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When Does Life Begin?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

In the view of the Talmud, it was only after a newborn had lived thirty days that it proved its viability and gained the status of a person and the legal rights of an adult. These days, quite happily, with modern hygiene and healthy prenatal care working in our favor, we rarely have to wait that full month to trust in our baby's survival.

So if the clue to beginning of life hinges on viability, then there may be some truth to the popular Jewish maxim that life doesn't truly begin until the children finish graduate school. The kids are finally on the way to self-sufficiency and the parents finally can have a life to themselves. But we know that is a myth. Jewish parents never stop worrying about their grown children and, they should be so lucky, their grandchildren as well.

According to the title of a popular song, life really begins at forty, "when love and living start to become a gentle art." But research suggests that this may be a myth. For many people, hitting forty is synonymous with forgetfulness, longer recovery time from aches and pains, and a gradual physical breakdown. Could it all be downhill from there?

The ultimate message is that life is unpredictable, unstable, and ultimately finite. It is up to us to begin life anew each day and to fill each day with purpose, joy, and the fullness of life.

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