

L'Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?

by **Leon R. Kass**

Copyright (c) 2001 First Things (May 2001).

You don't have to be Jewish to drink *L'Chaim*, to lift a glass "To Life." Everyone in his right mind believes that life is good and that death is bad. But Jews have always had an unusually keen appreciation of life, and not only because it has been stolen from them so often and so cruelly. The celebration of life-of *this* life, not the next one-has from the beginning been central to Jewish ethical and religious sensibilities. In the Torah, "Be fruitful and multiply" is God's first blessing and first command. Judaism from its inception rejected child-sacrifice and regarded long life as a fitting divine reward for righteous living. At the same time, Judaism embraces medicine and the human activity of healing the sick; from the Torah the rabbis deduced not only permission for doctors to heal, but also the positive obligation to do so. Indeed, so strong is this reverence for life that the duty of *pikuah nefesh* requires that Jews violate the holy Shabbat in order to save a life. Not by accident do we Jews raise our glasses "*L'Chaim*."

Neither is it accidental that Jews have been enthusiastic boosters of modern medicine and modern biomedical science. Vastly out of proportion to their numbers, they build hospitals and laboratories, support medical research, and see their sons and daughters in the vanguard wherever new scientific discoveries are to be made and new remedies to be found. Yet this beloved biomedical project, for all its blessings, now raises for Jews and for all humanity a plethora of serious and often unprecedented moral challenges. Laboratory-assisted reproduction, artificial organs, genetic manipulation, psychoactive drugs, computer implants in the brain, and techniques to conquer aging-these and other present and projected techniques for altering our bodies and minds pose challenges to the very meaning of our humanity. Our growing power to control human life may require us to consider possible limits to the principle of *L'Chaim*.

One well-known set of challenges results from undesired consequences of medical success in sustaining life, as more and more people are kept alive by artificial means in greatly debilitated and degraded conditions. When, if ever, is it permissible for doctors to withhold antibiotics, discontinue a respirator, remove a feeding tube, or even assist in suicide or perform euthanasia?

A second set of challenges concerns the morality of means used to seek the cure of disease or the creation of life. Is it ethical to create living human embryos for the sole purpose of experimenting on them? To conceive a child in order that it may become a compatible bone marrow donor for an afflicted "sibling"? Is it ethical to practice human cloning to provide a child for an infertile couple?

Third, we may soon face challenges concerning the goal itself: Should we, partisans of life, welcome efforts to increase not just the average but also the maximum human life span, by conquering aging, decay, and ultimately mortality itself?

In the debates taking place in the United States, Jewish commentators on these and related medical ethical topics nearly always come down strongly in favor of medical progress and on the side of life-more life, longer life, new life. They treat the cure of disease, the prevention of death, and the prolongation of life as near-absolute values, trumping most if not all other moral objections. Unlike, say, Roman Catholic moralists who hold to certain natural law teachings that set limits on what are permissible practices, the Jewish commentators, even if they acknowledge

difficulties, ultimately wind up saying that life and health are good, and that therefore whatever serves more of each and both is better.

Let me give two examples out of my own experience. Four years ago, when I gave testimony on the ethics of human cloning before the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, I was surprised to discover that the two experts who had been invited to testify on the Jewish point of view were not especially troubled by the prospect. The Orthodox rabbi, invoking the goodness of life and the injunction to be fruitful and multiply, held that cloning of the husband or the wife to provide a child for an infertile couple was utterly unobjectionable according to Jewish law. The Conservative rabbi, while acknowledging certain worries, concluded: "If cloning human beings is intended to advance medical research or cure infertility, it has a proper place in God's scheme of things, as understood in the Jewish tradition." Let someone else worry about Brave-New-Worldly turning procreation into manufacture or the meaning of replacing heterosexual procreation by asexual propagation. Prospective cures for diseases and children for infertile couples suffice to legitimate human cloning-and, by extension, will legitimate farming human embryos for spare body parts or even creating babies in bottles when that becomes feasible.

