

1: Ageing

Everybody wants to feel loved and valued for who and what they are. This need to feel wanted and worthwhile plays a major role in our decision-making, moods and wellbeing.

To a great extent, life revolves around these feelings and the perceived fulfilment of this need. This need is driven by expectations which, in themselves, reflect our perceptions of life. Experiences fuel and modify these expectations.

Ageing is the life journey of the body and the mind. Body and mind may progress together, synchronised by realities – or move along two very different, largely unrelated routes, as a result of misperceptions that cannot be fulfilled.



There it was at the top of the gentle rise, just a few hundred metres ahead: the Emmy Monash Home for the Aged. I was startled by a clang followed by a clacking noise. It was only a green and yellow tram moving along its tracks in the middle of Hawthorn Road. I looked over to my left as I continued walking up the hill and observed happy faces peering out at me from the tram windows and a few cars driving along the road behind the tram. Things to do. Places to go. People to see.

I came to the traffic lights at the intersection, turned right and found myself at the entrance. I looked around. Pretty flowering shrubs were growing out of the garden beds on both sides. I was enchanted by the sweet fragrance and watched a few large bees buzzing around the flowers as I heard a

distinctive click and saw the door in front of me slide open.

Inside I went. The smell was quite different, as was the atmosphere. There was some noise. I looked around me: a small office just ahead; a lounge to my left. The noise attracted my attention. I walked over to the corner where two people sat in animated conversation, or was it conflict? Both were talking loudly at the same time. No one was listening. Did they hear each other, in order to be able to respond? Was this a discussion I was observing? It seemed almost comical: two discourses going on at once – at times interweaving, sometimes at odds with each other, sometimes indifferent to each other.

The more I listened, the more fascinated I was. I approached – I felt drawn in and was becoming involved with them.

“Hello,” said one of them. “What’s your name?”

“Ron,” I replied.

“What did you say?” was shot back at me loudly.

“Ronny,” I responded.

“Speak up!” was shouted back into my face. “Why don’t you speak up, you’re so quiet. No one can hear you! Can’t you talk so we can understand you!”

That was the beginning of my encounter with the Emmy Monash Home for the Aged.

I began visiting regularly, always smiling at the residents who were either sitting around or moving about. I dropped a kind word here, a polite response there. Mostly, conversation topics were routine and superficial; but were they, really? I don’t think so. To me they definitely seemed so, initially, but to the residents of Emmy Monash, they were most definitely not so. For them, my visits were an important distraction from their customary daily routines; a breath of fresh air, a stimulating diversion.

Interesting! Different people were experiencing the same thing, at the same time, in very different ways. Those people were projecting strong images with theatrical personalities. There was the always-angry one; there was the sweet, serene one; the sleepy one; the fidgety one; the funny one; the inquisitive one; the worried one; the frightened one; the searching one; the old one, the younger one and the other one.

People with thoughts, feelings, needs, memories; people who had once

been children and then had parented their own children. People with names given to them by their parents – names filled with hopes and dreams and people with labels tacked onto them by other people. People living and people dying.

I could not resist attaching labels to the first two people I encountered that very first time at Emmy Monash: the “agro one” became *alter zisser* and the “softer one” became *zisser alter*. In Yiddish¹, the word *alter* means “old one” and the word *zisser* means “sweet one”. So there was the old sweet one and the sweet old one; or was it really “not so sweet” and “sweetie”? Which one was which and why were they so different? Were they really so different? Why did this matter?



We so often put name tags on people superficially, based on our first impressions. First impressions do count for something and are important as relationships start to develop. Some first impressions can be accurate but others can be quite misleading and deceptive, especially when created out of context.

Some time later – I cannot now remember when this transition occurred – I renamed them: the nicer one became *chaviv ve-zaken*, whereas, the unpleasant one was most definitely *zaken velo chaviv* (*Zaken* in Hebrew means “old” and *chaviv* means pleasant, likeable). So there was the sweet and elderly one, who was always pleasant to be with and the old and unpleasant one, who was mostly hard work.

