

“Sarah’s lifetime was...” (23:1)

Life is a gift, a precious gift from Hashem. In the *Talmud Gittin 64a*, *Chazal* teach us the signs for determining a young child’s maturity level. If one gives a child a stone and he proceeds to throw it away, but he keeps a nut which he has been given, it indicates that his mind is beginning to develop. If one gives him an object which he is prepared to return to its owner after a while, it is a clear sign that he is mature. In other words, the ability to distinguish between what is a gift and what is not; and the awareness that one must return the gift when it is demanded, are clear indications of a growing mind.

Horav Avraham Pam, z.l., explains that life is a gift, a gift which we return after a while. One who does not understand this idea behaves as if he will live forever, not caring that he has no purpose in life, acting like an immature child. On the other hand, even a young person is capable of understanding the transitory nature of life and appreciating the unique gift granted to him by the Almighty. Thus, this young person who values every minute of this precious gift, is, despite his age, a mature person. Furthermore, one who does not value and appreciate the gift of life repudiates his Benefactor.

The *Chafetz Chaim, z.l.*, was a person who valued the gift of life. I recently heard that his nephew, *Horav Chaim Yitzchak Pupko, z.l.*, who served him for twelve years, once got up his nerve and asked the *Chafetz Chaim*, “How old is the uncle?” The *Chafetz Chaim* seemingly ignored the question. A few moments later, the *Chafetz Chaim* took an envelope of coins and handed it to his nephew. “Here, take this,” he said. A moment went by, and the *Chafetz Chaim* asked, “Are you not going to count what I gave you?” “No,” he responded. “It is not proper to count a gift.” “You are right,” countered the *Chafetz Chaim*. “Life is a gift from Hashem. It is not proper to count it.” What an incredible thought, but that is why he was the *Chafetz Chaim*.

Life is a gift and must, therefore, be cherished. Every minute is special, every minute an opportunity that should not be wasted. Alas, some people realize this only when they have almost lost it. The following story demonstrates how a person who realized that he had almost died spent the rest of his life with this memory firmly entrenched in his mind. The story is about two very famous brothers, both multi-millionaires, Nathan and Isidore Strauss, considered to be among the greatest philanthropists of their day.

Together with their wives, they took a trip to Europe in 1912. After enjoying all the cultural sights and sounds of the continent, they decided to go to what was then called Palestine. When these two philanthropists arrived in *Eretz Yisrael*, they were given the royal treatment wherever they went. The holy places, *shuls*, *yeshivos*, all received their attention.

While Nathan was captivated by the pure holiness of the land, his brother Isidore was getting bored. “How many camels and how many schools and hovels can you see? Once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all,” he complained. “It is time to go.” Nathan Strauss and his wife refused

to leave. For some reason, he was overcome by the sight of so many people living in abject poverty, yet remaining committed to a Torah way of life and filled with inner joy. He just could not pull himself away.

The brothers argued. Finally Isidore said, "You are intractable. I am leaving. Stay here if you insist. I am going back to America."

They parted. Nathan stayed in *Eretz Yisrael*, traveling throughout the length and breadth of the land. Wherever he went, he contributed. He gave money for the creation of a city on the shores of the Mediterranean. Being its major benefactor, the city was named for him. Hence, the city of *Netanya* (after Nathan) was established.

Isidore, on the other hand, rushed and got to his ship just on time. You see, his connection in England was very important to him. He really wanted to sail back to the United States on the most famous ship of the day. In fact, it was just taking its maiden voyage. Yes, Isidore and Ida Strauss made the connection in Southampton, England, on the ill-fated Titanic. Five days later, they were among the 1500 who went down with the ship that "would never go down."

Nathan Strauss lived for the rest of his life with the acute awareness that, if not for the grace of the Almighty, he would have been on the Titanic too. He realized that he could have died and that he was saved for a reason: He had a mission to perform. For the rest of his life, he continued to give of his means and his time and energy to promote acts of *chesed*.

While an encounter with our own mortality is certainly a sobering motivator, we should not wait for the reminder. We are here for a reason. Life is short. Let us live it to its fullest – by making every minute count through serving Hashem.