

Writing Ourselves for Blessing
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

We just chanted “*B’sefer chayim*”—“In the book of life, blessing, and peace, and sustenance may we be written and inscribed.” For nearly two thousand years, there has been an association between Rosh Hashanah and the metaphor of books. The first place that I am aware of this image appearing is in the Talmud, in the tractate Rosh Hashanah. There, Rabbi Yohanan, who lived in the 1st century, spoke of three “books” that are opened on Rosh Hashanah: “one for the wholly righteous, one for the wholly wicked, and for the *beynonim*, the ‘in-between.’ The wholly righteous are at once inscribed and sealed in the book of life; the wholly wicked are at once inscribed and sealed in the book of death; and the *beynonim*, the ‘in-between,’ are held suspended from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur.”

I’m not entirely sure what Rabbi Yohanan meant when he spoke of people being inscribed in a book of life or a book of death. I doubt he meant it literally, as he clearly knew that in any given year, righteous people die, and wicked people live on. Perhaps he was speaking of a kind of spiritual life or death—the earning of life in an eternal world-to-come, or the life and death of the spirit in this world.

However he intended this metaphor, what is most intriguing to me in his teaching is what he says about the ‘*beynonim*,’ those who are neither wholly righteous nor wholly wicked. Which means, essentially, all of us—for who in the world is entirely good, or entirely bad? We are all those “in-between.” And according to Rabbi Yohanan, when we enter this season of new beginnings, nothing is yet written and sealed, it is our actions that ultimately will determine the nature of the “book” in which we are written.

This image of being “inscribed” at the new year entered our High Holydays liturgy in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which we will chant tomorrow morning. This ancient prayer, of unclear origin, also uses an image of God as one who judges and writes, in “*Sefer Hazichronot*, the book of remembrances.” According to the Unetaneh Tokef, it is not only God who writes in this book—it is us, each person, as well. “*V’chotem yad kol adam bo*”—“the seal of each person’s hand is in it.” Or, as our machzor translates this line: “it bears the imprint of us all, which our deeds and our lives have inscribed.” (p. 347)

I don’t think we’re meant to take any of this imagery of cosmic books too literally. But the metaphor gives voice to an important question when we look at our life and our hopes for the year to come. The question is this: how much exactly do we write, and how much is already written for us?

As moderns, as Americans, we tend not to like this notion of being “written.” The individual search for life, liberty and happiness is our birthright. The great American myth is that we are self-made people; that our effort and our choices make up the reality of our lives. Consciously or unconsciously, I think it’s safe to say that most of us here have internalized this orientation quite deeply. We prefer to be authors, not characters in someone else’s novel.

Another problem many of us have with this notion of being “written” is—who or what exactly is doing the “writing”? The notion of an all-controlling God who operates according to some dubious plan of reward and punishment, who metes out individual fates according to a cosmic accounting sheet, is both offensive and unhelpful. This is not a God I believe in, nor an image of God that corresponds to any kind of reality that I know.

And yet—

The fact is that there are some pretty significant things about my life that have not been written by me. It’s due to no fault or merit of my own that I was born to a middle-class Jewish family in America rather than a Sunni family in Iraq or to parents in Darfur; no fault or merit of my own that I live with safety and well-being while my counterparts deal with unspeakable hardship and violence on a daily basis. Call it God, call it chance; either way, the beginning of my book—which, as any writer knows, determines so much of the later chapters—was never in my control.

The same can be said for the end. I have no idea when I’m going to die, or how; whether I’m slated for another few years or for a ripe old age. My life didn’t come packaged with a 90-year warranty, or even an extended service plan.

And if I’m really honest with myself, I can admit that I’m not even sure how many of the events along the way between my birth and my death are in my control. Everything from illness to political events to a chance encounter have an impact on who I am, on what I do—many of them things I never would have asked for or couldn’t have anticipated even if I’d wanted to.

So what, then, do I—do any of us—actually write for ourselves? What exactly “hangs suspended” between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? And how do I write myself for goodness, for blessing, in this book of my life?

There are three things, according to the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, that we can do in the face of those harsh realities that we have no control over, three things that have power to change our experience—three ways that we can write, and not just be written. They are *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, *u’tzedakah*—turning, prayer, and acts of righteousness.

