

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

5773

Thanks to Rabbi Menashe Bovit for sharing with me the thought of our books of life being written by each other.



*"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun"*

"Let us now relate the power of this day's holiness, for it is awesome and frightening. On it Your Kingship will be exalted; Your throne will be firmed with kindness and You will sit upon it in truth. You will open the Book of Remembrance—it will read itself, and everyone's signature is in it."



*"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun"*

*"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed."*

*"How many shall pass away and how many shall be born, Who shall live and who shall die, Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not, Who shall have rest and who shall wander, Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued, Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented, Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished. Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low."*



*"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun"*

The High Holy days were a very important part of my religious childhood experience, partially because they were, with the exception of the Passover seder, my only religious childhood experiences. Not having grown up in an observant household, visiting my zayde in shul for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, became the whole of my religious experience, not much different from the situation of many Jews today. (By the way, the High Holy Days, which for many of our brothers and sisters are the only Jewish religious experience, serve as a revolving door, which has the potential to bring them in, or -God forbid- to throw them out; hence their paramount importance).

My scattered memories from my zayde's shul during the two days a year I attended services (I am not sure I attended the second day of Rosh Hashanah services) are pleasant ones: Mr. Groner, my zayde's friend giving me candy; and my brother, my cousins, and I, running in and out of the shul.

When I wasn't running in and out of the shul, I was actually paying attention to what was going on at services, and one of the few prayers I remember is Unetaneh Tokef.

Unetanneh Tokef is a piyyut -a Jewish liturgical poem- that has been a part of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy in rabbinical Judaism for centuries. It introduces the Kedusha of Musaf for these days and it is considered one of the most stirring compositions in the entire liturgy of the High Holy Days, probably the best known one after Kol Nidrei.

Because my Hebrew was good (I attended a secular Jewish day school), I understood the words of the prayer and, in my young mind, I imagined God sitting on an imposing throne, with a gigantic book open in front of Him, inscribing my destiny with a huge pen.



*"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun"*

The day was powerful, awesome, and frightening indeed. I remember standing helpless, as only a little child can stand, waiting for God to write my destiny for the entire coming year. Actually I wasn't so concerned for my own destiny. After all, the worst thing I could imagine happening to me was Mr. Groner not giving me candy. However I remember being really concerned for my grandparents' fate, for my parents' destiny. Whatever idea I had then about death, I remember it being a real possibility for my aging grandparents, and I recall praying with a purity and intention I wish I had today, that God would spare them for another year. I also recall thinking of my father's long working hours and his financial struggle, and asking God to make things easier for him, so he, and consequently my mother, my brother and I, would be less stressed out in the coming year.



*"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun"*

Many of my more sophisticated colleagues have tried to demystify the Unetane Tokef. They argue that God doesn't have a throne, big or small, or a book, or a pen. God is not in charge and can't change things, or He is in charge and doesn't want to change things. God may not have created us after all, and if He did, He doesn't care about us any longer, or as my mother likes to say, "God has more important things to do than making my hearing aids work."

I am not as sophisticated as many of my colleagues are, or I guess I resist sophistication. As Rabbi Nachman of Breslov explains, sophistication and faith usually don't work well together and right now I am trying to work on my faith.

Nevertheless, I would like to offer tonight an alternative reading of the Unetane Tokef, one that doesn't negate God's power, but doesn't leave us standing helpless.



*"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun"*

*"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, And on Yom Kippur it is sealed."*

I would like to invite all of us to focus on the word *"yikateivun"* - "it is written." Notice that the poet doesn't say *"On Rosh Hashanah He writes"* or *"On Rosh Hashanah God writes."*

Indeed our fate is being written by God, but not only by God.

I'd like to suggest that we look at our lives, at our destiny as being shaped by God, by our own decisions, and by those around us.

