our lives – and their parents and their parents.
When we fold our stories into the great cosmic journey of our people we get to live beyond our finite fleshy existence.

The way we live with our obligations lifts us beyond mortality.
The way we approach our obligations is our key to eternity.

Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that our deeds in this world can be counted as trees planted in the Garden of Eden of our personal *olam haba* – our world to come.
He cites the Rabbinic teaching that states that our good deeds plead our case in the Heavenly Court.
But we don't need that leap of faith to reject Roth's case for the supremacy of 'fleshy existence.'
We need only to turn to the weight we carry with us, today, to this service of loss and memory.
We each arrive here today carrying the weight of memory of parents, friends, family, loved ones. And we are all heartbroken by their loss.
We are saddened, but we are also lifted.
The fleshy existence is no more – and we miss it – of course we do.
But the values live on.
We need only to turn to our own memories of those we have loved and lost to know this to be true. These responsibilities remain alive, in us, for as long we let them dance still.

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As long as we live up to their challenge to do better, to care more, to love more deeply.

Our beloved dead live on.

And they challenge us too to live beyond our time on this fragile planet.

They challenge us too, to a life beyond our fleshy existence.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah I set homework.

It was a weighty homework – about shouldering the responsibilities of our life.

Responsibilities to our fellow human beings and to our God – to our faith.

It is not yet time to mark the homework.

May that time not come for many years yet, but come it will, as it comes for Everyman.

And on that day, when our friends and families stand around our own coffin they will carry the cast of our fleshy existence, the mould made out of the values and responsibilities by which we are to be judged.

And, if we merit it, this weightiness will triumph over mortality.

If we merit it, this weightiness will teach yet again, of that which we know when we think of our own departed loved ones,

It will teach that while fleshy existence rots in the earth, our values and responsibilities will live forever.

And indeed this is the answer to the question of what purpose is there to our lives.

For the memory of our beloved departed is more than a blessing.

It is such stuff as immortality is made on.