

Hayyei Sarah 5773 Living a Social Life

Shabbat Shalom.

On Wednesday afternoon, I found myself on 128 as the flakes began to descend. While the weather was rather dreary, my car was filled with the gorgeous and dense sounds of Elliot Carter, one of the most important and influential American composers, who passed away on Monday at the age of 103.

His music brought him dozens of awards including two Pulitzer Prizes and a Grammy Award for best contemporary composition. As the *New York Times* wrote, "His music could seem harmonically brash and melodically sharp-edged on the first hearing, but it often yielded drama and lyricism on better acquaintance."

Not only did he live a long life, but he did what he loved right up until its end as he continued to compose music.

I was struck by both his music and his longevity, and given that I had just read the *New York Times Magazine* article entitled, "The Island Where People Forget to Die," I was thinking about living a good and long life.

The article focused on the Greek island Ikaria).

The article told the story of a man from this island who after World War II settled on Long Island and was told he had only a few months to live due to cancer. He returned to Greece so that he could be buried with his ancestors, but, instead of dying, he continued to live. The cancer went away on its own; 35 years later, he is 97 years old and cancer free.

Dan Buettner, the author of the article, has been studying this island for the last decade, determining why and how its residents live such profoundly long and healthy lives.

This research has culminated in the Ikaria Study, which surveyed the island's large over-eighty-year-old population.

So, are you interested in learning the secrets of living a long life?

Here are a few of them.

Their diet consists mostly of vegetables from their gardens, legumes and greens, and plenty of olive oil. They have interesting practices including staying up late, but they also wake up late, and they always take naps. One doctor shared that he doesn't even open his office until 11 am because no-one comes in before then.

No one on the island wears a watch. This speaks to a different way of experiencing life.

One resident pointed across the Aegean Sea toward the neighboring island of Samos and said:

"Just 15 kilometers over there is a completely different world. They are much more developed. There are high rises and resorts and homes worth a million euros. In Samos they care about money. Here, we don't. For the many religious and cultural holidays, people pool their money and buy food and wine. If there is money left over, they give it to the poor. It's not a 'me' place. It's an 'us' place."

They use traditional Greek remedies including their teas. "Wild mint fights gingivitis and gastrointestinal disorders; rosemary is used as a remedy for gout; and artemisia is thought to improve blood circulation." (NY Times)

They consume less of the bad (meat, dairy, sugar, white flour, pesticides and processed food) and more of the good (olive oil, especially unheated, goat's milk, wild greens, potatoes, local sourdough and stone-ground wheat bread.)

As compared to the standard American diet, this diet might yield up to four additional years of life expectancy.

But the part of the article that was most fascinating to me, besides the recommended glass or two of wine and the naps, was the startling report of how often the people socialize.

Both the study of Ikaria and a study of Seventh Day Adventists in California who live long lives pointed out that not only do they both eat a healthful plant-based diet and Adventists don't drink alcohol or smoke, but they hang out with each other. Thus, healthy habits can be as contagious as non-healthy habits. A Harvard social scientist found that one's chances of becoming obese shot up 57% if a friend became obese.

The socializing helps behaviors – in the case of the Ikarians, good behaviors – stick.

The key difference between Ikaria and Samos is lifestyle, not diet or genetics. The people of Ikaria take naps, they spend a lot of time walking, they don't feel the simple stress of arriving late, and the community makes sure that everyone has something to eat and contributes as well.

Their community experience is a big piece of their longevity. People spend time with each other regularly, they hang out with each other, they check up on each other, and they take care of each other. This allows them to live in their homes longer and have a much richer and more satisfying life.

While there are certainly some other factors such as genetics, diet, and not wearing a watch, perhaps the biggest factor is their community.

Not only does it reinforce positive habits, but it helps people maintain their social connections.

In our Torah reading we learn that our earliest spiritual ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, also lived long lives – Sarah to 127, as the Torah states at the opening of the parashah, and Abraham until 175, quite a long life.

While I do not want to dwell too much on the exact age – it does seem a bit high – living a long life seems to be a value in the Torah, and it may be a value to us today.

The Torah says: "*Vayigva, vayamot Avraham b'seivah tovah zakein v'savei'a va'yei'aseif el amav.*"

"Abraham breathed his last and he died at good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin."