A famous Shakespeare line from *Romeo and Juliet* says: “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet”. Flowers can be labelled – this is surely true for roses (although today, many of the perfumed roses have been replaced by scentless ones) – but it’s not true for people. Labelling a person is dehumanising, because it ignores the complexities and sensitivities of the personality, its abstract and delicate spiritual essence – all those things that are integral parts of the non-mundane essence of humanity.

¹ A Jewish-German jargon, spoken by Ashkenazic Jews from Central and Eastern Europe.

We are born and we begin to develop. We grow, we experience and we remember. Our memories then influence our destinies by “programming” our reactions to the events we encounter and impacting our impressions of random occurrences, by interpreting them through our own unique patterns of thought and behaviour.

While our bodies age, intellectually we are ageless. We continue to experience an egocentric, individual reality for as long as our memories allow us to function. These two dimensions operate in parallel. The physical world has a beginning and an end; its existence is purely a function of time. The spiritual world, in contradistinction, is timeless. Biologically, as we age, more and more of our cells cease to function, but psychologically, we remain much the same – only with more memories and experiences ... and fewer and fewer people who are older than us.



Thinking back to that particular day, it was so different from most other days at Emmy Monash: there was a lot of noise. People sounded frustrated and angry.

“Can’t you see I don’t want to talk with you?”

“Help me!”

“You can’t sit here!”

“Help me, Nurse, help me!”

“I love you.”

“Can I have a cup of tea?”

“Speak up, I can’t hear you!”

“I want to talk with someone. People here are old. Look! They’re sleeping.”

Two people were arguing passionately about nothing. They were talking about different things; each of them was arguing with an imaginary person and neither was listening to the other. Unfinished business, I thought to myself. One was complaining about all sorts of things, reminiscing over various disappointments he felt he had suffered in his life. He felt so cheated

and hard done by. The other one was bemoaning apparent lost opportunities; more disappointments; bad luck; things he should have said and things he should have done. Two people living the sunset days of their lives, unhappy with their memories.

“Excuse me,” I heard suddenly. “Excuse me please!” Looking across the room, I spotted the person who was calling to me and walked over. “Do you have a few minutes’ time to push me out into the garden? The nurses are too busy and I want to sit away from these people.” I released the two handbrakes of the wheelchair and pushed it along the corridor and out into the garden. “Thank you,” I heard. “What’s your name?”

That was the start of another deeply informative chat about life and life’s experiences.

All of the Emmy Monash residents had started their lives, physically at least, in a very similar way: as tiny, dependent babies. But, equally obviously, their life circumstances and environmental dynamics had been so different, as were their feelings and memories, their perceptions and, even more importantly, their misperceptions; their experiences of giving and of taking, of loving and of feeling loved; feelings of security and insecurity, expectation and disappointment; the psychological programming of fulfilment and achievement with the associated positive experiences of enjoyment and contentment; or else of frustration and failure and the accompanying negative experiences of sadness and lack of contentment; facing up to problems and dealing with issues, or running away from problems and avoiding issues.

All these great forces act on people’s personalities and behaviours: actions and reactions; giving and taking; expectation and reality; happiness and sadness; needing and wanting; hunger and thirst; equilibrium and serenity; touching and being touched.

Ageing is about coming to terms with ourselves and with life; it’s about reconciling the many internal conflicts which life throws out at us; it’s meeting our *yetzers* – *yetzer ha-tov* (the good inclination) and *yetzer ha-ra* (the evil inclination) face to face.

The lucky ones among us have come to terms with their *yetzer ha-ra* by

suppressing or distracting it as often as needed, even if they have not been able to fully overcome this potent force within each of us; and they have also been able to nurture their *yetzer ha-tov*. These are the saintly ones, a small minority of people who accept their lives as they are and feel an overall serenity, contentment, fulfilment and enlightenment. They are content with their material existence and do not experience material dissatisfaction. There is spirituality, hope and continuity in their lives and no sense of real finality. This spirituality is ageless and timeless. Therefore, they age peacefully and leave this world with serenity, having reconciled themselves with life and with themselves.