Teshuvah

Teshuvah, most literally translated as turning or returning, is the predominant theme of these days extending from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur. How to define *teshuvah*? Let me quote here from another sage, David Byrne of the Talking Heads:

And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself--well...how did I get here?

That’s a great *teshuvah* question. How did I get here?

And the song goes on:

And you may ask yourself
What is that beautiful house?
And you may ask yourself
Where does that highway lead to?
And you may ask yourself
Am I right? ...am I wrong?
And you may tell yourself
My god!...what have I done?

That's an even better *teshuvah* question.

Where am I in my life, and how did I get here? Am I right, am I wrong? What have I been doing, what have I done?

To be able to fully answer these questions, two key qualities are needed: the quality of *emet*, of truth, and the quality of *rachamim*, compassion.

Let's begin with *emet*, truth.

To embrace truth is to cultivate a certain kind of awareness as we walk through life. It is very hard work, the ability to see things as they actually are—not as I'd like them to be, not as they used to be but are no longer, not as someone else wants them to be.

It's not always easy to be willing to see the truth of my own life. Truth is sometimes scary.

I remember, when I was a kid, I was very scared of the dark. While I wouldn't have admitted, in the daylight hours, to any kind of belief in demons and monsters, nighttime was another matter. I developed elaborate rituals to keep myself safe—from what, I'm not exactly sure, but whatever it was, it would certainly come to get me from underneath my bed. So the rules were: my entire body had to be covered by a sheet or blanket (for some reason, it was okay if my head stayed clear). To allow an arm to hang over the side of the bed would have been madness! And there were certain things I chanted to myself, in my head, to keep nightmares away.

This somewhat pitiful image of the young me, frozen beneath my covers at night, fearful of making a wrong move, comes to mind when I think about how easy it is to walk through the world, not allowing in the truth of things. They become the monsters under the bed, hiding in the closet, phantoms of our own minds and hearts.

A commitment to the truth, to true discernment, requires me to take off the covers, check under the bed, to open the closet door. Sometimes when I do, the fear dissolves, and the monsters are no longer scary. They're just me, for better and sometimes for worse.

But there are also times when the truth is hard. It's not always easy to acknowledge those places where I don't have control and need to accept what is. Truth calls on me to be honest about where I've fallen short, where I've hidden myself away, where I've been lazy or apathetic or just plain wrong. Sometimes it requires me to step up, to take risks when there is something that can be changed, and I am called upon to make that change.

I have found that gaining a clearer view of myself tends to help with my view of the world. A false sense of self is a distorted lens through which to view others, and ultimately distorts my relationships and interactions with the people around me. We can spend such an enormous amount of energy blaming ourselves, justifying ourselves, making up elaborate excuses for why we do what we do. It's less interesting or dramatic, perhaps, but ultimately more fruitful, to be able to simply sit with the truth of what is.

Because of all of these challenges, in order for the quality of truth to actually function in our lives, it needs something to accompany it—the quality of compassion. Sometimes we mistake truth for harsh judgment. But to be able to see myself, my life, clearly, I actually need an enormous amount of compassion. I need to be able to forgive myself even as I acknowledge my limitations, my mistakes, my failures. I need to be gentle with myself as I face an unpleasant but undeniable reality.

In the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, God's throne is established in *chesed*, in lovingkindness, and from this place of love, God sits in truth. This is such a central image of this holiday—the notion that God moves from the seat of strict justice, to the seat of *rachamim*, of compassion. And what is this image of God, but an aspect of ourselves—our own effort to bring the light of discernment, of careful judgment, to our own lives—but to do so from the seat of *chesed* and *rachamim*, of love and compassion.

The qualities of truth and of compassion that we bring to our awareness and our actions—these are very much in our hands. These are qualities that can be written large, or written small. These are two qualities that we can cultivate during these *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, Ten Days of Turning, between now and the end of Yom Kippur. They are qualities that we can cultivate for the other 50 weeks of the year, as well. They are an important part of the book that we ourselves write.

Tefillah

After *teshuvah* comes *tefillah*—“prayer.” How can we best understand this?

In rabbinic tradition, *tefillah* usually refers to a very specific kind of prayer—petitionary prayer, where we ask for something. And even if you have absolutely no belief in a God who listens to and answers prayer, I think there is something useful in this concept.

