‘Because of This Beauty’
Elliot Kukla

A story is told in the Talmud of Rabbi Elazar’s final days. As he lies dying, his friend and study partner Rabbi Yohanan comes to see him and finds him weeping. Rabbi Yohanan asks whether he is crying due to regrets about his Torah learning, family, or wealth. “No,” says Rabbi Elazar pointing to his own body. “I am crying because of this beauty, which will rot in the earth.” “In that case,” says his friend, “you surely have reason to weep.” (Talmud Berachot 5b) The two men cry together, holding hands.

The story of this death is still unspeakably sad to me. Losing our beautiful bodies is a central truth of being human, which we cannot avoid and must grieve over. No matter how well we live our lives, soon after death our bodies begin to decay. It doesn’t matter how many kale smoothies we drink or how many mitzvot we do — our bodies and minds are finite and, ultimately, not in our control. And, yet if we are able to stay present in the loss — when death is close by — there is a possibility for incredible intimacy and human connection in these final moments. If we are lucky, we will die like Rabbi Elazar, without regrets, in a warm bed, with a good friend beside us, holding our hand, empathizing with the terrible loss we are facing.

For the past 12 years, working as a rabbi who works with the dying, I’ve found that most of the ways we speak about death deny the undeniable reality of our mortality and inevitable decline. We use war metaphors for illness — “defeating cancer” or “battling disease” — that try to suggest we are in charge of our bodies. That, in turn, implies that retaining our health is a moral victory, one that all of us eventually lose.

Judaism teaches us — in the psalmist’s words — to count our days, limnot yameinu. (90:12) To me, this means to stay present in each of our days and the days of our loved ones, until their very last breath — even when, because of illness or cognitive decline, for example, that life is no longer the life we imagined or recognize.

It is scary for most of us to stay present with the dying and value life’s final moments — when a mother no longer remembers a child’s name, or when we are witnessing the debilitating physical pain or mental anguish accompanying dying. It is tempting to avoid being fully present by “fixing” (for example, looking for last-minute cures, or being inappropriately cheerful). Rabbi Yohanan provides a role model for how to stay with each other as we die: He joins with Rabbi Elazar in his weeping, holding him and acknowledging the hugeness and universality of his grief. All of us who visit people in hospice are confronted with the fact that the difference between the person who...
Giving Endings Meaning
David Ellenson

A Hebrew adage asserts, “Kol hat’chalot kashot,” “All beginnings are difficult.” So are endings. In the case of Sh’ma, it has been 50 years since my teacher Rabbi Eugene Borowitz inaugurated this journal of Jewish ideas and responsibility as a vehicle for Jewish communal discussion, debate, and dialogue, and my feelings are mixed ones of sadness and gratitude as I both lament the journal’s impending closure and am grateful for its many years of existence. This, the final issue of Sh’ma, marks the end of a vital chapter in American-Jewish history.

I recently sat with a long-term client of mine, a 101-year-old Holocaust survivor, as she was dying. She held my hand in her dry, parched palm. She seemed peaceful when she opened her surprisingly clear blue eyes to say goodbye to me with a slow blink of her eye. She was radiantly beautiful in that moment. The story of Rabbi Elazar came to mind.

Dying at 101 after a natural decline is the best-case scenario for any of us. Dying old also means forming a century’s worth of deep relationships. Each of her days counted, including this one. She was ready to go. Weeping, I let go of her hand and said good-bye.

Of course, I would be disingenuous if I did not acknowledge that my feelings are intensified in view of my own retirement this year after a career of service to the Jewish people and the academy of scholars — as well as my deep and abiding personal relationship with Dr. Borowitz. I have a vivid memory of Rabbi Borowitz in 1973 discussing Sh’ma’s founding three years earlier. He told our class that many of the great Jewish teachers of the 19th century served as inspiration for Sh’ma. These men — Zacharias Frankel, Isaac Mayer Wise, Isaac Leeser — had created periodicals to disseminate their own views and to foster Jewish communal discourse in that time and place. He was convinced that conceptions on which he grounded his life, turning away from the blacks, the Christians, the interfaith and community endeavors which now seem so eroded of hope, Despair which drives us inward upon ourselves.