Traditional Judaism is the ultimate example of this approach to life and of living. Adjusting our everyday life routines according to the Jewish daily, weekly, monthly and yearly cycles gives us a wonderful opportunity to balance our material and spiritual existences and to progress and grow as human beings. Unfortunately, however, too many among us emphasise only the material aspects of life, while denying or suppressing the non-material. Too many people choose the short-sighted approach of remaining static. Selectively, they heavily dilute their Jewish spiritual or non-material living by modifying their Judaism (beliefs) to comply with their current “feel-goods”; but rather than helping them maintain their overall situation, this tends to cause a decline.

One of the most basic phenomena of human existence, which very strongly influences human behaviour, relationships and self-esteem, is a rather hidden, subconscious element that “programs” our perceptions/misperceptions and responses. Let me illustrate through an example:

Person A grows up experiencing active responses and focused participation in dialogue. *Person B* grows up experiencing the opposite – namely, passive listening, with little active dialogue – unless something specific comes up, along with an ability to tune in and out of various activities simultaneously. Now put these two people together and try to visualise their interaction. Most likely *Person B* will naturally listen to *Person A*, observing and absorbing. *Person A*, however, will feel awkward: it’s not the kind of dialogue they

are used to and *Person A* will soon feel that *Person B* is not participating or listening because of a lack of interest.

With time, empathy, care and awareness, both *A* and *B* can learn from each other and adapt to each other. But in most cases, the opposite is much more likely to occur, because of individual programming, experiences, expectations and reactions, comfort zones, familiarity, exposure to new situations and to different people.



That visit to Emmy Monash had a great impact on me. On my way back to my car, I was lost in thought and then was day-dreaming as I drove home. Something very profound flashed into my mind. Very shortly before having walked into the aged care home, I had been startled by the noise of a tram. Those happy young faces that had peered out at me then were peering into me now. My imagination was vivid: young people, busy and buzzing with so many things to do and people to see and places to go. The faces that looked out at me at Emmy, on the other hand, were old faces – though also filled with dreams, memories and expectations. There were two dramatically different time-frames operating simultaneously: the young and the old. For the old, time is much more limited; it takes them so much longer to do things that not so long ago had taken so much less time. For the young, time is much less of an issue.

Life is full of expectations. Our emotions are powerfully driven by our own perceptions of events. But, our perceptions can often be confused with the misperceptions of other people who are interacting with us – or are our misperceptions the perceptions of others? Life is full of these conflicting impressions. How often do our superficial views become the notions that drive our emotions?

I believe that maturing is very much about finding out about ourselves. It is a life-long process of resolving issues and conflicts, of handling insecurities and unknowns and searching for our own unique truths. Surely, a large chunk of our lives is spent providing for our basic needs – food, shelter, safety –

by grappling with our perceived insecurities. But over and above these mundane, yet essential, drivers are our fundamental psychological and spiritual needs. Yet so many people get this wrong and try to fulfil their non-material needs through material pursuits.

This brings me back to the first two characters I met at Emmy. For me, they illustrated the ageing process. I have met so very few people who radiate serenity and have a quiet, saintly aura about them and so many more people who are cranky, dissatisfied, unhappy, or outright angry with life and with the people around them.

Life offers us ample opportunities to resolve our inner and outer conflicts. The saintly people take that opportunity while the others, the majority, carry with them a lot of “unfinished business” – namely, unresolved issues. Therefore, they are not likely to ever find peace of mind. Most unfinished business is blamed upon others, rather than being perceived as our own responsibility. But at the end of the day, each one of us is responsible for our own inner truths and has the ability to find our own, unique inner peace.

This capacity enables us to meet our real “self” and feel comfortable about who we are. Only after we do that can we feel comfortable with the people with whom we interact. Our memories can either help or hinder us. Much depends upon the balance between our inward and outward focus.

Another vivid memory surfaces: a gift I have recently received from a very close business partner. Terry is a self-made man with very strong ethical and moral principles: a truth-seeker, constantly looking for the inner meaning of life and living. He is a man on a journey to the beginning of creation, a journey into the universe and beyond it – and at the same time, a down-to-earth family man looking to do good deeds in the here-and-now. Although Terry and I come from very different backgrounds and have travelled very different paths, we share similar thoughts about so many things.

