

God and The Book of Life: Who Writes Our Story?

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I'd like to ask you to clear your mind for a quick visualization exercise.

Imagine there is a person recording all your actions, marking down when you have been good and when you have been bad, writing down all your deeds and checking it twice....do you see the person writing? What do you see?

Now, imagine that you are on a line filing by a person like sheep, moving slowly and methodically. And, as you pass by this person, your name is being written down on one side if you are to live and one side if you are to die...do you see the person writing? What do you see?

Now, listen to these words:

This day all who walk the earth pass before you as a flock of sheep. And like a shepherd who gathers his flock, bringing them under his staff, you bring everything that lives before you for review. You determine the life and decree, the destiny of every creature. On Rosh HaShanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall leave this world and how many shall be born into it, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not...

These are the words and images of the U'retaneh Tokef prayer which occurs in the repetition of the Musaf Amidah.

Now, you might challenge me and ask: Is the image of God being projected by the liturgy a benevolent and friendly figure like Santa Claus or an evil, all-too-powerful tyrant like Mengele?!

How can I even compare the image of God to Santa Claus or Mengele—one a Christian fantasy and one an all-too-real Nazi?!!

You might think these are obscene and inappropriate comparisons to make with the image of God, yet I raise them as images that exist in our consciousness and exert power over our understanding of the world and our liturgy.

The metaphor of God as an existential accountant recording each soul in a book of life or a book of death is confusing. How can we understand it?

We can brush it off as rabbinic fantasy, an unsophisticated fairy-tale like Santa Claus—for children only. We tell the kids the Talmudic story of God sitting with three large books before him. One in which God writes who will live and one in which God writes

who will die and one for the people in the middle who will sit in limbo and wait for the final judgment on Yom Kippur---we tell the story to the kids but many of us don't really believe it.

Or, we can discard the metaphor for its baseness and cruelty, its projection of a power with which we want no association, one that makes a determination of life and death without emotion or compassion, justice or fairness.

How could these images represent God? How could God truly be the kind shepherd who determines life and death on this day?

Most often we decide that it is just impossible and we reject the metaphor.

Yet, it is dominant in the liturgy and even in the language we use outside of the synagogue to greet each other and wish each other well in this holiday season—L'shana tovah tikatevu u'tihatemu...May you be written and sealed for a good year...written and sealed in the book of life.

We speak of the Book of Life. We explain that God writes in one book or another by watching our deeds. We listen to the hazzan recite the u'netaneh Tokef and we hum along mournfully...who will live and who will die? Who by flood and who by fire? Who by...We follow along and we feel the fear and trepidation. What will this year bring for US? WILL we be written in the book of life? Will our loved ones?

Our rational minds reject the metaphor yet our emotional mind or our neshamahs embrace it.

This doesn't necessarily mean we are hypocritical or doomed to eternal confusion. Our salvation remains in the fullness of the imagery—in the second part of u'netaneh tokef. There is more to the image of the Book of Life with God as its author.

After the long paragraph of "mi's", the list of different outcomes for our lives, our salvation comes with these words: U-t'shuvah u-t'fillah v-tz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zerah. But penitence, prayer and good deeds annul the decree.

We are not left hopeless by this piyyut. We are meant to remember that no matter the verdict, our destiny is within our control. As the late professor Max Arzt wrote of this prayer:

“[It] reaches its climax when it assures us that it is within man's power to annul an evil decree, to reopen the future, and to reclaim the initiative it gives. The quantity of man's life is in the hands of god, the quality of his life is in man's hands only...in its climactic declaration, the prayer affirms that man can change the future by changing himself.”

The **quantity** of our lives is in God's hands; the **quality** of our lives is in our hands only. Although the Book sits in God's possession, we determine the Story....our actions can change the ending.

So, I ask you: what book have you written for yourself thus far? What book will you write for the future? How can we write our book so that it will be a book of life and not a book of death? Yes, we are all mortal, all destined to die at some point over which no one is to have control but God. But, we are not meant to sit and wait for that day. We are meant to live.

What can we each do to make our personal books into books of life in the upcoming year? Three answers come from the u'netaneh tokef prayer—teshuvah, tefillah and tzedekah...genuine repentance, authentic prayer and the practice of justice and good deeds will annul the decree.

First teshuvah or repentance. Rabbi Marshall Meyer, of blessed memory, taught this on teshuvah:

The Hebrew word for atonement, teshuvah, requires a radical change of direction in our life: a search for the real and the lasting, and hence a negation of those acts and thoughts that drive a human being away from creative and responsible living. Such atonement thus demands a hard look at one's relationship to himself (or herself), and the integration of one's own personality.

Teshuvah is an internal process by which we redirect our path so that we continue to move toward "creative and responsible living." As creatures made in God's image we have great powers of creation and regeneration and yet we are flawed. We are not God. We are human beings and so we are limited and make mistakes. The more we learn from our mistakes and integrate this knowledge into our lives, the more we live lives of value and purpose, lives with texture and integrity.