The second example. At a meeting in March 2000 on "Extended Life, Eternal Life," scientists and theologians were invited to discuss the desirability of increasing the maximum human life span and, more radically, of treating death itself as a disease to be conquered. The major Jewish speaker, a professor at a leading rabbinical seminary, embraced the project-you should excuse me-whole hog. Gently needling his Christian colleagues by asserting that, for Jews, God is Life, rather than Love, he used this principle to justify any and all life-preserving and life-extending technologies, including those that might yield massive increases in the maximum human life expectancy. When I pressed him in discussion to see if he had any objections to the biomedical pursuit of immortality, he responded that Judaism would only welcome such a project.

I am prepared to accept the view that traditional Jewish sources may be silent on these matters, given that the halakhah could know nothing about test-tube babies, cloning, or the campaign to conquer aging. But, in my opinion, such unqualified endorsement of medical progress and the unlimited pursuit of longevity cannot be the counsel of wisdom, and, therefore, should not be the counsel of Jewish wisdom. *L'Chaim*, but with limits.

Let us address the question of *L'Chaim* and its limits in its starkest and most radical form: If life is good and more is better, should we not regard death as a disease and try to cure it? Although this formulation of the question may seem too futuristic or far-fetched, there are several reasons for taking it up and treating it seriously.

First, reputable scientists are today answering the question in the affirmative and are already making large efforts toward bringing about a cure. Three kinds of research, still in their infancy, are attracting new attention and energies. First is the use of hormones, especially human growth hormone (hGH), to restore and enhance youthful bodily vigor. In the United States, over ten thousand people-including many physicians-are already injecting themselves daily with hGH for anti-aging purposes, with apparently remarkable improvements in bodily fitness and performance, though there is as yet no evidence that the hormones yield any increase in life expectancy. When the patent on hGH expires in 2002 and the cost comes down from its current \$1,000 per month, many more people are almost certainly going to be injecting themselves from the hormonal fountain of youth.

Second is research on stem cells, those omnicompetent primordial cells that, on different signals, turn into all the different differentiated tissues of the body—liver, heart, kidney, brain, etc. Stem cell technologies—combined with techniques of cloning—out the promise of an indefinite supply of replacement tissues and organs for any and all worn-out body parts. This is a booming area in commercial biotechnology, and one of the leading biotech entrepreneurs has been touting his company's research as promising indefinite prolongation of life.

Third, there is research into the genetic switches that control the biological processes of aging. The maximum life span for each species—roughly one hundred years for human beings—is almost certainly under genetic control. In a startling recent discovery, fruit-fly geneticists have shown that mutations in a *single* gene produce a 50 percent increase in the natural lifetime of the flies. Once the genes involved in regulating the human life cycle and setting the midnight hour are identified, scientists predict that they will be able to increase the human maximum age well beyond its natural limit. Quite frankly, I find some of the claims and predictions to be overblown, but it would be foolhardy to bet against scientific and technical progress along these lines.

But even if cures for aging and death are a long way off, there is a second and more fundamental reason for inquiring into the radical question of the desirability of gaining a cure for death. For truth to tell, victory over mortality is the unstated but implicit goal of modern medical science, indeed of the entire modern scientific project, to which mankind was summoned almost four hundred years ago by Francis Bacon and René Descartes. They quite consciously trumpeted the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate, and they founded a science whose explicit purpose was to reverse the curse laid on Adam and Eve, and especially to restore the tree of life, by means of the tree of (scientific) knowledge. With medicine's increasing successes, realized mainly in the last half century, every death is increasingly regarded as premature, a failure of today's medicine that future research will prevent. In parallel with medical progress, a new moral sensibility has developed that serves precisely medicine's crusade against mortality: anything is permitted if it saves life, cures disease, prevents death. Regardless, therefore, of the imminence of anti-aging remedies, it is most worthwhile to reexamine the assumption upon which we have been operating: that everything should be done to preserve health and prolong life as much as possible, and that all other values must bow before the biomedical gods of better health, greater vigor, and longer life.