Despair is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It makes likely the apocalypse on which it feeds. Judaism (as contrasted with its spokesmen) has no glib prescriptions for the torments of our age, but despair is fundamentally un-Jewish. Despair is the ultimate rejection of God and man. It is the grossest sin of our age, worse than silence or even violence (which is a way of acting it out), or the selfishness which masquerades as free enterprise. It is despair which we must challenge, defy and conquer if we are ever to energize a Jewish community, with all its brains and social imagination, to help America and the world to choose life.

Albert Vorspan

Sandy lee scheuer, zikhronah livrakhah

My grandmother used to scowl at all the daily papers looking for Jewish names. Sometimes she came upon names of gangsters, sometimes of Nobel laureates. She was overjoyed when she found a Jew who had done something praiseworthy; she was horrified when she found a Jewish name connected with crime or sin. And then there were, again and again, the Jewish victims: six Jews (and forty non-Jews) killed in an earthquake! Three Jews (and twenty-four others) die in plane crash! It was not that she was insensitive to gentle suffering; she was a very compassionate woman. A merciful daughter of the merciful. But her Jew’s belonged to her. Their death (their sin, their accomplishment, their story) was...
contemporary America was in equal need of such instruments, and he decided to launch Sh’má.

While inspired by these men, he did not slavishly imitate them. Indeed, he said he was determined to depart from their paradigm in one extremely crucial respect. These men all used their journals and magazines to promote their own views on concerns of the day and to polemicize against those whose positions they opposed. In contrast, Borowitz was determined to forge a different prototype for Sh’má. He felt that Sh’má should adopt a principled commitment to pluralism and always be open to diverse views on every topic—as long as these views were expressed in intelligent and respectful tones.

Borowitz invited a wide array of activists and academics to bring their full intellectual curiosity to the topics they addressed, cultivating a range of viewpoints that voiced sharp and pointed disagreements. Borowitz was determined that Sh’má embody a stance deeply rooted in the traditional Jewish notion of machloket l’shem shamayim, principled argument for the sake of heaven. He believed that arguments and discussions were ongoing and that there was seldom a final word. So, as he told our class and years later wrote about in his introduction to a book on rabbinc theology, he altered and amended a statement often appearing at the completion of a medieval Jewish manuscript, “Tam v’nishlam”—“Over and done.” He added the word “lo,” or “not,” before Nishlam, transforming the adage to mean that while the expression of a debate might be “over,” it was not, if ever, “done.”

The integrity, variety, and intellectual humility that characterized Sh’má for the past five decades never failed to affirm this approach. Sh’má—and, since 2016, Sh’má Now—never abandoned this overarching commitment as it evolved through several iterations over the years. Such sensibility may well be the single most important legacy Sh’má has bequeathed to our community. It is one that we in the Jewish community should continue to promote at a time when respect among disputants is all too frequently lacking; when persons too often simply condemn one another and attempt to seal themselves off from those with whom they quarrel. As it comes to its completion, Sh’má will unquestionably be missed by so many of us. However, Sh’má will always remain part of netzach Yisrael (the eternity of the Jewish people): its model of passionate and engaged, yet civil, informed, and ongoing discourse provides an ever relevant and necessary model of enduring significance to our Jewish world. I am deeply grateful that—despite the closure of Sh’má—its 50-year-archive will remain secure and available to scholars, rabbis, and Jewish seekers now and into the future.

As Sh’má publishes its final edition, a rabbinc lesson I once heard from a bat mitzvah girl about the moment of matan Torah—the giving of Torah at Sinai—captures the admixture

“Teach us to treasure each day, that our hearts are open to Your wisdom.”

“Limnot yameinu kein hoda v’navi l’vay chochmah.”

