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Rebbetzin offers advice for a meaningful life

VICKI CABOT
Contributing Editor
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"Listen, sweetheart," comes the voice over the phone with the intimacy of an Old World bubbe and the intensity of a talk-show host. Esther Jungreis, founder of Hineni, a premier Orthodox outreach organization, sought-after teacher, prolific writer, New York television personality - and bubbe - is on the line. This sweetheart listens up as Jungreis dishes up her unique blend of tam (flavor), tachlis (purpose) and Torah in a recent telephone interview.

Jungreis will be in Phoenix March 14 for the Abraham Samuel Friedman Distinguished Speaker Series sponsored by the Phoenix Community Kollel and The Jewish Collection. She'll also be signing copies of her latest book at the Jewish Collection in Scottsdale earlier that day. That's the reason for the call.

"Life Is a Test: How to Meet Life's Challenges Successfully" (Mesorah Publications, \$24.95 hardcover), her fourth book, offers a spiritual approach to life. The book begins with tests of self-discovery, then examines the challenges of interpersonal relationships, and concludes with a section on perceiving divine design in the world. Jungreis draws generously on anecdotes culled from her nearly 40 years of experience working with Jews of all ages at Hineni's Manhattan headquarters and shores up her message of self-help with textual reference and Torah teaching.

"Life" provides a guide to living a meaningful life, offering up timeless wisdom for timely problems.

Everything is in the Torah, says the rebbetzin. We just have to open the book - and ourselves - to find it. "It's our instruction manual," she says.

Jungreis says that everything in life is a test, impelling us to look for higher purpose.

"Each person has a mission," says the rebbetzin, who found hers after losing her husband and founding the movement to reach out to Jews by using Torah knowledge. Discovery comes through study and learning, she says.

Jungreis, who has lectured to audiences around the world, including standing-room-only crowds in New York's Madison Square Garden and Hollywood's Palladium, says that once a person is touched, by a lecture, a class or an encounter, he or she must find his or her own way.

"Each person at his own level," she says, her Eastern European roots detected in her charming accent. Jungreis and her family come from Hungary; they suffered the deprivation of ghetto life and ultimately were deported to Bergen-Belsen. After the war, they eventually made their way to the United States where they rebuilt their lives.

"It's not how you go, or how fast you go," she says of starting on the path of Jewish

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learning. "But the main thing is that you embark."

Jungreis suggests that traditional values found in the Torah have been subjugated to contemporary false ones.

"Success, money, they are addictive," she says. Without a spiritual component, they lead people to selfish, destructive lives.

"Without direction from God, we can become arrogant, we lose our sense of priorities, our values," she says.

The Torah teaches us to look beyond ourselves and to seek a higher good.

God did not create us solely to indulge in pleasure, she says, "but to create a better world, to give back."

Jungreis says such an attitude can lead to more fulfilling relationships.

"What is crucial in a relationship is that the partners have the same goals, the same purpose, that they are looking in the same direction."

She says that seeking such a spiritual connection is the secret to a lasting marriage.

Jungreis laments that society has degraded marriage and relationships, positing them on more superficial values such as appearance, money or success.

She suggests that truly loving relationships are predicated on love and that loving means giving.

"The more we give, the more our love," she says.

Jungreis says her message resonates with today's young people.

"I think young people today are looking for roots, searching for meaning," she says.

She says that many of the young people who have returned to a more traditional Jewish life have brought back their parents and their grandparents with them.

"They are carrying their parents' generation."

So, is she optimistic about the future of Jewish life in America? Absolutely.

"To be Jewish is to be optimistic," she says.

"We are survivors. We are here."

Details

- What: Book signing, "Life Is a Test"
 - Where: The Jewish Collection, 10701 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale
 - When: 4-5 p.m. Wednesday, March 14
 - Call: 480-368-0001
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- What: Rebbitzin Esther Jungreis, "Life Is a Test"
 - Who: Phoenix Community Kollel
 - When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 14
 - Where: The Arizona Biltmore, 2400 E. Missouri Ave., Phoenix
 - Cost: \$15 advance registration, \$20 at the door
 - Contact: 602-433-0300, speakerseries@aztorah.com

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