Recent proposals that we should conquer aging and death have not been without their critics. The criticism takes two forms: predictions of bad social consequences and complaints about distributive justice. Regarding the former, there are concerns about the effect on the size and age distribution of the population. How will growing numbers and percentages of people living well past one hundred affect, for example, work opportunities, retirement plans, hiring and promotion, cultural attitudes and beliefs, the structure of family life, relations between the generations, or the locus of rule and authority in government, business, and the professions? Even the most cursory examination of these matters suggests that the cumulative results of aggregated decisions for longer and more vigorous life could be highly disruptive and undesirable, even to the point that many individuals would be *worse off* through most of their lives, and worse off enough to offset the benefits of better health afforded them near the end of life. Indeed, several people have predicted that retardation of aging will present a classic instance of the Tragedy of the Commons, in

which genuine and sought-for gains to individuals are nullified or worse, owing to the social consequences of granting them to everyone.

But other critics worry that technology's gift of long or immortal life will not be granted to everyone, especially if, as is likely, the treatments turn out to be expensive. Would it not be the ultimate injustice if only some people could afford a deathless existence, if the world were divided not only into rich and poor but into mortal and immortal?

Against these critics, the proponents of immortality research answer confidently that we will gradually figure out a way to solve these problems. We can handle any adverse social consequences through careful planning; we can overcome the inequities through cheaper technologies. Though I think these optimists woefully naive, let me for the moment grant their view regarding these issues. For both the proponents and their critics have yet to address thoughtfully the heart of the matter, the question of the goodness of the goal. The core question is this: Is it really true that longer life for individuals is an unqualified good?

How *much* longer life is a blessing for an individual? Ignoring now the possible harms flowing back to individuals from adverse social consequences, how much more life is good for us as individuals, other things being equal? How much more life do we want, assuming it to be healthy and vigorous? Assuming that it were up to us to set the human life span, where would or should we set the limit and why?

The simple answer is that no limit should be set. Life is good, and death is bad. Therefore, the more life the better, provided, of course, that we remain fit and our friends do, too.

This answer has the virtues of clarity and honesty. But most public advocates of conquering aging deny any such greediness. They hope not for immortality, but for something reasonable-just a few more years.

How many years are reasonably few? Let us start with ten. Which of us would find unreasonable or unwelcome the addition of ten healthy and vigorous years to his or her life, years like those between ages thirty and forty? We could learn more, earn more, see more, do more. Maybe we should ask for five years on top of that? Or ten? Why not fifteen, or twenty, or more?

If we can't immediately land on the reasonable number of added years, perhaps we can locate the principle. What is the principle of reasonableness? Time needed for our plans and projects yet to be completed? Some multiple of the age of a generation, say, that we might live to see great-grandchildren fully grown? Some notion-traditional, natural, revealed-of the proper life span for a being such as man? We have no answer to this question. We do not even know how to choose among the principles for setting our new life span.

Under such circumstances, lacking a standard of reasonableness, we fall back on our wants and desires. Under liberal democracy, this means the desires of the majority for whom the attachment to life-or the fear of death-knows no limits. It turns out that the simple answer is the best: we want to live and live, and not to wither and not to die. For most of us, especially under modern secular conditions in which more and more people believe that this is the only life they have, the desire to prolong the life span (even modestly) must be seen as expressing a desire *never* to grow old and die. However naive their counsel, those who propose immortality deserve credit: they honestly and shamelessly expose this desire.

Some, of course, eschew any desire for longer life. They seek not adding years to life, but life to years. For them, the ideal life span would be our natural (once thought

three-, now known to be) fourscore and ten, or if by reason of strength, fivescore, lived with full powers right up to death, which could come rather suddenly, painlessly, at the maximal age.

This has much to recommend it. Who would not want to avoid senility, crippling arthritis, the need for hearing aids and dentures, and the degrading dependencies of old age? But, in the absence of these degenerations, would we remain content to spurn longer life? Would we not become even more disinclined to exit? Would not death become even more of an affront? Would not the fear and loathing of death increase in the absence of its harbingers? We could no longer comfort the widow by pointing out that her husband was delivered from his suffering. Death would always be untimely, unprepared for, shocking.