Terry’s gift was a surprise. It was a small paperback book which he told me was out of print, written by a Catholic priest named Henri Nouwen, an academic reputed to be one of the greatest spiritual thinkers and writers of the twentieth century, who lived and worked within the Western secular culture. His major commitment in life was his work with the mentally handicapped in

the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto, Canada.

This small paperback contains two very deep and moving pieces about living and dying. Nouwen attributes value and deep meaning to every life. His analysis about living is from a viewpoint of becoming aware of feeling beloved. He develops the principle of being the beloved into becoming, and living as, the beloved. For him, life's greatest gift is our acceptance of life, as it is reflected in what we do with it – namely, our ability to care, share and experience – or, in other words, to rise above the superficial and the material. He speaks about the beauty, the meaning, the value and the memories of giving and of receiving and about the positive impact we leave upon others. The warmth and love he finds in mentally handicapped people and the immense values he attributes to every small, day-to-day thing, impact on the very essence of life itself. This is a strongly reciprocal and interactive relationship, in which every participant can both give and receive.

This is so relevant to the whole issue of ageing and what living is all about.

At least two miracles occur in every human being's life:

Birth – from a humble beginning of two cells joining together there evolves a highly complex body and personality. The moment of birth is the point at which the tiny baby child emerges out of its mother's womb into this world. Out it goes from a small, secure, fluid and dark place into a huge space full of light and noises. Almost instantaneously, the baby “switches on” and starts to operate independently. This is surely a miracle.

Death – the point at which a living human being ceases to live. Life departs, even though certain physical processes continue for a while. The body lies there, seemingly the same, but it has changed and will quickly continue to change without the life force. This too is a miracle.

Life is how we live between these two miracles. Every day, hour and minute of life shortens the amount of available time, until the end of this phase of existence. Most people do not know how much time they actually have; but the main difference between the baby and the old man is that for the child, time feels never-ending whereas for the old person it feels very limited.

We humans have a spiritual dimension, which is closely connected with our

consciences. We constantly experience forces acting on us in different ways. Our “goodness” (*yetzer ha-tov*), creates “feel-goods” that are not physically or materially based and are also not connected with any immediate reward. For instance, we have a desire to help others, to relieve pain and suffering, to improve someone else’s lot. In a Jewish context it is called performing *mitzvot* (commandments). Even though we are promised a reward in the world to come, our motivation to follow our *yetzer ha-tov* is often pure and selfless. We have this drive to do what is good, proper and right. This goodness of humankind is our G-dliness, the “Divine spark” within us.

However, to varying degrees we also are the victims of the *yetzer ha-ra*, which is a very potent negative and destructive force. This force has been called “the devil in us”. The Hebrew word for it is *lebasim*, which can be translated as to beguile, to tempt, or to mislead or lead astray – it is an active word which is used as a verb. The word “Satan” is derived from this root, (STN). But however we choose to brand this force, it too plays on our “feel-goods” – in a different way: it attacks our mind and tries to lure us to imagine all sorts of material gain and instant gratification of our natural desires. We are susceptible to it, especially when we are vulnerable; it tempts us, takes advantage of us and plays on our minds and emotions by evoking images and stirring our imaginations.

However, we have the power to stifle these thoughts and quench these images; this power is called “freedom of choice”. We are free to consciously substitute those thoughts and images with others, out of our memory banks. Needless to say, the earlier we choose to activate these counter-measures, the easier the job; and the more we delay to counteract our *yetzer ha-ra*, the more difficult will the task become and the longer it will take for us to succeed. The more we allow ourselves to become influenced by the *yetzer ha-ra*, the more will this evil force be enabled to take hold of us and assume control over us. The very first such instance is the story of Adam and Eve, in which we are told that Eve “saw that the fruit was a delight to perceive”.

One rather simple way of testing ourselves is to ask ourselves honestly: will this “proposition” of our *yetzer ha-ra* stand up to public scrutiny? Or, in other words: could we honestly do such a deed openly, with pride and

dignity? If the answer is “yes”, think it through rationally; if the answer is “no”, forget about it.

