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Resume Writing & the Sefer HaHayim: on Writing and Creating a Legacy

This August the New York Times [published a story](#) on electronic productivity-monitoring of white-collar employees, many more of whom are now working remotely away from the watchful eye of their supervisors and colleagues. The article drew a lot of attention for the ways in which the article itself incorporated the very technologies about which it was reporting. And so as you scrolled down the article, a tab on your web-browser would share information about the efficiency with which you were reading and processing the article. If you turned aside from reading the article to some other task, you would be warned that you had neglected the article and that this would be noted as a loss of productivity.

My attention, however, was drawn to the new entree of productivity interventions into professions that had never been monitored in this way. For example, hospice chaplains who work for large hospital corporations are now subject to the same sorts of productivity monitoring as other employees of contemporary American “late Capitalism.”

Rev. Margo Richardson of Minneapolis, according to the Times, became a hospice chaplain to help patients wrestle with deep, searching questions:

“This is the big test for everyone: How am I going to face my own death?” she said. When her employer, the healthcare corporation Allina instituted new productivity metrics, the chaplains on staff were asked to “gamify” their service to dying patients. Each pastoral intervention, such as meeting with a patient, or officiating a funeral, or having a conversation with a grieving family member, was assigned a number of points and the chaplains were tasked with predicting each day the number of points they expected to earn:

Every morning the chaplains would share on a spreadsheet the number of “productivity points” they anticipated earning. Every evening, software would calculate whether they had met their goals. But dying defied planning. Patients broke down, canceled appointments, drew final breaths. This left the clergy scrambling and in a perpetual dilemma. “Do I see the patients who earn the points or do I see the patients who really need to be seen?”

As you may imagine, this was a demoralizing process for the chaplains and Rev. Richardson has since left her job. One expert who spoke to the Times for that article responded, “we’re in this era of measurement but we don’t know what we should be measuring.”

Once I started thinking about how we measure the wrong things, it seemed that everyone was talking about this. Ezra Klein interviewed the philosopher C. Thi Nguyen over the summer and they too explored this very theme. Nguyen observed that once something can be quantified we have a tendency to prioritize that which can be quantified, even as that necessarily entails neglecting what should have been a priority. We should not be surprised that when chaplaincy work is “gamified” chaplains then prioritize those activities that earn them the most “points.” If social-media “gamifies” communication, as Nguyen suggests, we should not be surprised that participants begin to prioritize the form of communication that will earn us “points” - likes and shares and retweets. What is lost are other, older, goals of communication such as persuasion, enlightenment, or kindness.

Only certain things can be quantified, and over time, we risk prioritizing that which can be measured and counted. But the most important things cannot be measured or counted. The most significant metrics are entirely hidden from human eyes.

Today we say, and we continue to say for the next ten days:

זְכַרְנוּ לַחַיִּים מִלֶּדֶת הַפֶּיז בַּחַיִּים וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים לְמַעַן אֱ-לֹהִים חַיִּים

Remember us for life, King who desires life, and write us into the book of life, for your sake, living God.

This prayer, which becomes part of our Amidah for these ten days, is built around an image of a book of life which is a ubiquitous metaphor for the season.

What is this Book of Life? Where do we want to be written? Rabbi Yohanan, as quoted in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16b) teaches that there are three books which are opened on Rosh Hashanah:

שְׁלֹשָׁה סְפָרִים נִפְתְּחוּ בְּרֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה, אֶחָד שֶׁל רְשָׁעִים גְּמוּרִין, וְאֶחָד שֶׁל צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִין, וְאֶחָד שֶׁל בֵּינוּנִים. צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִין — נִכְתְּבוּ וְנִחְתְּמוּ לְאֶתְרֵי לַחַיִּים, רְשָׁעִים גְּמוּרִין — נִכְתְּבוּ וְנִחְתְּמוּ לְאֶתְרֵי לְמִיתָה, בֵּינוּנִים — תְּלוּיִין וְעוֹמְדִין מֵרֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים, זָכוּ — נִכְתְּבוּ לַחַיִּים, לֹא זָכוּ — נִכְתְּבוּ לְמִיתָה.