Susan Borrin

I’ve circled around Psalm 90:12, “Limnot yameinu” for decades, wondering what it would mean for me when my time came: Had I measured my days by the love, the wisdom, the opportunities surrounding me? Especially in dark times, like this political moment, had I remembered to layer optimism over cynicism? Had I reminded myself that counting each day didn’t make the days longer but might make each day richer? And so, when I considered the sensibility that would inspire this, the final issue of Sh’má and thus the last that I will edit, I settled quickly on “Limnot yameinu.” I’ve counted about 7,500 days since I began editing Sh’má in September 1998: 195 thematic issues; some 2,000 writers who have shared their experiences and wisdom; and probably close to 3,000 topics and open questions, which I’ve explored or asked others to ponder. Sure, there have been some gloomy days, uncertain days, troubled days. But most days at my desk I sat down and very quickly opened a window through which to explore the world: My senses and creativity awake to each topic as I reached out to potential writers, thinkers, spiritual seekers, political pundits—rabbis, academics, and lay leaders, always seeking to mingle emerging voices with those more seasoned. I always tried, when I could, to meet writers for tea, and I now count more than a few as friends. Over the years, I’ve gained confidence in meeting deadlines and structuring conversations, and I’ve learned a deep patience for coaxing words from those whose words at first fail them. I’ve also grown bolder in raising my own voice as I broached difficult topics for an increasingly diverse readership. Over the course of my tenure as editor of Sh’má, the journal has also changed: what began in 1970 as a stand-alone 8-page biweekly print publication became, in 1998, a 16-page monthly—sometimes numbering 24 stapled pages—and then in 2016, a 4-page insert in the Forward; for the past year, it has been published as a digital-only edition on the Forward’s website. And now, in its 50th year—its Jubilee year—Sh’má is as David Ellenson writes ceasing publication. With changing reading patterns, the kinds of rich Jewish conversations Sh’má has sought to spur have become more accessible and even widespread in newer digital formats. Which is to say: our days, too, have been numbered. Over the past 21 years, with the release of each new issue, I’ve enjoyed the incomparable pleasure of holding in my hands the work of my heart. That is, I know, an extraordinary way of measuring one’s days.
of emotions I have that mark this moment of transition. She pointed out that God first addresses Israel in Exodus 20:1 with the silent Hebrew letter “aleph” in the Hebrew word “Anochi” — “I am.” Such silence, she said, is frightening. There is a void. How it will be filled is unseen. Yet, the gift of revelation is linked to that silence. Silence prepares Israel to listen to God and opens them to unexplored paths. May the path Sh’ma blazed for our community during these past five decades of its existence continue to inspire creativity in the days and years ahead and nurture the type of dialogue it fostered for so long.

David Ellenson is chancellor emeritus and former president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as well as former director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies and professor emeritus of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

I Pass This on to You
Alice Shalvi

Now that I have grown old and reached the venerable age of 93, I live more in the past than in the present. With physical activity restricted by what has been a gradual waning of bodily strength, I of necessity spend more time alone, my contemporaries no longer alive, the younger generations too preoccupied with their own current issues, both personal and professional.

It is a time of recollection. Scenes from childhood, adolescence, student days, marriage, motherhood, employment, and volunteer activity flash before my eyes — but not in so orderly a chronological sequence. Not only do I no longer see these scenes of my life in black and white, but the perspectives are altered. Details I had not previously perceived are suddenly visible. I recall being at the railway station, cheerfully setting off to make aliya to Israel. I now see the tears in my parents’ eyes, even though I was fulfilling their own passionate Zionist ideals. And I recall my little children crying while they watched me at the window, as I set off for work waving good-bye and disappearing into the distance. I revisit the past, and it is revised. With age comes hindsight.

While many of the memories remain blessedly blissful, many others arouse regret: regret at mistakes made, sins committed, duties neglected, words spoken too hastily, words that remained unspoken.

I confront decisions made in great certainty of taking the right path — decisions that now seem to me more questionable. The self-righteousness of youth is replaced by a realization that there might well have been a different path to follow, one in which duty replaced the fulfillment of my own desires. Was I right in leaving elderly parents in England in order to achieve the satisfaction of aliya to Israel? To what extent should obligations come before self-satisfaction? Was I right in trying to combine mothering of six children with an active professional career and numerous volunteer activities?

Is this what the psalmist who taught us to “count our days so that we obtain a heart of wisdom” is hinting at when referring to the necessity of accepting our human frailties, the imperfections of our lives, our mortality, as part of the process of ripening, aging?

