

Just a little earlier this evening, we held a special "tot Shabbat" service for the little children in our congregation; and now in the same place we are holding a special service for the seniors in our congregation. It seems to me very fitting that here, in this sanctuary, we should be recognizing the entire continuum of our life span, as human beings and as Jews.

Our service this evening honors our seniors, i.e. we who are the elders of our community, who are the parents, grandparents, and in some cases even the great-grandparents of the younger generations. In the past, it was our task to teach and to model for those younger generations about growing up. We are still their teachers today; but now it has become our task to teach and to model for them, by our ways as well as our words, about growing old.

In Psalm 90 of the Book of Psalms, the following words are written, " ... teach us to number our days so we may have hearts of wisdom ..." The ancient poet who wrote those words was commenting not just about the fragility of life but also about its effect on the meaning of life.

Since we are all mortal human beings, we know that our days are numbered, that our lives are time limited. But, as seniors today, we also know that we have been granted a far greater number of days,- years, even decades in our lives than any people who came before us; so we are now the longest lived generation in our society's history!

Frankly, I don't think we ever expected to live that long — if we thought about it at all; and many of us are astonished at how old we are, regardless of whether or not we are willing to admit how old we actually are!

These years added to our lives are not something we sought or expected or knowingly earned or were prepared for. In fact, they came as an unexpected gift — but we are finding out now that this gift was not free. It has come at a price, as many gifts do, and the bill for repayment has now come due. The cost comes in the form of the many changes we must experience and the many losses we must endure; because at the same time

as we have been more years, other important things have been taken away.

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We suffer aging health changes; so, as a result, feeling well merely comes to mean feeling well enough, and we can no longer expect cures for our illnesses but can only hope for some comfort. We lose strength and energy and capacity; so there are now more and more things we cannot do as well or as easily as we did before — and there are some things we cannot do at all anymore. Time also changes for us. We can no longer have the same expectations or anticipations for the future because we know that we have more yesterdays than tomorrows, more memories than ambitions. Instead, we have to come to terms with a different sense of time, and we share the bitter-sweet, funny-sad comment about "not buying green bananas anymore". And, hardest of all, we lose people who were such important parts of our lives — our parents, spouses, siblings, friends — leaving us with empty spaces and empty places in our hearts.

Indeed, we have to let go of, or do without, or lose so much in our "new" old age that we sometimes question whether the gift is worth it, whether the cost is too high. Yet, did anyone ever promise us that the olden years would be golden years? Did we really expect that we would live so much longer and still be the same, and the people and the things in our lives would also be the same? Surely we must have realized that we cannot live a long time and not grow old; so the only way to escape the changes and losses of the aging years is to die young!

Much has been irretrievably taken from us, but much has also been unquestionably given to us; although there is no way to compare or compute or equate their values.

What is it worth to live long enough to see our children grow up to adulthood, to watch them build their homes, raise their families, succeed in their lives? What is it worth to live to see our grandchildren begin to grow up, go off to school, and, in some cases, even see them marry and begin a whole new generation in our families? What is it worth to live to have more years and anniversaries together with our husbands or wives, no matter in what condition either one of us may be? What is it worth to be able to have new experiences, to learn new lessons, to gain more of the wisdom that seems to come only with age? And what is it worth to have more time to contribute more to people and causes we care about, and even to plant more seeds to build a better future although we may not be able to see them come to bloom ourselves?

So, each of us must discover and decide for ourselves whether these longer lives are more of a gift or a burden, or some of both. We must decide whether those added years merely make inevitable the changes and losses we experience or make up for them, or some of both. Certainly we miss the way things used to be and the way we used to be, which we know can never be again. But should we not also wonder whether if all the good things in our lives were in the past, then what is the point of the present or any hope for the future?

If this new longevity that we have is a gift, then how can we best use it? But if it is also a burden, how can we best bear it? How can we learn to live without whatever has been lost, but still make the best of whatever has been left? Should we just count the time we still have in our lives, or should we also try to make the time we have in our lives still count?

I think that some important answers to these questions can be found in an old Hasidic saying that tells us that God does not close any doors in our lives without also opening some windows someplace else. Yes, a window is smaller than a door; it provides less space to look out and so shows us less. But it is still an opening to the outside world; we can still see other people and other places and other possibilities; it still brings in light and air to our lives. And, yes, these windows are not in the same place as the doors used to be, which we were accustomed to; but they are there; they are within reach; we can find them.

This means that these "new" old years that have been added to our lives now give us our last chance to do whatever we still can do, and to be whatever we still can be. Yes, these will be different than before, just as windows are different from doors though both are openings onto life.

So, it must be our task now, that each of us — in our own way and as much as we can — must find these windows in our lives and open them as wide as

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we can. This is a lesson that we must all learn for ourselves; but it is also a lesson that we must teach to those who come after us, so that, in time, they too may learn how to best use their own gift of time. As the older generation, this is our responsibility to the younger ones; and it is also our challenge and our opportunity for ourselves in these last numbered days and years of our lives.