Three books are opened on Rosh HaShana before the Holy Blessed One: One of wholly wicked people, and one of wholly righteous people, and one of in-between people. Righteous people are immediately written and sealed for life; wicked people are immediately written and sealed for death; and in between people are left with their judgment suspended from Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are written for life; if they do not merit, they are written for death.

When we say זְכַרְנוּ לַחַיִּים וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים we are asking to be written into the book of the צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִין, the fully righteous who are written and sealed for life. We want to be in that book. We ask and we pray for our names to be listed among those צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִין who all deserve only good things, instantly and always. The special insight, the *biddush*, of the prayer is that we ask this לְמַעַן אֱ, for Your sake, we say to God. We pray for our lives זְכַרְנוּ לַחַיִּים וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים, so that we may perform tasks לְמַעַן אֱ, that are of value to God.

But there is another Book of Life in our Rosh Hashanah liturgy. On Rosh Hashanah, and for the next ten days we recite the moving Avinu Malkeinu prayer at each and every weekday tefilah. This prayer, a plaintive call to God, addressed as our sovereign and as our parent, includes its own mention of the Book of Life:

אֲבִינוּ מִלְּקֵנוּ כְּתָבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר חַיִּים טוֹבִים

“Avinu Malkeinu,” we call, “write us into the book of good life.” Is this the same book of life that Rabbi Yohanan taught was opened for the righteous on Rosh Hashanah? Perhaps. But in Avinu Malkeinu the Book of Good Life is paired with four other books.

אֲבִינוּ מִלְּקֵנוּ כְּתָבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר גְּאֻלָּה וְיִשׁוּעָה
אֲבִינוּ מִלְּקֵנוּ כְּתָבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר פְּרִנְסָה וְכִלְפָּלָה
אֲבִינוּ מִלְּקֵנוּ כְּתָבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר זְכוּיֹת
אֲבִינוּ מִלְּקֵנוּ כְּתָבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר סְלִיחָה וּמְחִילָה

Inscribe us in the Book of Redemption and Deliverance.
Inscribe us in the Book of Maintenance and Sustenance.
Inscribe us in the Book of Merits.
Inscribe us in the Book of Pardon and Forgiveness.

There are five books in all and their names correspond, one to one, with the five books of the Torah. This is a different paradigm altogether for the meaning of the central metaphor of the Rosh Hashanah prayers.

The phrase זְכַרְנוּ לַחַיִּים וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים can be a reference to the book of life in which the righteous are inscribed. In this understanding we stand together today and ask, each one of us for ourselves, for another year of life to undertake worthy tasks לְמַעַן אֱ that God considers to be worthy tasks. But if זְכַרְנוּ לַחַיִּים וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים is an allusion to the Torah itself, as it seems to be in Avinu Malkeinu, our request is no less than to be written into the Torah,

meaning that our lives become part of something larger than ourselves and that we merge the narrative arc of our lives into the eternal story of the Torah itself.

Earlier this summer, as I prepared to go on the job market, I undertook the task of writing an updated resume for the first time in a decade. And, as I undertook that process I was completely flummoxed by the need, which I am sure is familiar to many of you from your own professional lives, to identify professional accomplishments to highlight in the resume. The coach who was helping me write a resume asked very basic questions which I struggled to answer: “What accomplishments are you most proud of?” “What were the most transformational successes?” And, “what metrics can you share to demonstrate that accomplishment?”