There is no way in which one can go back in time. But I know I can learn, belatedly, from all these experiences. What should I, could I, have done differently? Is there still a possibility of making amends?

Confessing, confronting my faults and failures, arouses a mixed response. There is contrition, but at the same time comes enlightenment, an awareness of having learned something, something I can still pass on to others.

How much time have I left in which to do that? Today, I am fully aware of the inevitability of questioning one’s past decisions. To be wholly satisfied with what I did is to be arrogant, blind to my human frailty. Insight — as honest as possible an evaluation of my decisions, my actions, and my errors — generates wisdom: an evaluation that need not necessarily lead to penitent breast-beating any more than it should induce total self-satisfaction. I am, after all, human, and all flesh is frail.

Old age is a time of storytelling, of
Today’s Life,
Tomorrow’s Afterlife

Avi Killip

When you close your eyes and conjure an image of your ideal afterlife, what appears? Are you able to visit with lost loved ones? Do you finally find the answers to life’s most hidden truths? Is there an all-you-can-eat buffet? Do you have a body? Can you conjure any image at all?

How Judaism weighs in on the question of the afterlife depends on what you mean by “afterlife” and why you are asking. The answers to the question of whether or not there is an afterlife are wide-ranging, diverse, and sometimes contradictory. Jewish texts of every genre and generation explore the afterlife. Some describe a messianic world-to-come that takes place at the end of days, offering a collective afterlife, once the messiah comes, that will emerge only in a time when life as we know it is over and gone. Other texts imagine an alternate world, parallel to ours, that exists right now, where the souls of the righteous live on and where we too can earn a place if we are worthy. This is why the Talmud warns the living (Berakhot 18b) not to taunt the dead in a cemetery — the tractate imagines that the dead are aware and even jealous of the actions of the living, and could penalize them for their loose tongues. And in another talmudic tractate (Ta’anit 16a), people ask the souls in the cemetery to request mercy on their behalf. Our liturgy and hasidic texts, moreover, offer images of resurrection and reincarnation. These texts offer diverse Jewish answers to questions about the afterlife, transforming death from an ending into a potentially resplendent transitional moment.

The quest to understand what is meant by the afterlife leads us back to one universal, central, and eternal question: What are you hoping for in an afterlife? Curiosity about what comes next is directly tied to our notion of mortality. By exploring these ancient texts — and there are countless texts that reveal countless different answers — we are given a glimpse of what the authors longed for, potentially opening doors for us to a deep wisdom about what matters in the lives we inhabit now. If we read these texts not as predictions, but rather as aspirations, we are given a window into the hearts of our Jewish ancestors, offering insight into centuries of human passion and purpose. When we close our eyes and think about an afterlife, it may provide a clue as to what we value most in this world. In the same way, when we read about what our ancestors hoped for, it gives us a window into what they valued.

When read with this lens, the very different depictions of the afterlife reveal different understandings about what matters to an individual. For example, a text from the Talmud describes an image of resurrection that is so embodied, it almost feels cartoonish. It quotes a Babylonian rabbi of the 3rd century: “Rabbi Hiyya bar Yosef stated: ‘The just, in the time-to-come, will rise for, it gives us a window into what matters.”

Art by Pat Berger

Alice Shalvi, a feminist activist and social advocate, has lived in Israel since 1948. She is professor emerita of English literature at The Hebrew University, where she taught from 1950 until 1990. Among her numerous awards, she was given the Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement in 2007. Her memoir, Never a Native, was recently published.
buried in the ground and miraculously emerges again as a plant. Resurrection is just another version of this familiar cycle-of-life. Given enough time, we might return to this world just as we were before.

What matters most to Maimonides is “Truth” and “Knowledge,” and these aspirations find their way into his picture of the world-to-come.

Maimonides, the medieval Jewish philosopher, offers a completely opposite view — a world-to-come where we are totally disembodied: “The world-to-come has no body or corporeality,” he writes, later adding, “Nothing that happens to bodies in this world happens there.” (Mishneh Torah, Repentance, chapter 8) Instead, he explains, souls “enjoy the glow of the Divine Presence,” which is to “know and grasp the truth of the Holy Blessed One.” In this future, we are bodiless minds that retain only knowledge and are finally able to “grasp Truth.”