It's interesting to note that not only does Abraham live a long life, but a content, happy life.

"Such a summation of a life is found with no other personality in biblical literature;" (JPS) he lived a long life and lived it well.

As I consider what I learned about longevity from the Ikaria study, I would love to implement some of the eating ideas, but those are fairly difficult.

Fortunately, there is a behavior more readily adopted.

This is one that many of us do regularly.

It's being here together in community.

I cannot tell you how enriching, reinforcing and stabilizing a force it is in my life that I know that, God willing, every Shabbat I will be in shul with you.

For those of you who come every Shabbat, you know this. Those of you who come once or twice a month also have a sense of this. There is something incredibly powerful about being here together, of simply forming this community, this *kehillah kedoshah*, this holy and sacred community.

Surveys have backed this up. One conducted by the University of Pittsburgh in 2006 found that people who attended weekly religious services have a longer life expectancy than those who do not. The added years of life were similar to the amount of years one could expect from other lifestyle changes such as regular exercise or taking statin-type drugs that lower cholesterol.

This makes sense – coming to shul regularly engages us not only in learning, prayer and spirituality, but, most importantly, it engages us with each other regularly. We see one another in this organic setting. We check in with one another naturally. We don't have to call to set a time to get together. We are here every Shabbat, every week.

Remember when you moved to this area – how did you meet new people? How did you meet like-minded friends?

Coming to shul is one of the best ways to do that.

I have said this before and I suppose I will say it again. The most important part of the Shabbat experience is the the Kiddush (Torah reading is important too! 😊), because we can see each other, schmooze, catch up with each other – a weekly caring interaction.

I can't tell you how sustaining it is to me to look out and see members of our community – some who have been ill and were away from shul for a while, some who have experienced losses, some who are looking forward to or celebrating a *simhah* (celebration). Whatever it is, we all come together.

Whether it's coming to shul because your child is 25/52 and you are accompanying him or her, or whether it's coming to shul because you want to learn and participate in our new *Kulanu* Learning Minyan, or maybe because you want to come and meditate in our meditation group, or maybe it's that you participate in the dozens of other activities and services that we offer.

At the end of all that, we come together as a community.

That was the genius behind the idea of the *minyan*. Thousands of years ago, our ancestors were aware that in order to sustain a community, the group has to come together regularly so that even the simple act of reciting certain prayers requires a *minyan*, a quorum, of ten adult Jews. It is in that group that we can meet each other and connect with each other. But a minyan doesn't become powerful until it's regular.

Many of our weekday *minyanim* have some of the same people who come each and every week – the Sunday-evening regulars and the Friday-morning regulars, who often connect with each other by going out to breakfast after minyan. Or think of our Wednesday-morning minyan followed by breakfast and a class of some 30 people.

Those groups, many of whom come every week, see each other and connect with each other and have formed their own mini *kehillah kedoshah*, a smaller sacred community within our greater community.

We don't live on Ikaria. Not only will we most likely not adopt all of their healthful eating habits, but we will not spend our days walking up and down 20 hills. We just won't.

We don't live that close to each other, and we spend a lot of our time driving in cars or sitting at computers. We lead a mostly sedentary life. We have to schedule exercise so that we actually move around a bit. Now while I am all for changing our lifestyle and walking to shul more or even biking to shul, we need even easier recommendations.

We're not going to just bump into each other on Mass. Ave. or on Waltham Street. We need to come to shul to meet each other, to "bump into" each other.

If we do that, if we continue to find those moments to come together on Shabbat – if we enjoy the joy of singing and dancing together on Friday-nights, share the more intellectual experience of Shabbat morning, and connect with others over Kiddush, or the deep spirituality of the Shabbat *Minhah*-afternoon service – then we will be part of a weekly Shabbat experience.

If we make this a regular habit, then our lives will not only be enriched, but I believe that, as we learn from our friends in Greece, our days will be made longer.

Maybe not as long as Abraham and Sarah's days, but longer nonetheless and certainly more enjoyable, more contented – a longer, happier and more social life.

Kein Yehi Ratzon - May it be God's will.

Shabbat Shalom.