It is powerful to ask, to put out into the universe a request for my life. An important part of writing in the book of our lives is having the courage to have desire, to really want something—not just for selfish reasons, but in order to come into the fullness of who we are. For some of us, that means having our basic needs more adequately taken care of—adequate livelihood, a

reasonable amount of health, companionship and support. It can also mean asking for help in the realm of the mind and the spirit—we can ask for courage, for wisdom, for patience, for understanding. And when we are able to sit with the truth of our lives—not the stories we tell ourselves, not the excuses or blame that have become our habit—then we will have an easier time knowing what it is we need to ask for.

Who or what are we asking all this from? I'm not sure it matters. Because *tefillah*, understood this way, is more a stance than a theological statement. It's a willingness to acknowledge our vulnerability, our need. It's a willingness to admit that I can't do it all by myself. The fallacy of self-sufficiency—and the attendant shame when we can't make it by our efforts alone—runs very deep in our culture.

The willingness to ask, to turn to the expanse of the universe with a sincere request, is an acknowledgment that I am part of something much larger than myself. And not just to ask for my own sake, but to ask in the service of something larger, something beyond myself—this is *tefillah*. It is a stance of both humility and of commitment.

So here we are, gathered in a lunch room transformed into a place of prayer. I urge you to use this time, these gifts of hours on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, use the days in between, to do a little practicing of *tefillah*. Sit with the gaps in your life, as well as the blessings. Think about what qualities will help you do the work you need to do in the year to come, and ask to be granted some measure of those qualities. If you feel overwhelmed by the hand you've been dealt by life, by all those things that have been written by some power beyond you, then ask for help, and be open when it comes. Ask for compassion for yourself, forgiveness for yourself, and for the ability to be compassionate on those around you. A very powerful *tefillah* practice is to ask for blessing for the people you're having a difficult time with. Turn your frustration, your anger, into a prayer for their wellbeing. It can have a transformative effect—not on them, but on you.

Tzedakah

And finally—*tzedakah*. Unlike *teshuvah* and *tefillah*, which focus on movements in our hearts and minds, *tzedakah* entails real action in the world.

What is *tzedakah*? Most literally, the obligation to give money and other material support to those in need. But its Hebrew root is *tzedek*, justice, a Biblical term that has to do with restoring the appropriate distribution of the earth's bounty—a bounty that ultimately belongs to no one but its Creator. Human beings are responsible for the great imbalance of wealth and poverty in our world, and *tzedakah* is an active, personal commitment to address that imbalance.

Tzedakah, like *tefillah*, is a stance. It is an affirmation that I owe whatever blessing I enjoy to some Source beyond myself, and that to honor that Source, I must care for others. It is an attitude that implies that I receive not in order to cling as hard as I can to what I have, but in order to be able to give it away. And the highest level of *tzedekah* is a commitment to making sure that everyone has a livelihood, that all members of society can take care of their basic needs.

This is a good time of year to review our *tzedakah* commitments, to look clearly at the balance in our lives between taking care of ourselves and caring for others. It's a good time to think more deeply about all those things I've convinced myself I "need," and seeing if perhaps there are greater needs elsewhere. When tens of millions of people have little or nothing to eat every day, how can I pay \$600 for a phone? Thousands of dollars for a television?

The stance of *tzedakah* is far more than pennies in a *pushke*. If we took it seriously—if we were committed, as rabbinic tradition dictates, to giving away 20% of our income every year to help right the obscene imbalances in our society, in our world—then think about the change that could be accomplished. *Tzedakah* is an account—a financial account, a moral account, the account we need to attend to, to make sure we've fulfilled a basic Jewish, a basic human, commitment.

So in closing, it turns out that there is a lot we can do in our suspended state, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A commitment to truth and compassion, a willingness to put our best intentions and our sincerest desires out into the universe, a readiness to give of ourselves in a meaningful way for the wellbeing of others—this is the path that we are invited to step onto on this holiday. It's not a simple invitation, but it's a hopeful one. To take even one of these steps means that we're still alive, that we are indeed written into the book of life. I wish each and every one of you a new year of blessing—*l'shanah tovah tikkateivu!*