Montaigne saw it clearly:

I notice that in proportion as I sink into sickness, I naturally enter into a certain disdain for life. I find that I have much more trouble digesting this resolution when I am in health than when I have a fever. Inasmuch as I no longer cling so hard to the good things of life when I begin to lose the use and pleasure of them, I come to view death with much less frightened eyes. This makes me hope that the farther I get from life and the nearer to death, the more easily I shall accept the exchange. . . . If we fell into such a change [decrepitude] suddenly, I don't think we could endure it. But when we are led by Nature's hand down a gentle and virtually imperceptible slope, bit by bit, one step at a time, she rolls us into this wretched state and makes us familiar with it; so that we find no shock when youth dies within us, which in essence and in truth is a harder death than the complete death of a languishing life or the death of old age; inasmuch as the leap is not so cruel from a painful life as from a sweet and flourishing life to a grievous and painful one.

Thus it is highly likely that even a modest prolongation of life with vigor or even only a preservation of youthfulness with no increase in longevity would make death less acceptable and would exacerbate the desire to keep pushing it away-unless, for some reason, such life could also prove less satisfying.

Could longer, healthier life be less satisfying? How could it be, if life is good and death is bad? Perhaps the simple view is in error. Perhaps mortality is not simply an evil, perhaps it is even a blessing-not only for the welfare of the community, but even for us as individuals. How could this be?

I wish to make the case for the virtues of mortality. Against my own strong love of life, and against my even stronger wish that no more of my loved ones should die, I aspire to speak truth to my desires by showing that the finitude of human life is a blessing for every human individual, whether he knows it or not.

I know I won't persuade many people to my position. But I do hope I can convince readers of the gravity-I would say, the unique gravity-of this question. We are not talking about some minor new innovation with ethical wrinkles about which we may chatter or regulate as usual. Conquering death is not something that we can try for a while and then decide whether the results are better or worse-according to, God only knows, what standard. On the contrary, this is a question in which our very humanity is at stake, not only in the consequences but also in the very meaning of the choice. For to argue that human life would be better without death is, I submit, to argue that human life would be better being something other than human. To be immortal would not be just to continue life as we mortals now know it, only forever. The new

immortals, in the decisive sense, would not be like us at all. If this is true, a human choice for bodily immortality would suffer from the deep confusion of choosing to have some great good only on the condition of turning into someone else. Moreover, such an immortal someone else, in my view, will be less well off than we mortals are now, thanks indeed to our mortality.

It goes without saying that there is no virtue in the death of a child or a young adult, or the untimely or premature death of anyone, before they had attained to the measure of man's days. I do not mean to imply that there is virtue in the particular *event* of death for anyone. Nor am I suggesting that separation through death is not painful for the survivors, those for whom the deceased was an integral part of their lives. Instead, my question concerns the fact of our finitude, the fact of our mortality—the fact *that we must die*, the fact that a full life for a human being has a biological, built-in limit, one that has evolved as part of our nature. Does this fact also have value? Is our finitude good for us—as individuals? (I intend this question entirely in the realm of natural reason and apart from any question about a life after death.)

To praise mortality must seem to be madness. If mortality is a blessing, it surely is not widely regarded as such. Life seeks to live, and rightly suspects all counsels of finitude. “Better to be a slave on earth than the king over all the dead,” says Achilles in Hades to the visiting Odysseus, in apparent regret for his prior choice of the short but glorious life. Moreover, though some cultures—such as the Eskimo—can instruct and moderate somewhat the lust for life, liberal Western society gives it free rein, beginning with a political philosophy founded on a fear of violent death, and reaching to our current cults of youth and novelty, the cosmetic replastering of the wrinkles of age, and the widespread anxiety about disease and survival. Finally, the virtues of finitude—if there are any—may never be widely appreciated in any age or culture, if appreciation depends on a certain wisdom, if wisdom requires a certain detachment from the love of oneself and one's own, and if the possibility of such detachment is given only to the few. Still, if it is wisdom, the rest of us should hearken, for we may learn something of value for ourselves.