From a Jewish point of view, it is much easier to cross-check such “propositions”, because we do it against an absolute system of rights and wrongs.

Interestingly, the Jewish daily prayer book contains strong statements about protecting us from this evil influence, both in the Morning Prayer: (“Rescue me today and every day ... from the destructive Satan”) and in the Evening Prayer: (“Remove Satan from before us and behind us”).

The good inclination and the evil one are the two most basic forces in human nature. Every human being must get to know these two forces during their lifetimes and, even more importantly, take control over them. We must learn to perceive and understand how the *yetzer ha-ra* tries to act upon our minds and develop the ability to overpower this negative, destructive force. At the same time we must also be able to understand our individual *yetzer ha-tov* and feel not only comfortable, but also in companionship with it.

Goodness leads to serenity and satisfaction with life, because it brings us in touch with the essence of living. Evil, on the other hand, leads to dissatisfaction because it becomes insatiable. When allowed to operate uncontrolled, it leads to emptiness, loneliness and ultimate destruction.

This is the journey of ageing, as we live our lives.

The lucky ones find this out early in life. How sad it is, however, for a person to simply become older in age (i.e. to realise that life has become almost entirely spent) without experiencing personal growth. What a profoundly shocking experience it is to feel hard done by and cheated, when reflecting back on the memories of their past experiences.

There is nothing wrong with the material, the physical and the many pleasures and enjoyments which life has to offer. But – everything in its time and in relative proportion to everything and everyone else. Never “me” at the expense of “you”; it’s “me” together with “us”.

This, to me, is the secret of living life.



The *Midrash* (homilies of our Sages on the Scriptures) brings a very interesting illustration of the material way of life, compared with the spiritual way of life.

Our patriarch Isaac fathered twin sons: Esau and Jacob. Esau was the earthy, material brother, while Jacob was the more esoteric, spiritual one. Later in life, Jacob was renamed Israel (literally: “He who strives with G-d”) – a name which reflects this characteristic.

Much later on in history, the Romans destroyed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and expelled most of the Jews from the Land of Israel. Some were brought to Rome and began living in Italy.

Italy is one of the most beautiful countries in the world: the landscapes, the seascapes, the art, the architecture, the food and the wine all are exceptionally beautiful. Its people are friendly and courteous and its music happy and often dramatic. Yet all of this is merely superficial beauty and majesty, lacking in spirituality. Italy has been likened to Esau.

Our mystics say that one must first descend to the lowest depths before being able to rise to new heights. So, too, the Jewish people were exiled to Rome and had to remain in exile for nearly two thousand years before being able to return to their homeland in Israel.

The physical world on its own is devoid of meaning. Its beauty is apparent one day, but may wane and disappear with time. The spiritual world, however, is timeless and ageless. Life that is devoid of spirituality is lifeless. Its physical attraction is like a fleeting ray of sun that, after it goes away, leaves us with nothing at all.

This image reflects the passing of life. What happens when we age? The material comes and goes, leaving memories of the past and expectations for the future, whereas the spiritual remains with us, in the present, bridging our past into our future.



Most people go through life seeking their parents' approval. Some people never experienced any lack of parental approval. How lucky for them! (Or is it? In some cases this may be detrimental to their psychological development.) Older generation parents were often unable to express open approval and love for the children and ended up communicating mostly instructions, discipline and corrections. On the other hand, many modern-day parents are instructed to voice love and approval of their children, but neglect their parenting responsibilities, which include setting and maintaining consistent and fair standards along with clear limits and boundaries.

I'm trying here to explain how many people's mindsets affect their behaviour throughout life. You see, ageing is such an interesting phenomenon that affects every single human being on a daily basis, both in how people internalise it and how they externalise it. Biologically speaking, our bodies age: with time, our organs deteriorate and our bodily functions wear down. Our inner self, however, as it is stored in our experiential memory, does not really age. We may forget things, but memory has an amazing capacity to retrieve images and relive experiences. Thus, even though the physical cells deteriorate, die off and regenerate, the "persona" lives on as long as life itself persists. Our soul is ageless. It is not subject to the metamorphoses of time; it lives within its own unique framework of existence. Thus, even when the body is very old and decrepit and "can't anymore", the soul "can" and is as fresh and young as ever.