Next Tefillah—prayer. Through prayer we reach out to God. We cannot confront all the challenges of life alone and so through prayer we reach beyond ourselves for strength and solace. Through prayer we open up our hearts; we let our souls sing; we lose ourselves in the melodies and find an experience that is unique in our lives.

The prayers of the prayerbook help us to take the first step. They give us language when we have none—some prayers cry out in sorrow, some in anger, some in joy. The written prayers help us to find the deeper prayers of our own hearts. Without these personal prayers the rabbis taught that our prayer is not authentic.

How does prayer affect our lives? Will we get everything for which we pray? Not necessarily...in fact, I would venture to say, probably not. But prayer will affect our lives for good because it activates a part of us that needs to live and that often gets lost in the busy, loud world of our everyday lives. Prayer slows us down and quiets us down. It helps us to express our hopes and dreams, our fears and worries, our anger and our struggles. Prayer brings color and detail to the story of our lives.

In fact, studies say that prayer has such a positive effect on people's lives that spiritual activity like church and synagogue attendance can lead to longer and healthier lives. While I can't guarantee this, I CAN guarantee that adding more prayer to your life will add **quality** to your life.

Maybe you've been meaning to come to synagogue more often, but just haven't gotten around to it. Now's the time. This year is the year: add a Shabbat, add a weekday minyan at 7:45am. Add the Shema and v'Ahavta at bedtime or a blessing when you eat or when you see something beautiful. Now is the time.

Third and last is Tzedekah. On the practice of justice and good deeds, Rabbi Meyer taught this:

Judaism has always understood that for atonement and prayer to be genuine they must be expressed and translated into human conduct. Normative Judaism does not recognize the type of piety which denies the world and human society. God wants us to better our life and to be God's partner in the perfection of the world. It is true, says the author [of u'netaneh tokef], that we are fragile and mortal, but a human being is also the creation of God and as such has the power to point to eternity and give meaning to life's battles...

Giving of ourselves—either of our time through volunteering or our money through donations—this too will improve the quality of our lives. Tzedekah expands our lives and our world and reminds us of our situation in relation to the needs of others.

Whether we volunteer in our synagogue or in a soup kitchen, we are working as God's partners and moving the world in the direction of life. Whether we are contributing to our Metrowest Federation to help Jews in need in our own neighborhood, to our own Hurricane Relief Efforts to help purchase food for Jews in Biloxi...Whether we are buying Israel Bonds or contributing to Masorti Judaism in Israel....Whether we are speaking out against genocide in the Sudan or bigotry and bias in our own country...we are affirming life, supporting life, saving lives, at our best.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain, people would always ask me if I liked the work. I really couldn't answer yes to that question because I wished that the work wasn't necessary, that there weren't people in such positions of trauma and crisis. Instead, I would answer that the work gave me great reward. I learned and grew from it and when I struggled with feeling inadequate, when I didn't know what to say or do, I tried to draw confidence from the Talmudic saying that one who visits a sick person removes one-sixtieth of his (or her) suffering.

I was helping people, even when I struggled to understand how. Being present for someone, even if you don't have any words but just a smile, a touch—is one of the greatest gifts you can give someone when you call on them at a hospital or at a house of Shivah, a house of mourning.

This, too, is an act that brings life into a world often filled with pain, illness and death. It is an act of life on our own communal level. So, the next time you are considering visiting a sick friend or a mourner, but are afraid to go because you don't know the right thing to say, remember that just being there is something wonderful that will fill the recipient's heart with life.

In the end, the metaphor of the Book of Life is empowering. We are not helpless sheep filing through life. We are God's partners imbued with the power to change the world, to give life, sustain life and nurture it. While only God knows and has control over our final destiny, u'netaneh Tokef comes to remind us that our lives are in our own hands. Our books are not written or sealed without our own involvement.

A poem I found entitled "Book of Life—Uncertainty" speaks to our situation:

I wanted a perfect ending,
So I sat down to write the book
With the ending in place before
There even *was* an ending.
Now I've learned the hard way,
That some poems don't rhyme,
And some stories don't have
A clear beginning, middle, and end.
Life my life, this book has ambiguity.
Life my life, this book is about
Not knowing, having to change,
Taking the moment and making the
Best of it, without knowing
What's going to happen next.
By Gilda Radner

Time is precious, life is precious and we must act before it is too late. We must begin to write our book of life by taking action, by picking up in the middle and making the best of it.

The metaphor of the book of life is meant to teach us a valuable lesson about God and ourselves. God created the world with us inside and gave US the freedom to do with our lives what we will. The **quantity** of our lives is in God's hands; the **quality** of our lives is in our hands only.

So, I leave you with this question: What will you write this year in your book of life? My prayer for us all is that our tales of teshuvah, tefillah and tzedekah give our lives meaning and purpose. My prayer for the world is that life conquers death, love conquers hatred, comfort removes pain and presence comforts grief. May God bless us all with the gifts of life and may we make our days count as we record them in our own Book of Life.