

You, Through Heavenly Eyes

Yom Kippur Morning 5779

Rabbi Nicole K. Roberts

North Shore Temple Emanuel

Today is a Jewish day of powerful imagery. On the Day of Atonement, the *gates* begin to close, as our time runs out to repent. The white clothes we wear symbolise the *shrouds* we'll wear at our death, reminding us of our mortality and humility. Last night, our leaders, past and present, stood as *witnesses* to the vows we make for the coming year. And then, of course, there's "the book"—the *Sefer Chayim*: the Book of Life. This is the heavenly volume in which, tradition says, our deeds are inscribed, by none other than the Divine—the ultimate Judge. It's one of the most ancient images of the season: our actions are being recorded by Someone who cares whether they were good or bad. Our actions are noticed and *noted*, not by an indiscriminate universe, but by an Arbiter—a Divine Accountant (with a capital A), who tallies the moral ledger.

As a former CPA of 9 years, I always find the Book of Life the most intriguing image of the Yamim Noraim. Because, like any accountant, I get lost in the details: How is this moral ledger kept, *exactly*? Is it a merit or demerit system? That is, do we start off in God's favour as children, losing and regaining points as we go through life? Or do we start out with no merit, and strive upward, towards the angels?

Are the marks under our names ever erased? What does it mean that *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* "temper judgment's severe decree"? Is it that the bad things we do are neutralised by the good in a 1:1 ratio, or do we need to make a *practice* of these, in order to impact the tally?

Are all misdeeds counted equally? Does a rabbi who, say, runs a yellow light have more strikes against her than one who drives alone in a T2 lane... theoretically? Does manslaughter get only one mark in the Book, or does it get more than, say, failing to wave the lulav on Sukkot? Is the one who commits an act of antisemitism on a school bus as redeemable as the one who litters in Centennial Park? How *is* the Holy One keeping track?

When we worry too much about these details, of course, we miss the point of the imagery altogether. The *Sefer Chayim* is simply meant to get us thinking about whether we've done more harm than good, to inspire us to change our ways, and to help us balance out the debits and credits under our name. Heaven's got the accounting system under control—we need only worry about doing a better job of things here on earth. One particular aspect of that accounting system, however, does feel important to highlight, here at the start of this Day of Atonement. And that is, that however we *humans* envision the process, tradition says that God is recording both our transgressions *and* our worthy acts in this Book. That however much we *humans* may inflate in our minds a single bad or good act that we've done in the world, in God's eyes there is always more to who we are.

One of the best contemporary articulations of this concept comes from attorney Bryan Stevenson, known in America for providing legal representation to death row inmates, to juvenile offenders being unfairly tried and sentenced as adults, and to prisoners facing life sentences without parole. In the course of his work, which he writes about in his book *Just Mercy*, Stevenson spends a lot of time with the convicted, with their families, and with their communities, and while many of his clients are indeed guilty of a crime, he gets to know them not *only* as criminals, but as whole human beings, with interests, talents, and concerns; human beings with tortured childhoods, who may have made terrible mistakes *but who do really good things too*. It's easy for the criminal justice system to see these people *only* as a lost cause and lock them away for life (or worse), but through his contact with them, Stevenson has come to know a truth that he states often and with a passion: that “we are each more than the worst thing we've ever done.”ⁱ

We are each more than the worst thing we've ever done. What a powerful message for this season, when we're meant to focus so intently on our failings! We are more than *just* the things we've done wrong. It's not that our transgressions don't matter, or that we needn't atone for them. They're not inconsequential. But we each do *good* things too—*really good things*—and these also have consequence in the Divine scheme. The purpose of this annual opportunity for making amends is to keep us from dwelling *overly long* on the things we've done wrong. Because if we let our failings begin to consume and define us, we may begin to believe ourselves incapable of good, and that's not how we're seen by the Holy One keeping the great ledger on high. Tradition says both our transgressions *and* our worthy acts are recorded in the Book of Life.

Sadly, our moral ledgers here on earth are often kept differently. Human beings hold grudges, because human hurt isn't easily forgotten. When others do forgive us, we often still find ourselves mired in guilt, because our *own* conscience can be merciless. And even if we and the wounded *are* ready to forgive and move on, there may be many more who aren't, if our mistake has been shared with a wider “audience.” Today, a transgression can go public in a heartbeat. Recently on a podcast, I listened as a 42-year old woman talked about how a transgression she'd committed at age 22 had gone viral in the media and on social media, causing a massive public controversy, destroying her reputation, and forever denying her error the right to be forgotten. Some *2 decades* later, because of what she calls “technologically enhanced shaming” that is “amplified, uncontained, and permanently accessible,” *still* not a day goes by when she is not reminded of her mistake. She's become *completely* defined by it—it's all people know her for, and they know her for it before they even meet her. She laments, “I am seen by many, but known by few” and “it's easy to forget ‘that woman’ was dimensional and had a soul that was once unbroken.”ⁱⁱ