How, then, might our finitude be good for us? I offer four benefits, first among which is *interest and engagement*. If the human life span were increased even by only twenty years, would the pleasures of life increase proportionately? Would professional tennis players really enjoy playing 25 percent more games of tennis? Would the Don Juans of our world feel better for having seduced 1,250 women rather than 1,000? Having experienced the joys and tribulations of raising a family until the last had left for college, how many parents would like to extend the experience by another ten years? Likewise, those whose satisfaction comes from climbing the career ladder might well ask what there would be to do for fifteen years after one had been CEO of Microsoft, a member of Congress, or the President of Harvard for a quarter of a century? Even less clear are the additions to personal happiness from more of the same of the less pleasant and less fulfilling activities in which so many of us are engaged so much of the time. It seems to be as the poet says: “We move and ever spend our lives amid the same things, and not by any length of life is any new pleasure hammered out.”

Second, *seriousness and aspiration*. Could life be serious or meaningful without the limit of mortality? Is not the limit on our time the ground of our taking life seriously and living it passionately? To know and to feel that one goes around only once, and that the deadline is not out of sight, is for many people the necessary spur to the pursuit of something worthwhile. “Teach us to number our days,” says the Psalmist,

“that we may get a heart of wisdom.” To number our days is the condition for making them count. Homer’s immortals-Zeus and Hera, Apollo and Athena-for all their eternal beauty and youthfulness, live shallow and rather frivolous lives, their passions only transiently engaged, in first this and then that. They live as spectators of the mortals, who by comparison have depth, aspiration, genuine feeling, and hence a real center in their lives. Mortality makes life matter.

There may be some activities, especially in some human beings, that do not require finitude as a spur. A powerful desire for understanding can do without external proddings, let alone one related to mortality; and as there is never too much time to learn and to understand, longer, more vigorous life might be simply a boon. The best sorts of friendship, too, seem capable of indefinite growth, especially where growth is somehow tied to learning-though one may wonder whether real friendship doesn’t depend in part on the shared perceptions of a common fate. But, in any case, I suspect that these are among the rare exceptions. For most activities, and for most of us, I think it is crucial that we recognize and feel the force of not having world enough and time.

A third matter, *beauty and love*. Death, says Wallace Stevens, is the mother of beauty. What he means is not easy to say. Perhaps he means that only a mortal being, aware of his mortality and the transience and vulnerability of all natural things, is moved to make beautiful artifacts, objects that will last, objects whose order will be immune to decay as their maker is not, beautiful objects that will bespeak and beautify a world that needs beautification, beautiful objects for other mortal beings who can appreciate what they cannot themselves make because of a taste for the beautiful, a taste perhaps connected to awareness of the ugliness of decay.

Perhaps the poet means to speak of natural beauty as well, which beauty-unlike that of objects of art-depends on its *impermanence*. Could the beauty of flowers depend on the fact that they will soon wither? Does the beauty of spring warblers depend upon the fall drabness that precedes and follows? What about the fading, late afternoon winter light or the spreading sunset? Is the beautiful necessarily fleeting, a peak that cannot be sustained? Or does the poet mean not that the beautiful is beautiful because mortal, but that our appreciation of its beauty depends on our appreciation of mortality-in us and in the beautiful? Does not love swell before the beautiful precisely on recognizing that it (and we) will not always be? Is not our mortality the cause of our enhanced appreciation of the beautiful and the worthy and of our treasuring and loving them? How deeply could one deathless “human” being love another?

Fourth, there is the peculiarly human beauty of character, *virtue and moral excellence*. To be mortal means that it is possible to give one’s life, not only in one moment, say, on the field of battle, but also in the many other ways in which we are able in action to rise above attachment to survival. Through moral courage, endurance, greatness of soul, generosity, devotion to justice-in acts great and small-we rise above our mere creatureliness, spending the precious coinage of the time of our lives for the sake of the noble and the good and the holy. We free ourselves from fear, from bodily pleasures, or from attachments to wealth-all largely connected with survival-and in doing virtuous deeds overcome the weight of our neediness; yet for this nobility, vulnerability and mortality are the necessary conditions. The immortals cannot be noble.

