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Living a Purposeful Life – at Any Age

Finding a purpose in life can increase our longevity, regardless of our age. That's the conclusion reached by Patrick Hill of Carleton University in Canada, who, with his colleague Nicholas Turiano of the University of Rochester Medical Center, examined data from a project called the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) Study.

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by Nancy Sokoler Steiner

In 1995, this study enrolled more 7,000 participants to look at how physical and mental health changes over time.

“There are a lot of reasons to believe that being purposeful might help protect older adults more so than younger ones,” Hill said in an Association for Psychological Science article. “For instance, adults might need a sense of direction more after they have left the workplace and lost that source for organizing their daily events.”

Other scientific research also affirms the value of living a purposeful life. Studies indicate having a sense of purpose boosts health by lowering the incidence of certain diseases, promoting cognitive function and improving mental health.

But what does that all this mean for someone in their 80s or 90s, who may not be able to go out and save the world?

Rabbi Karen Bender, Skirball Director of Spiritual Life and Grancell Village Rabbi at the Los Angeles Jewish Home, says that while age and physical limitations may prevent residents from doing external tikkun olam (repair of the world), they can still do internal tikkun of themselves.

“Mussar is an area of Jewish thought that really speaks to the issue of purpose and meaning in a person’s life,” says Rabbi Bender. “I think it’s especially relevant to seniors because it talks about the importance of cultivating your personality traits and finding your spiritual curriculum. For example, if you’re a short-tempered person, how do you become a more patient person?”

Rabbi Bender notes, “The Mussar masters would say you never finish...There is always work to do.”

Jewish Home residents Ernie Braunstein and Michal Robbins embody the idea of evolving throughout life. They have continued to find purpose and meaning across the stages of their lives.

In his early days, Ernie’s sole purpose was survival. He was a 17-year-old college student in Hungary when he was sent to lay railroad track at a German labor camp in Yugoslavia. Later, the Nazis forced the 15,000 camp inmates on a march to Germany, a five-month ordeal of hunger, disease and fatigue. Ernie was one of only 2,000

to reach the destination: Auschwitz. Despite the brutal conditions, he was determined to survive.

After being liberated, he joined his brother in California, starting with nothing. When a local business advertised for an experienced cabinetmaker, Ernie talked his way into the job.

“I’d never had a hammer in my hand,” he says. “At lunch time, while the other workers were eating, I pushed the buttons to see how each of the machines worked.”

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Michal Robbins loves to share her musical talent.



He took a series of jobs, each paying better than the last, and eventually opened his own clothing manufacturing business. When the business dissolved, Ernie persevered. He became a car salesman and used his earnings to purchase and administer a chain of convalescent homes along with his brother. Later, he invested in real estate, losing his fortune when a major tenant went out of business.

Now, a five year resident at the Home, Ernie has found purpose in reaching out to other residents. He acts as an unofficial ambassador, welcoming new residents and showing them around. He started a Holocaust survivors' group, and also chairs the Home's Men's Club, organizing speakers and outings for both groups.

"I keep myself busy, as much as I can" he says. Despite leg problems and restricted vision due to macular degeneration, he says, "I don't stay in my room."

He also finds purpose in his relationships with his daughter, stepdaughter and three grandchildren, ages 25, 22 and 17.

Ernie summarizes what the Jewish Home means to him. "This Home adds a few extra years to your life."

Like Ernie, Michal Robbins also mastered the art of reinvention.

Born in Israel, Michal started playing piano at the age of four and, at the age of 16, came to the U.S. on a scholarship to Juilliard. She wrote and performed jazz and classical music and even appeared at the Home about 40 years ago.

At the age of 36, Michal returned to school for a ten year stint, earning a bachelors in biology and masters degrees in clinical and experimental psychology. She worked as a therapist in a clinic before opening and running four facilities for autistic young adults.

Her crowning achievement was collaborating with her son to create The Wisdom Center, a deluxe facility on the Monterey Peninsula offering day programs for elderly and disabled individuals. But business expenses and the economic downturn forced the center to close. Michal lost her money and her purpose.

Despondent, she reluctantly heeded the suggestion of her three sons to move to the Jewish Home. That was two years ago. It didn't take long for Michal to realize that all of her talents and experiences could be put to good use in her new environment.



Ernie Braunstein focuses on family and helping others.

Now she leads twice-weekly music sessions for residents at the Max Factor and Goldenberg-Ziman buildings (singing in English, Yiddish and Hebrew), provides musical accompaniment at Shabbat services, teaches a conversational Hebrew class and gives a class on how to stay young by managing emotions. She writes for the Home resident newsletter, *Chai Journal*. And she recently began teaching piano to members of the kitchen staff.

"I'm the happiest I ever was," she says. "I do what I want and I have fun. I help people."

Michal believes there's always more to learn, and is demonstrating that by taking rabbinical and cantorial classes at the America Jewish University beginning this fall.

"Life is a present," she says. "We are given opportunities and we have to look for them... I think the most important thing in life is to give. And to give while you're having fun is the best thing."



Nancy Sokoler Steiner is a freelance writer and author based in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *Westways*, and *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, among other publications.