That is why even though time marches on, we feel inside much the same as we have always felt.

As life goes on, there seem to be fewer people to look up to, people who are older than us, and more and more people who are younger than us and whom we do not know and have not interacted with. As life goes on, most of us encounter new people whom we never encountered before. New experiences, new ideas, new challenges – and still, we don't really feel very different inside ourselves. Both consciously and subconsciously, we keep seeking approval for what we are and how we feel.

Generally, we shun not only disapproval, but even indifference. This, I believe, is one of the strongest forces we encounter within us throughout our lives. It is also one of the most dominant and potent forces that constantly influence our perceptions, reactions, relationships and behaviour. The reality of our physical survival is driven by our emotional control system.

An important part of ageing is “finding ourselves” and resolving issues. Ageing should involve reconciliation of our unresolved issues and coming to terms with ourselves.

Not too many people actually achieve this during their lifetimes – so few of us do really become serene within and saintly towards those around us. Most people simply continue to go through the motions of living – merely existing, without developing or growing as human beings. Most people also fail to realise their true potential, or understand the forces that help or hinder true growth.

Some people even have vivid memories of having crossed that mysterious boundary between life and death and having returned to being alive again.

The decision when it is time to “cut the silver thread” (see Ecclesiastes 12:6) is not made in the physical realm. Death is the discontinuation of bodily life as we experience it here on earth. But for the soul there is no death, since it is connected with the eternity of spiritual existence.

Each living person knows when they have completed their earthly existence and it is time for their soul to be freed to continue in another realm of existence. There is final peace and acceptance.

For those who are close to the departed and are “left behind”, there are questions, uncertainties, longing and, often, much sadness and feelings of emptiness. And there’s also guilt: did we really do everything we could? Did the departed suffer, or did they make their peace?

Being given time to prepare for death is a blessing and a most precious gift, since it enables us to leave no “unfinished business” and no “unreconciled issues”. Even in life, we all need time and space to bid our farewells. Belief in the hereafter offers great comfort and many advantages in confronting death; but even for those lacking this dimension of belief, a final opportunity for reconciliation is most important.

Too many people are full of regrets and uncertainties. An unfulfilled need for parental approval often develops into a general need for approval. We are governed by our perceptions and even more often – by our misperceptions, which so strongly influence our externalised behaviour. Our behaviour, in turn, influences the behaviour, reaction and responses of third parties.

Ageing is a fact of life. It is inevitable. It is simultaneously positive and negative. Life is not only about living: it is about *how* we live and *how* we age. We grow older, but our persona does not feel older.

The main question is, do we confront ourselves? And if so – how? Even more importantly: have we found ourselves in a true sense, by overcoming our own deep personal issues and resolving our inner conflicts?

This is ageing.

This is death and this is life.



Something stirred me. I was dozing; or was I dreaming? No, it felt as if I were floating, weightless. I must have been asleep. The sensation was unbelievable. Never before had I felt like this.

I looked around me. There was a strange kind of light glowing all around me. It wasn't bright, but it wasn't dark either. It felt serene. Somehow, I felt secure. I was floating weightlessly and could sense familiar sounds drifting softly around me.

As I looked around I saw a kind of a silvery thread, or was it some kind of a cord? I didn't know. This was all so new. Where was I? There was a sense of familiarity and comfort, but this floating, dreamy sensation was unfamiliar.

The silvery, string-like thread was also very gently and very softly drifting about. I was watching it. It seemed to be floating upwards towards me. It was joined to me. As I focused more on this silvery string I started to notice people.

I looked. I could feel. I could sense and comprehend. These people were familiar to me, but there was this strange kind of a haze between us. I looked closer. What was happening to these people?

They were crying and whispering and holding onto each other. They laughed and then were quiet. They looked and they closed their eyes. There were tears. It was sad but it was also happy.

There was someone else there with them. I couldn't see. Who was this? They were close to this other person and it was all so blurred.

I continued to feel myself floating. I was floating very close to these people.