Of this, too, the poets teach. Odysseus, long suffering, has already heard the shade of Achilles’ testimony in praise of life when he is offered immortal life by the nymph

Calypso. She is a beautiful goddess, attractive, kind, yielding; she sings sweetly and weaves on a golden loom; her island is well-ordered and lovely, free of hardships and suffering. Says the poet, "Even a god who came into that place would have admired what he saw, the heart delighted within him." Yet Odysseus turns down the offer to be lord of her household and immortal:

Goddess and queen, do not be angry with me. I myself know that all you say is true and that circumspect Penelope can never match the impression you make for beauty and stature. She is mortal after all, and you are immortal and ageless. But even so, what I want and all my days I pine for is to go back to my house and see that day of my homecoming. And if some god batters me far out on the wine-blue water, I will endure it, keeping a stubborn spirit inside me, for already I have suffered much and done much hard work on the waves and in the fighting.

To suffer, to endure, to trouble oneself for the sake of home, family, community, and genuine friendship, is truly to live, and is the clear choice of this exemplary mortal. This choice is both the mark of his excellence and the basis for the visible display of his excellence in deeds noble and just. Immortality is a kind of oblivion-like death itself.

But, someone might reasonably object, if mortality is such a blessing, why do so few cultures recognize it as such? Why do so many teach the promise of life after death, of something eternal, of something imperishable? This takes us to the heart of the matter.

What is the meaning of this concern with immortality? *Why* do we human beings seek immortality? Why do we want to live longer or forever? Is it really first and most because we do not want to die, because we do not want to leave this embodied life on earth or give up our earthly pastimes, because we want to see more and do more? I do not think so. This may be what we say, but it is not what we finally mean.

Mortality as such is not our defect, nor bodily immortality our goal. Rather, mortality is at most a pointer, a derivative manifestation, or an accompaniment of some deeper deficiency. The promise of immortality and eternity answers rather to a deep truth about the human soul: the human soul yearns for, longs for, aspires to some condition, some state, some goal toward which our earthly activities are directed but which cannot be attained in earthly life. Our soul's reach exceeds our grasp; it seeks more than continuance; it reaches for something beyond us, something that for the most part eludes us. Our distress with mortality is the derivative manifestation of the conflict between the transcendent longings of the soul and the all-too-finite powers and fleshly concerns of the body.

What is it that we lack and long for, but cannot reach? One possibility is completion in another person. For example, Plato's Aristophanes says we seek wholeness through complete and permanent bodily and psychic union with a unique human being whom we love, our "missing other half." Plato's Socrates, in contrast, says it is rather wholeness through wisdom, through comprehensive knowledge of the beautiful truth about the whole, that which philosophy seeks but can never attain. Yet again, biblical religion says we seek wholeness through dwelling in God's presence, love, and redemption—a restoration of innocent wholeheartedness lost in the Garden of Eden. But, please note, these and many other such accounts of human aspiration, despite their differences, all agree on this crucial point: man longs not so much for deathlessness as for wholeness, wisdom, goodness, and godliness—longings that cannot be satisfied fully in our embodied earthly life, the only life, by natural reason, we know we have. Hence the attractiveness of any prospect or promise of a

different and thereby fulfilling life hereafter. The decisive inference is clear: none of these longings can be answered by prolonging earthly life. Not even an unlimited amount of “more of the same” will satisfy our deepest aspirations.

If this is correct, there follows a decisive corollary regarding the battle against death. The human taste for immortality, for the imperishable and the eternal, is not a taste that the biomedical conquest of death could satisfy. We would still be incomplete; we would still lack wisdom; we would still lack God’s presence and redemption. Mere continuance will not buy fulfillment. Worse, its pursuit threatens-already threatens-human happiness by distracting us from the goals toward which our souls naturally point. By diverting our aim, by misdirecting so much individual and social energy toward the goal of bodily immortality, we may seriously undermine our chances for living as well as we can and for satisfying to some extent, however incompletely, our deepest longings for what is best. The implication for human life is hardly nihilistic: once we acknowledge and accept our finitude, we can concern ourselves with living *well*, and care first and most for the *well-being* of our souls, and not so much for their mere existence.

But perhaps this is all a mistake. Perhaps there is no such longing of the soul. Perhaps there is no soul. Certainly modern science doesn’t speak about the soul; neither does medicine or even our *psychiatrists*, whose name means “healers of the soul.” Perhaps we are just animals, complex ones to be sure, but animals nonetheless, content just to be here, frightened in the face of danger, avoiding pain, seeking pleasure.