With help I was, eventually, able to answer those questions and create a resume. I’m not going to share it with you today (but if you know of anyone who should see it; let’s speak after yom tov), but I do want to share with all of you that the actions and accomplishments of which I am most proud cannot be described by any metric. There is no metric that can capture dispensing halakhic guidance which incorporates loyalty to halakhah, as best as I can understand it, and also incorporates sensitivity to a challenging family dynamic of a religiously diverse modern family. There is no metric that can capture coaching someone through proficiency as a leader of weekday tefilot at our shul, or proficiency observing Shabbat at home. There is no metric that can capture the negotiations necessary to officiate a wedding when the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom have radically different visions for the ceremony reflecting radically different perspectives on Judaism itself.

The Sefer HaHayim, the Book of Life, is God’s record of everything that cannot be quantified. All of the accomplishments and victories and acts of moral courage that will never be known to anyone else and which can be measured by no metric, are lovingly collected by God and written into the Book of Life. This is the sum of our merits that we present before God on Rosh Hashanah. This is the way that our very lives and the stories they tell can merge into the eternal story of the Torah itself.

Today, I want to encourage you to think about what deeds and character traits and relationships you wish to incorporate into the Sefer HaHayim. So much of our contemporary lives prioritize that which can be measured. But here, in this room, on this day, we prioritize matters of utmost importance that cannot be measured or counted or quantified. Know that every act of devotion or kindness or justice is seen and treasured and is recorded in the Sefer HaHayim that we write and from which God reads today.

There is one more reference to a Sefer HaHayim in our liturgy today. The final berakhah of the amidah, today and for the next ten days includes a request to be written in the Book of Life but on Rosh Hashanah itself the request is more elaborate:

בְּסֵפֶר חַיִּים בְּרָכָה וְשָׁלוֹם וּפְרֻיָּה וְרַב־טוֹבָה נִזְכָּר וְנִפְתָּח לְפָנֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְכָל עֲמֻדָּה בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל לְחַיִּים טוֹבִים וְלְשָׁלוֹם: וְנֹאמַר כִּי בִי יִרְבוּ
יְמֵיךָ וְיוֹסִיפוּ לָךְ שָׁנוֹת חַיִּים: לְחַיִּים טוֹבִים תִּכְתְּבֵנוּ: אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים. כְּתִבְנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים: פְּתוּב וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבָקִים בְּה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים
כְּלַכֶּם הַיּוֹם:

In the book of life, blessing, peace and abundant maintenance, may we be remembered and inscribed before You; we and all Your people, the House of Yisrael for a good life and peace. And it is said: “Through me [the Torah], shall your days be multiplied, and increased for you will be the years of your life.” For a good life, inscribe us, living God; inscribe us in the Book of Life, as it is written: “And You who cling to the Lord, your God, are all alive today.”

That more elaborate insertion concludes with a verse from the beginning of Sefer Devarim (4:4)

וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבָקִים בְּה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים כְּלַכֶּם הַיּוֹם:

“And you who cling to the Lord your God are living all of you, unto this day.”

It is absolutely not true, I am sorry to report, that anyone who clings to God will stay alive. What does this verse possibly mean in the context of a tefilah that we recite on Rosh Hashanah?

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv), writing on Sefer Devarim explains that through an ongoing connection to the Torah we merit **חיות הנפש** - a lively spirit and joy in our closeness to God. That is what we are praying for when we ask **בְּסֵפֶר חַיִּים ... גְּזִכָּר וְנִכְתָּב**. If we are devoted to matters of uttermost importance, and not distracted by only those priorities that can be counted, we merit the joy and satisfaction of a life well lived in close intimacy with God.

Figuring out the metrics by which I want to be known by other people is challenging. But it has led me to the uplifting realization of all the things that cannot be counted. The process itself has filled me today, with gratitude. I'm grateful for all of the quantifiable and countable accomplishments that we achieved together, some of which are now on my resume.. And I'm even more grateful for all that cannot be counted that we accomplished together.

May all of us be written, immediately and confidently into the Sefer HaHayim, among the righteous, for a year of health and friendship and the blessings of Torah and Mitzvot.