My silvery string was attached to me, but there were two "me". There was a "me" there together with the people and there was "me", myself, floating around "me and my people".

The silvery string floated. I felt weightless. I didn't need to look or listen: I could perceive. I was somehow connected to their feelings and thoughts. It all felt so effortless and natural, so strange yet so comforting and whole.

I kept on floating weightlessly above them and was able to float closer and further away at the same time. There were others floating close to my space; I could sense them. There was serenity and familiarity.

My silver string was thinning, but still perceivable. There was no space or time. I existed, but did not have any form or substance.

Two worlds – two separate dimensions in space/time – two energies: the infinite coexisting with the finite, each with its own unique dimensions within one continuous existence.



I remember so well that first night after my first *minyan* (prayer quorum) as a mourner.² We had buried my late Mother a few short hours before and I found myself sitting *shiva*³ for the first time in my life.

I have helped many people bury their loved ones and I have attended and

² A Jew who lost a member of his/her immediate family (parent, spouse, sibling or descendant) is commanded to "sit *shiva*" – namely, stay for week at a home, usually the home of the departed and observe certain customs. Wherever possible, all their daily prayers are conducted in a minimum quorum of ten at the house of mourning.

³ *Shiva* – literally, "seven", in Hebrew. To "sit *shiva*" is to observe the Jewish law of the first seven days of intense mourning after the death of a close relative: parent, spouse, brother, sister or child.

participated in many *minyanim*. Each was familiar to me; each had its own uniqueness.

This was different.

It was around 9:30 at night in early winter. Hundreds of people had come to pay their respects. Their warmth and well-wishing were a tremendous source of comfort.

Now there was a strange kind of loneliness: a bit intimidating, a bit frightening, a bit overwhelming, a bit comforting.

My mobile phone had been switched off for most of the day. There was someone who I knew was in crisis and would need my advice. This image came into my mind as I sat in the darkness of our lounge room on the low mourners' chair, in my socks,⁴ alone for the first time that day, thinking thousands of thoughts and only now becoming aware of the moonlight softly seeping into the room through the window.

I switched on my phone, intending to make that call, when my message bank started to beep out counting message after message, startling me out of my daze. Then my cell phone rang.

I really didn't feel like talking to anyone. I looked down and the screen did not display any familiar caller; it just flashed and rang dogmatically.

Should I – or should I not? I wanted my privacy; I also really had to make my call, before it got too late.

Of course I should answer! How inconsiderate of me!

I pressed the green button and heard a very warm familiar voice: my Israeli friend Thomas (Schwedi). “Hello Ronny, we heard your sad news and wanted to *menachem ovel* you (to comfort a mourner). We called you from New York on the way to the airport and then again from the airport and just before we boarded our flight to Israel. We called as soon as we landed at Ben Gurion and then as we walked through the airport on arrival and on the way up to Jerusalem and just now as we arrived. How is everyone – you, your father, Dina, your children, brother and family? Just a minute please – here is someone who wants to speak with you.”

⁴ Mourners are prohibited from wearing leather shoes.

I couldn't believe it. Rabbi Steinsaltz was on the line! Adin Even Yisrael – my soul mate – with his beautiful, soft, warm and so humane voice, with his closeness, deep understanding and heartfelt concern. Only a few weeks earlier I had been overseas myself and had heard the sad news that the Rabbi had lost his ageing mother-in-law in Paris. I had phoned him to express my love and our condolences.

Life is so strange, so full of surprises. Later that night, after I had called my friend in crisis, I retrieved all seven voice mail messages that these two amazing friends had left.

So there I was, walking around the dark room in deep conversation with one of the very few people in this world I feel so close to, as if there are no boundaries between us. We talked for nearly half an hour, but time flashed by as if it were a second. We talked about life and about parenting. We shared our feelings about losing loved ones.

This conversation – its timing, its participants, its deep, heartfelt emotions – was the most meaningful experience for me at that point. I shall never forget what the Rabbi told me then. He said that no one can ever repay a parent; the only thing that we can do is to try to be better parents to our children than our parents were to us.