Curiously, however, biology has its own view of our nature and its inclinations. Biology also teaches about transcendence, though it eschews talk about the soul. Biology has long shown us a feasible way to rise above our finitude and to participate in something permanent and eternal: I refer not to stem cells, but to procreation-the bearing and caring for offspring, for the sake of which many animals risk and even sacrifice their lives. Indeed, in all higher animals, reproduction *as such* implies both the acceptance of the death of self and participation in its transcendence. The salmon, willingly swimming upstream to spawn and die, makes vivid this universal truth.

But man is natured for more than spawning. Human biology teaches how our life points beyond itself-to our offspring, to our community, to our species. Like the other animals, man is built for reproduction. More than the other animals, man is also built for sociality. And, alone among the animals, man is also built for culture-not only through capacities to transmit and receive skills and techniques, but also through capacities for shared beliefs, opinions, rituals, traditions. We are built with leanings toward, and capacities for, perpetuation. Is it not possible that aging and mortality are part of this construction, and that the rate of aging and the human life span have been selected for their usefulness to the task of perpetuation? Could not extending the human life span place a great strain on our nature, jeopardizing our project and depriving us of success? Interestingly, perpetuation is a goal that *is* attainable, a transcendence of self that *is* (largely) realizable. Here is a form of participating in the enduring that is open to us, without qualification-provided, that is, that we remain open to it.

Biological considerations aside, simply to covet a prolonged life span for ourselves is both a sign and a cause of our failure to open ourselves to procreation and to any higher purpose. It is probably no accident that it is a generation whose intelligentsia proclaim the death of God and the meaninglessness of life that embarks on life’s

indefinite prolongation and that seeks to cure the emptiness of life by extending it forever. For the desire to prolong youthfulness is not only a childish desire to eat one's life and keep it; it is also an expression of a childish and narcissistic wish incompatible with devotion to posterity. It seeks an endless present, isolated from anything truly eternal, and severed from any true continuity with past and future. It is in principle hostile to children, because children, those who come after, are those who will take one's place; *they* are life's answer to mortality, and their presence in one's house is a constant reminder that one no longer belongs to the frontier generation. One cannot pursue agelessness for oneself and remain faithful to the spirit and meaning of perpetuation.

In perpetuation, we send forth not just the seed of our bodies, but also the bearer of our hopes, our truths, and those of our tradition. If our children are to flower, we need to sow them well and nurture them, cultivate them in rich and wholesome soil, clothe them in fine and decent opinions and mores, and direct them toward the highest light, to grow straight and tall-that they may take our place as we took that of those who planted us and made way for us, so that in time they, too, may make way and plant. But if they are truly to flower, we must go to seed; we must wither and give ground.

Against these considerations, the clever ones will propose that if we could do away with death, we would do away with the need for posterity. But that is a self-serving and shallow answer, one that thinks of life and aging solely in terms of the state of the body. It ignores the psychological effects simply of the passage of time-of experiencing and learning about the way things are. After a while, no matter how healthy we are, no matter how respected and well placed we are socially, most of us cease to look upon the world with fresh eyes. Little surprises us, nothing shocks us, righteous indignation at injustice dies out. We have seen it all already, seen it all. We have often been deceived, we have made many mistakes of our own. Many of us become small-souled, having been humbled not by bodily decline or the loss of loved ones but by life itself. So our ambition also begins to flag, or at least our noblest ambitions. As we grow older, Aristotle already noted, we "aspire to nothing great and exalted and crave the mere necessities and comforts of existence." At some point, most of us turn and say to our intimates, Is this all there is? We settle, we accept our situation-if we are lucky enough to be able to accept it. In many ways, perhaps in the most profound ways, most of us go to sleep long before our deaths-and we might even do so earlier in life if death no longer spurred us to make something of ourselves.

In contrast, it is in the young where aspiration, hope, freshness, boldness, and openness spring anew-even when they take the form of overturning our monuments. Immortality for oneself through children may be a delusion, but participating in the natural and eternal renewal of human possibility through children is not-not even in today's world.

For it still stands as it did when Homer made Glaukos say to Diomedes:

As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. The wind scatters the leaves to the ground, but the live timber burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning. So one generation of man will grow while another dies.