These contradictory images reveal different experiences of life. Rabbi Hiyya wants more of this world. He envisions, and perhaps longs for, a chance to live again in his body. How many of us hope for the same? What matters most to Maimonides, on the other hand, is “Truth” and “Knowledge,” aspirations that find their way into his picture of the world-to-come.

Some people view life as an insatiable quest for understanding. For those who desperately want answers to life’s unanswered questions, Maimonides’ vision might be the most exciting and compelling articulation of the afterlife.

Of the many depictions of the world-to-come, I have a favorite: “Shabbat is a taste of the world-to-come.” (Bereishit Rabbah 17:5) This text doesn’t ask me to wait until some future time to access the mystery and promise of a better world. I am invited to experience the world-to-come at the end of each and every week. As I celebrate Shabbat, whether with good food, good friends, family, or a nice long nap, Shabbat is my opportunity to live in the world of my dreams.

On Shabbat, perhaps more than any other day, the unknowable questions echo.

Perhaps this Shabbat you and yours can consider what is for Judaism an age-old question: What are you hoping for in an afterlife?

Rabbi Avi Killip serves as vice-president of strategy and programs at the Hadar Institute. She was ordained from the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Boston. An advisory board member of Sh’ma Now and the Jewish Studio Project, Killip lives in Riverdale, NY, with her husband and three young children.
On this page, our three commentators examine a stanza from Yehuda Amichai’s poem, “Open Closed Open.” They explore how lifespan influences our non-linear movement between states of openness and closedness as we grow older. Our online version includes the full poem. We welcome your comments. —S.B.

Phil Schultz: Yehuda Amichai wrote in a modern Hebrew strongly influenced by its ancient heritage. His originality is most powerfully expressed in his use of metaphor. These lines of verse from his magnum opus, Open Closed Open, beautifully represent his manner of compressing great feeling and thought into a few words. And the thought and feeling here concern his rather wonderful appreciation of human consciousness. “Before we are born, everything is open/ in the universe without us.” I’m reminded of Martin Buber’s use of the mystical saying “In the mother’s body man knows the universe, in birth he forgets it.” The womb is, in other words, the “primal world that precedes form.” Using metaphor in a new and artful way, both writers are attempting the impossible: to use their great gifts to define the tiny enormity of human nature.

Near the end of the longer poem this is excerpted from, Amichai writes: “Forgotten, remembered, forgotten/ Open, closed, open.” We know the universe, contain it within ourselves before and after consciousness. There’s great sadness in this thought, and great praise. “For as long as we live, everything is closed/ within us.” Yes, we are citizens of the state of human nature, enlarged and limited by its opus and wondrous desires. In a sense, this is a definition of love itself — love and most certainly death.

“And when we die, everything is open again.” Only then are we one with the universe, and with God. I have no doubt Amichai would strongly disagree with everything I’ve said here, as I may myself tomorrow morning. But the moment is an island and a metaphor, and each must be respected, for a moment. In other words, in forgetting we open to the miracle of revelation, and in remembering — well, some few, like Yehuda Amichai, write great poems. Open, Closed, Open.

Jeanie Patz Blaustein: I want to suggest that Yehuda Amichai’s “Open Closed Open” is a radical and subversive masterpiece. While seeming to reify the stark contrast between open and closed, Amichai actually threatens to disrupt the discontinuity of these binary states when he invites us elsewhere in the poem to taste the sweet eternity of the present: “…the Now is always with me, where I go is the Now…” Later, when pondering “…who will remember the rememberers?”, he points toward an awareness that can perceive continuity across states of consciousness. Amichai is encouraging us to look directly to the irrepressible movement of our earthly lives to discover a relationship with God that could permeate and connect every moment of our existence to transcendence. Perhaps Amichai’s lament of the closed stems not from the inevitability of our waking slumber but from our unwillingness to search for this sacred union. The choice is always present. Musing on the “correct way to stand at a memorial ceremony,” Amichai asks, “…eyes gaping frozen like the eyes of the dead, or shut tight, to see stars inside?”