Isn't this the main message in life? Each and every one of us is given a unique opportunity to live life as a better person than we might otherwise have become. We have a special human quality called *chesed* (kindness) – compassion for others. We have the unique capacity – which no other living being shares – to improve the world and, by so doing, help save it.

That Divine spark within each of us enables us to activate our *chesed* by finding it within us, connecting with it and remaining true to it. It is not far away from us; our *chesed* is not in the heavens. It is very close to us as it is within each of us (see Deuteronomy 30:12).

In the Hallel⁵ King David first praises G-d as being all powerful, by comparing Him with man-made idols which he describes as follows (Psalms 115:5-7):

⁵ Psalms 113-118, recited as a prayer of adulation on the Jewish festivals, the new moon and a few other occasions in the yearly cycle.

*They have a mouth, but cannot speak, they have eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear; they have a nose, but cannot smell.
Their hands – they cannot feel; their feet – they cannot walk;
they cannot utter a sound from their throat.*

This is almost like stating the obvious. We have five senses: smell, touch, sight, hearing and taste, which enable our bodies to experience and identify external phenomena. Our brain then processes, interprets and stimulates our actions. We can choose to pay attention to the messages we receive, ignore them, or even suppress and override them.

Our freedom of choice enables us to make informed choices within a framework of absolutes. The Jewish concept of *emet* (truth) is Torah truth. Choosing “truth” turns our short-term decisions into long-term ones. It defines our path in life as well as our consistency – and, paradoxically, allows for much flexibility and spontaneity, adventure and contentment.

What is the alternative? The alternative is allowing ourselves to become blinded by short term “feel-goods” or instant gratification, at the expense of an absolute framework of good and evil.

What happened between Cain and Abel?

The Biblical text is very sparse. We are told that G-d forewarned Cain about the consequences of his *yetzer ha-ra*; but what was Cain’s real issue? And what about Abel?

The *Midrash* fills in the blanks. It tells us that Cain suffered from enormous jealousy, whereas Abel was full of lust. Both of these negative forces involve envy and both, in the extreme, become addictive.

Cain was obsessed with the desire to possess every material thing around him, whereas Abel had an obsessive desire to enjoy everything he perceived as his.

The difference is that Cain needed to possess externally, whereas Abel was possessed internally. Cain allowed his *yetzer ha-ra* to lead him to temptation and this made him unable to share anything with anyone else. Abel’s *yetzer ha-ra* pushed him towards the exclusive enjoyment of everything he saw.

Both brothers were possessed and neither could share. Their extreme,

exclusive desires came at the expense of everything else. Therefore, both were punished so that neither could enjoy life.

The Torah offers each of us the opportunity of living life to the fullest and enjoying it, but within a framework of *Torat Emet* – the Torah of Truth. Our challenge is to be better than our ancestors and do everything we can so that our descendants become better than we are.

How do we do this? How do we live? How do we age?

This is a call for everyone to journey, to delve and explore and, most importantly, to ask questions and search for answers.

Time can be conceived of as time intervals which include special highlights in life as well as living life itself. We age in the same way that we live. The choices we make reflect our awareness of the availability of choice.

Towards the end of Deuteronomy (chapter 30) Moses sums up some essential issues for humanity. Before he dies in the desert, he says:

There shall come a time when you shall experience all the words of blessing and curse that I have presented to you. (verse 1)

This mandate that I am prescribing to you today is not too mysterious or remote from you. It is not in heaven so [that you should] say, “Who shall go up to heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it.” It is not over the sea so [that you should] say, “Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that we will be able to hear it and keep it?” It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it. (verses 11-15)

See! Today I have set before you [a free choice] between life and good [on one side] and death and evil [on the other]. (verse 16)

I call heaven and earth as witnesses! Before you I have placed life and death, the blessing and the curse. You must choose life, so that you and your descendants will survive. (verse 19)

The way we feel about ourselves and those around us reflects how we have aged. And how we are seen by those around reflects who or what we have become.

The spiritual or the physical?

Our thoughts, our deeds and our actions!

If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am for myself, what am I?

The body ages.

The memories live on.

Each life impacts upon so many other lives.