And yet it also still stands, as this very insight of Homer's itself reveals, that human beings are in another respect unlike the leaves; that the eternal renewal of human beings embraces also the eternally human possibility of learning and self-awareness; that we, too, here and now may participate with Homer, with Plato, with the Bible,

yes with Descartes and Bacon, in catching at least some glimpse of the enduring truths about nature, God, and human affairs; and that we, too, may hand down and perpetuate this pursuit of wisdom and goodness to our children and our children's children. Children and their education, not growth hormone and perpetual organ replacement, are life's-and wisdom's-answer to mortality.

This ancient Homeric wisdom is, in fact, not so far from traditional Jewish wisdom. For although we believe that life is good and long life is better, we hold something higher than life itself to be best. We violate one Shabbat so that the person whose life is saved may observe many Shabbath. We are obliged to accept death rather than commit idolatry, murder, or sexual outrage. Though we love life and drink *L'Chaim*, we have been taught of old to love wisdom and justice and godliness more; among Jews, at least until recently, teachers were more revered than doctors. Regarding immortality, God Himself declares-in the Garden of Eden story-that human beings, once they have attained the burdensome knowledge of good and bad, should not have access to the tree of life. Instead, they are to cleave to the Torah as a tree of life, a life-perfecting path to righteousness and holiness. Unlike the death-defying Egyptians, those ancient precursors of the quest for bodily immortality, the Children of Israel do not mummify or embalm their dead; we bury our ancestors but keep them alive in memory, and, accepting our mortality, we look forward to the next generation. Indeed, the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply, when rightly understood, celebrates not the life we have and selfishly would cling to, but the life that replaces us.

Confronted with the growing moral challenges posed by biomedical technology, let us resist the siren song of the conquest of aging and death. Let us cleave to our ancient wisdom and lift our voices and properly toast *L'Chaim*, to life beyond our own, to the life of our grandchildren and their grandchildren. May they, God willing, know health and long life, but especially so that they may also know the pursuit of truth and righteousness and holiness. And may they hand down and perpetuate this pursuit of what is humanly finest to succeeding generations for all time to come.

Leon R. Kass, M.D., is the Addie Clark Harding Professor in the Committee on Social Thought and the College at the University of Chicago and author of *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfection of Our Nature*. This article is adapted from a lecture given in Jerusalem in May 2000 under the auspices of the Shalem Center.

Judaism from its inception rejected child sacrifice and regarded long life as a fitting divine reward for righteous living. At the same time, Judaism embraces medicine and the human activity of healing the sick; from the Torah the rabbis deduced not only permission for doctors to heal, but also the positive obligation to do so. Indeed, so strong is this reverence for life that the duty of *pikuah nefesh* requires that Jews violate the holy Shabbat in order to save a life. Our growing power to control human life may require us to consider possible limits to the principle of *Chaim*. One well-known set of challenges results from undesired consequences of medical success in sustaining life, as more and more people are kept alive by artificial means in greatly debilitated and degraded conditions.

1994. Why immortality is not so bad. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2: 257-70. CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Fischer, John Martin. 2005. Free will, death, and immortality: The role of narrative. *Philosophical Papers* 34: 379-403. CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Hartshorne, Charles. Kass, Leon. 2001. *Chaim* and its limits: Why not immortality? *First Things* 113: 17-24. Google Scholar. Kass, Leon. Let us address the question of *Chaim* and its limits in its starkest and most radical form: If life is good and more is better, should we not regard death as a disease and try to cure it? Although this formulation of the question may seem too futuristic or far-fetched, there are several reasons for taking it up and treating it seriously. Against these critics, the proponents of immortality research answer confidently that we will gradually figure out a way to solve these problems. We can handle any adverse social consequences through careful planning; we can overcome the inequities through cheaper technologies. Though I think these optimists woefully naive, let me for the moment grant their view regarding these issues. The prospect of successful intervention into the causal mechanisms of aging has produced moral concern most notably from the bioethicist Leon Kass who wrote in *Chaim* and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality? (Kass, 2001). "Should we welcome efforts to increase not just the average but also the maximum human life span, by conquering aging, decay, and ultimately mortality itself?"