Rather than accept Amichai’s invitation to “focus on what death opens up,” in Vered Karti Shemtov’s words, we regularly avert our gaze. In so doing, we blind ourselves not only to what Shemtov calls “shifts of energy” that occur in birth and death, but also to the rich potential shifts that occur with each breath — if we notice and hear them.

Vered Karti Shemtov: We tend to think of life as closed, open, closed. Birth is often seen as a transformation from the closed womb into the open world, and death and the grave are perceived as closure. Yehuda Amichai reverses this convention, presenting us with a beautiful midrash on a talmudic passage from the talmudic tractate Niddah: “[A]s soon as [the fetus] comes into the world, everything which had been closed opens, and that which was open closes...” (31b) In Amichai’s poem, both transitions — from the womb to the world, and from the world to the grave — represent shifts of energy. When we open our eyes for the first time, we absorb and enclose within us the fullness of the world, and when we close our eyes for the last time, that which was contained within us is released and becomes open again.

While the talmudic quote focuses on birth, Amichai’s poem, written toward the end of his life, asks us to consider the transition to death and challenges us to focus on what it is that death opens up. Much of Amichai’s last book is devoted to theology and to reflections on Jewish texts. The narrator talks about God, a lot, but does not talk to God.

Life, in these poems, precludes the possibility of connecting with the transcendent or with that which is and will always be open. Instead, life is confined to the here and now of the self, and openness exists only in the absence of a self. What is closed is what Philip Schultz describes as “being one with the universe, or with God.”

Only texts can approximate eternity. Spoken words pass, written Amichai, and the lips that utter them turn to dust, but prayers — and I would suggest, Amichai’s poems — are here to stay. Reading his poems brings them back to life by embodying them in a self, our own selves, and in so doing, we close/enclose them.

Philip Schultz is the author of eight collections of poetry; his most recent is Luxury (W.W. Norton, 2018), is His collection Failure (Harcourt, 2007) won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008. He’s the founder and director of The Writers Studio, a private school for creative writing based in New York City, with branches in Tucson, the Hudson Valley, and San Francisco and online.

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Vered Karti Shemtov, PhD, is the Eva Chernov Lokey Senior Lecturer in Hebrew Language and Literature at Stanford University. She is editor of Dibbur, a literary journal dedicated to Hebrew, Jewish, and comparative literature.
Consider & Converse

A Guide to \textit{Limnot yameinu}/Teach us to count our days

\section*{Introduction}

\textit{Sh'ma Now} curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the core of this issue of \textit{Sh'ma Now} is the Jewish sensibility of \textit{“limnot yameinu / Teach us to count our days.”} This short phrase, drawn from Psalm 90:12, has inspired countless stories about making our days matter — constructing a life and building relationships with family, friends, and community that is steeped in a rich bounty of love and meaning. It is a primary text on growing old — and one that posits deep Jewish wisdom about a topic many find too difficult to engage.

\textit{Sh'ma Now} never viewed learning or “meaning-making” as solely an individual activity. That’s why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you to consider the idea of going forth in your discovery of ideas and questions independently or with others, formally and informally.

\section*{How to Begin}

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and prompts for individual contemplation and informal or structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal can be used, please contact Susan Berrin, \textit{Sh'ma Now} editor-in-chief, at SBerrin@shma.com. You can also print out a PDF file of the entire issue at http://forward.com/shma-now/.

\section*{Guidelines for Discussion}

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
  \item Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other’s comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
  \item For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.
  \item Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.
\end{itemize}
Interpretive Questions

can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.

• Rabbi Elliot Kukla, [page 1] director of the Bay Area’s Kol Haneshama: Jewish End-of-Life Care/Hospice Volunteer Program, to share his favorite texts about dying with dignity. He offers us the story of Rabbi Elazar’s final days. “As he lies dying, his friend and study partner Rabbi Yohanan comes to see him and finds him weeping.” The story serves as a prooftext for exploring what it means to stay present in each moment of life, For Elliot, *limnot yameinu* means “to stay present in each of our days and the days of our loved ones, until the very last breath — even when that life is no longer the life we imagined.” Why is it important to stay present in the moments of saying goodbye? Many people share stories from their shared history, how is it different to stay focused on the moment of leaving life? What do you remember about saying goodbye to your loved ones? What made those moments significant?

