

The Book of Life

Samuel Engel – Kol Nidre 2011
(with a lot of help from Anne)

I've thought a lot this year about the Book of Life – how to get into it and how to keep my family and friends in it. The answer I keep coming back to is that the Book of Life is something we have to choose.

My name is Samuel Engel. This evening, I have asked to talk about the Book of Life, about TBZ and about *Tzedakah*. Although I used to see the annual appeal as an awkward interruption in the Kol Nidre service, tonight I asked for the privilege of speaking. I asked to speak because it has become clear to me that this community and our support for it are integral parts of our personal renewal.

Gmar Chatima Tova, we say. "May you be inscribed for good" in the Book of Life.

This formulation we use in English – *may you be inscribed* – is distinctly passive, as if we will each be handed a scratch ticket on Yom Kippur and only one of us will score the mega-millions prize. There's no question that some of life's events *do* happen **to** us, just happen, out of our control, as most of us learn painfully along the way. Sometimes *very* painfully.

But inside the boundaries of chance, our philosophy holds that we each have the ability – *the responsibility* – to act. Action. Making choices.

(The sobering Une-tane Tokef prayer...)

The sobering *Une-tane Tokef* prayer gruesomely describes the many ways we could die this year – who by fire, who by water, who by sword, who by beast... who by cancer. But it always comes back to the choices we each have to affirm life instead.

To inscribe ourselves in the Book of Life, the prayer says, practice *teshuvah*, *tefilla* and *tzedakah*. As I understand it, *teshuvah* is about returning to our true self. *Tefilla* is about connecting spiritually to something beyond ourselves. And *tzedakah* is about acting righteously.

Although these choices are all deeply personal, in our tradition we come together as a community to write ourselves in the Book of Life. TBZ is the place we have all chosen to find and share energy for this challenge.

Let me tell you about my journey to TBZ. Maybe your story is a little like mine. Or maybe your own path highlights how our differences create this diverse and welcoming community.

By the time I came to TBZ, I had spent over 20 years away from active Jewish life, having turned away from a Jewish childhood that was warm but... suffocating. During my adult years, I would dutifully come to the high holiday services and pray... pray that nobody would talk to me. Then I would busy myself under my *tallis* looking for confirmation that I didn't belong. I always found it. It's easy to feel like an outsider if that's what you're looking for.

(Then my daughter Rose was born...)

Then my daughter Rose was born, and I wanted to show her the culture I grew up with. I called Rav Claudia to introduce myself and apologized sheepishly that it was only now that I had a kid that I was interested in joining a synagogue. "What? Now that she's born?" she teased. "Some people don't show up until the bat mitzvah. You're early!" And so I got my first taste of the way TBZ accepts each one of us wherever we are on our Jewish path.

I started coming here with an infant strapped to my chest, feeling unsure of myself and awkward. And then I began to learn that it's hard *not* to belong when you're welcome.

I can't belong, I thought, because I don't know my prayers well. But TBZ thoughtfully reinvents the liturgy inside a traditional service and delivers spirit just singing *yay-de-day*.

I can't belong, I thought, because I'm not sure about God. But TBZ emphasizes one-ness, the interconnectedness of all life, and makes room for questions and questioning people like me.

I can't belong, I thought, because the Bible sometimes seems anachronistic to me. But TBZ acknowledges the challenge of the text and looks nonetheless for relevance and meaning.

I can't belong, I thought, because my wife did not grow up Jewish – is not Jewish. But TBZ has families and individuals who have a variety of relationships with Judaism and we're all here.

This community accepted me where I am on my Jewish journey. You forgave my doubts and helped me choose *teshuvah*.

(Over the next three years...)

Over the next three years, I found myself coming to shul more and more often – to Shabbat services, to dance in the street – literally dance in the street! – on Simchas Torah, to deliver holiday baskets at Senior Life next door, to join community dinners and more.

For the first time in my life, I found myself eager to come to shul, to share a spiritual connection with others. Really? *My father* would have loved that! I thought. And when I'd tell my daughter we were going to shul, she'd say, "yay, shul! I'm going to wear my kippah!" / loved that.

TBZ accepted me as I have evolved on my Jewish journey. You gave me a place and way to affirm my connection to something bigger and helped me choose *tefilla*.

Many of us discover just how much strength this community can give when a family member gets sick or dies. For Anne and me this summer, TBZ was like a life preserver that keeps lifting you up when you think your head is underwater.

(When Rose was diagnosed with Leukemia...)

When Rose was diagnosed with Leukemia, community members filled her hospital room with get-well drawings from the children and even managed an ad hoc Shabbat Children's Service on the ward. Our caring rabbis patiently navigated the challenges of an interfaith funeral with spirituality and respect. TBZ-ers helped us bury our daughter on Cape Cod, sang to us and lifted shovels with us.

Back at home, the community laid a siege of love. You sat with us during shiva, fed us, cried with us, yes laughed with us, and came together each evening so I could say Kaddish in my own home, and then later make a daily minyan.

I've racked my brain trying to figure out what I could possibly have done to deserve so much love and support. The only answer is that I joined TBZ, where we have agreed to be here for one another.

TBZ accepted me each day however I was able to give *to* the community or accept *from* the community. You helped me understand the power of choosing *tzedakah*.

I'm telling you my story because yours may be similar. Maybe you too have been grateful to find a spiritual home that embraces you without judgment, a joyful, vibrant place that nourishes your soul and respects your intellect.

(Perhaps you have experienced TBZ's love...)

Perhaps you have experienced TBZ's love at life's milestones: when you faced illness, or when you celebrated a marriage, or had a baby-naming, a bat mitzvah or another personal transition. Or perhaps you will. If you haven't, it's always available when we reach out just a little.

So as we look forward to this year, we face many choices about how we inscribe ourselves into the Book of Life. This evening I'm asking you to choose to support TBZ.

This synagogue's power comes from a volunteer base of mutual support, but there are still expenses. Our lean budget includes the salaries of talented professional rabbis who share vision, joy and counsel, office staff, building maintenance and programming costs. It's a full-service synagogue line-up.

With our open door principle, TBZ has chosen to make membership accessible to everybody, regardless of ability to pay. Instead of setting higher dues, we plan each year to raise almost a quarter of our operating budget through annual appeal donations.

(Again: we plan each year to raise...)

Again: we plan each year to raise a quarter of our operating budget through donations – about \$180,000. It's not an accident and we're not just hoping for casual charity. The budget is based around the obligation of *Tzedakah*, the understanding that members will extend their dues with an additional payment.

Here's how we do it: everybody gives something. Participating at some level in the annual campaign is an opportunity for each of us to affirm and act on our commitment to this community.

On average, our budget expects that each member will contribute \$360, or \$720 per family. We're not average, though, so what this means is that some of us will give \$25 or \$100, *many of us will give \$1000* and it is essential that some give \$3000, \$5000 or more.

If you're like me, your heart is tugged daily by pleas to support great nonprofit organizations – groups helping hungry people here and abroad, arts institutions, social justice concerns. We should give to all of them. But we *must* also give to TBZ.

Pledge cards are attached to your High Holiday tickets and ushers will collect them in a few minutes. Please give fully, give as you are able and give something. Please give a little more than you gave last year.

(Why give to TBZ?...)

Why give? Because TBZ welcomes us with acceptance and nurtures our return to our true selves. *Teshuvah.*

Why give? Because TBZ connects our spirit to humanity and beyond. *Tefilla.*

Why give? Because TBZ gives us the strength to *act* on our values and to go forward in the world with righteousness. *Tzedakah.*

Thank you. *Gmar Chatima Tova.* May you inscribe the Book of Life with goodness.