The God element in the writing of my destiny reminds me that there are elements in my life which are beyond my control. With a few minor variations, the unsophisticated idea of the God of my childhood resonates true even today. To the almighty, yet merciful God of my childhood, I pray that the variables I don't control will be favorable to me in this coming year.

At this hour, I turn my attention as well to the aspects in my life that depend on me, and on me alone. *"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, And on Yom Kippur it is sealed,"* but God is not the author of my making time for my family, acquiring

healthier eating habits, or finding time to study, exercise, or volunteer for a good cause. It is not God who is going to decide if I will reach out to others, or be selfish and care only for myself.

Finally, I realize that others around me, my immediate family, my friends, my fellow congregants, and the members of my community, also have a say in my fate, in my destiny. My life is about me, but not only about me. No man is an island; none of us is a self-made person. Many significant others wrote, keep writing, and will continue to write in the books of our lives. Now, by recognizing that others around me are helping write the book of my life, I become aware that I am helping write other people's books as well.



*"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun"*

*"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed,"* but we all have a hand in this holy writing. Our books are a product of our own self-determination, of the contributions of family and friends, and of the blessings and challenges that come from God.

*"But t'shuvah, tefilah and tzedakah avert the severity of the decree."*

What about t'shuvah, tefilah and tzedakah? How do they fit into the picture?

I like to suggest that t'shuvah, usually translated as repentance, hints to the self-determination element of the book of our lives. T'shuvah is the introspection that leads me to change the aspects of my life that only I can, and should, change.

T'filah, prayer, points to my relationship with God, to the realization that the source of my life is the same as the source that sustains the life of the universe. Prayer acknowledges the mysterious aspects of our lives, the inexplicable elements of our existence; the ones beyond our control. Prayer reminds us that beside our tangible materiality, there is a spirit within us, which connects us with the big spirit of all creation.

*Tzedakah*, righteousness, reminds us of the interpersonal nature of our lives. Life is an ongoing process of giving and receiving. If we want to be written in the book of

life, we must learn to give and to receive, we must let others write in our books and we must make a difference in the books of those around us.

Now, while it is true that our lives are a product of our self-determination, the interaction with others, and God's presence, the truth is that each of our stories is different.

Some of you may feel well-connected to the spiritual spheres and may expect everything, good or bad, to come from God. You may feel that there is nothing you can do to change your destiny, and that nobody out there can lend you a hand. If this is your story, you may need to work in this coming year on how to ask for and accept help; and how to make your own contribution to the book of your life. As the saying goes, "God helps those who help themselves."

If you feel down and lonely despite being surrounded by family and friends, if you feel lost despite being immersed in your daily occupations, if you are a hard worker who gives his time and efforts to others, and yet haven't found meaning in your life, remember that God is still part of the picture, that you are really never alone.

Finally, if you are a self-sufficient man or woman, if you feel that nobody needs you, and that you need neither others nor God in your life, the challenge for you in this coming year might be to realize how your life and the lives of others around you can become better off if you learn to become a giver, if you try to interact with the people around you.

So, as we recite "*Avinu Malkeinu, inscribe us in the book of sustenance and prosperity*" let us think how we can help others be inscribed in the book of sustenance and prosperity, maybe by helping someone who is between jobs with his or her resume, or by being the one who offers the job opportunity they need.

As we plead "*Avinu Malkeinu inscribe us in the book of deliverance,*" let us consider how we can become instruments in God's deliverance, maybe by offering comfort, support and company to those distressed and downtrodden around us.

As we pray "*Avinu Malkeinu, inscribe us in the book of happiness, in the book of forgiveness,*" let us consider how we can help God to write us in these books. Let us

reflect on what we need to do, how do we need to change, to become happier human beings, more forgiving ones.

May all of us and our loved ones be written in the book of life; a life of deliverance, sustenance, joy, forgiveness and meaning. May we all help write each other's books in this coming year, and may we find the strength within ourselves to do our share in the writing of our own book.

May God be with us, may we feel His comforting presence, and may He bless us and our families with a good and sweet year.