• In *NiSh’m* [page 6] our simulated Talmud page, three contemporary commentators examine a stanza of the poet Yehuda Amichai’s poem, “Open Closed Open.” (translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld)

> “Open closed open. Before we are born, everything is open
> in the universe without us. For as long as we live, everything is closed
> within us. And when we die, everything is open again.
> Open closed open. That’s all we are.”

I asked Vered Shemtov, a professor of Hebrew literature, Jeannie Blaustein, founding board chair of Reimagine End of Life, and the Pulitzer Prize winning poet Philip Schultz to reflect on this extraordinary stanza and how the lifespan influences our non-linear movement between states of openness and closedness as we grow older. Vered writes, “We tend to think of life as closed, open, closed. Birth is often seen as a transformation from the closed womb into the open world, and death and the grave are perceived as closure. Yehuda Amichai reverses this convention… Amichai’s poem, written towards the end of his life, asks us to consider the transition to death, and challenges us to focus on what it is that death opens up.” How do you understand this poem and how does it relate to your perception of death? How does Amichai understand death as both an “opening” and a “closing”? Jeannie writes that we generally avert our gaze when we encounter death. Does this poem instill a greater curiosity about and desire to change your gaze?
Consider & Converse

A Guide to Limnot yameinu/Teach us to count our days

Reflective Questions
can help one to integrate the ideas in these articles with one’s own sense of self.

• I asked the pioneering Israeli feminist activist and writer Alice Shalvi [page 3] to reflect on the relationship the psalmist suggests between coming to terms with our finitude and attaining wisdom. At 93 years old, I wondered if Alice would share her thoughts about all that counting. With dignified honesty, she reveals some soul-searching: “I confront decisions made in great certitude of taking the right path — decisions that now seem to me more questionable. The self-righteousness of youth is replaced by a realization that there might well have been a different path to follow, one in which duty replaced the fulfilment of my own desires.” What certitudes have you revisited and what outcomes have you discerned? What myths and stereotypes of the elderly have you challenged? How have you understood mortality as “part of the process of ripening and aging”? Has that understanding helped you accept frailties and limitations?

• Rabbi Avi Killip [page 4] writes about how our understanding and thoughts on the afterlife inform our approaches to death. Of course, none of us know whether there is an afterlife, but Avi helps us unpack what Judaism teaches us about this mystery. Jewish texts of every genre and generation offer wide ranging and diverse and sometimes contradictory images of life after death. Avi explains that the quest for answers about the afterlife leads us back to one universal, central, and eternal question: “What are you hoping for in an afterlife”? Can you answer this question? Have you ever thought about how vast and diverse Jewish thought is about the afterlife? Avi’s essay explores three images: The idea of resurrection, the Maimonidean image of basking in divine glory, and her personal favorite image: Shabbat as a taste of the world-to-come. How are these three images related, and what do they each teach us about living the lives we now inhabit?

• Rabbi David Ellenson, [page 2] former president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and a close student of Sh’mah founder Dr. Eugene Borowitz, writes a brief eulogy to the journal Sh’mah. After 50 years of publishing, Sh’mah will be shutting down its run with this issue. Of its early years, David writes, about the “traditional Jewish notion of machloket l’shem shamayim, principled argument for the sake of heaven.” Borowitz “believed that arguments and discussions were ongoing and that there was seldom a final word.” Ellenson goes on to say that Sh’mah maintained its commitment to open and civil discourse through each iteration, which “may well be the single most important legacy Sh’mah has bequeathed to our community.” How does a journal—even one that published for 50 years—continue to have impact? How do you imagine the legacy of Sh’mah? What were your favorite issues and why are they remembered? In today’s more polarized world, “where respect among disputants is all too frequently lacking and where persons too often simply condemn others and attempt to seal themselves off from those with whom they quarrel,” how are conversations maintained?