What a harsh and unyielding sentence. To be defined *completely* by what we've done wrong, and *nothing* that we've done right? Appropriate, perhaps, for terrorists, tyrants, and predators—but the “human sins” most of us confess in our Yom Kippur *vidui* are not so inhumane as to merit such eternal damnation. That's not *our* religion. Judaism holds that we are *more* than the worst thing we've ever done. *Teshuvah, tefilah, tzedakah*—these temper

judgment's harsh decree. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, "In ancient Israel... when [people] felt burdened by a sense of... disappointing God[, t]hey would bring a sacrifice, a sin-offering, to God's altar. Its purpose was not to 'balance the books' with one good deed to offset every bad one, nor was it to bribe God to overlook their offense. Its purpose was to acquaint the donor with his or her better nature, to let him say to himself... 'Sometimes I am weak and thoughtless. But... sometimes I can be strong and generous and self-disciplined as well. I am not a bad person. I am a person who often does bad things, but more often does good things.'"iii The good things we do—these, too, go into the Book and are remembered on this day. *B'Sefer Chayim b'rachah v'shalom*—"In the Book of Life is blessing and *shalom*." The word *shalom* means wholeness. The *wholeness* of what we do in life counts, in God's Book. We are each more than the worst thing we've ever done.

Of course, there's a spiritual corollary to this that also bears exploring on this Day of Atonement, before anyone gets too comfortable with their revised tally in the ledger! If we are more than the worst thing we've done, are we also more than the *best* thing we've done? Many of us enter Yom Kippur feeling as though we have some pretty big credits to our name. When reflecting on the past year, we think mainly of its highlights and our accomplishments. Yet very few of us excel morally in *all* areas of life, and on Yom Kippur we must summon the humility to acknowledge this. The Day of Atonement, it is said, holds us accountable not only for what we *commit*, but also for what we *omit*—the things we *neglected* to do; the ways we've *failed* to shine. Have we succeeded in business at the expense of our family? Have we provided for our family by being ruthless in business? How have we treated our co-workers and staff on the way to our success? If success has brought us wealth, have we shared it with those in need, or only with restaurants, shopping malls, and car dealers? Does the pride we feel in our greatest accomplishment reflect the *whole* of who we are? How would God see it? How do those around us see it?

I gain a bit of insight into this question almost every time I meet with a recently bereaved family. What I've learned is that to those around us, there is *much* more to who we are than just our greatest accomplishment. In preparation for a eulogy, I ask family members and close friends to share with me what they'll remember most about their loved one and what made that person such a unique, irreplaceable soul. Invariably, no matter how outstanding the person's achievements in the world, these impressive acts are mentioned in our meeting only fleetingly. The deepest emotion emerges when family and friends talk about the other, lesser known things: how "mum was always present, at every family function"; how "my sister used to make the best chicken soup for Pesach"; and how "dad used to share scraps with the dog under the table." How "my best friend was always available for a chat and a coffee"; how "my brother hated going to the beach," and how "my grandma's smile never left her face, despite her great pain." The deceased may have been wildly successful, changed the world with a novel invention, earned medals in combat, or been a prominent public figure, yet it is so often their little day-to-day acts that are missed most acutely—their laugh, a phrase they would say all the time, an amusing habit that's always been irritating but now we'd give anything if only it could continue. These complete

the *whole* of who we are. We are each so much more than the single greatest thing we have done.

B'Sefer Chayim b'rachah v'shalom. The Book of Life records the wholeness of our life. And while this image is often presented as a *warning* during this season, sometimes it can be a comfort to know that Someone, somewhere, is accounting for *everything*, beyond just what most of *humanity* sees. Sometimes, after all, what humanity sees can be so very limited. This past year, our shul began participating in a wider Jewish communal effort to prevent suicide and support those who've been impacted and left behind. At one of our discussions here at shul, a member of ours who lost her sister to suicide shared an important reminder that's stuck with me ever since. She said, "my sister is best known for having taken her own life—that's *all* some people know about her. But her death was only one *part* of her life." Those left behind knew her as a person who was so much more than her final act.

We are more than just the manner in which we die. We are more than just the manner in which we *think* we live. We are more than just the best thing we've ever done, and more than just the worst. This is what the Book of Life imagery should teach us—how to live with a more balanced view of who we are, and who *others* are—how, if only on this day, to glimpse ourselves and those around us not through human eyes, but heavenly ones.

So I'd like to ask, if you feel comfortable, that you close your human eyes for the next few moments. Close your human eyes and take these next few moments in self-reflection...

Are you someone who entered the sanctuary today wracked with guilt, having made a cringeworthy mistake or offense—something you can't quite shake from your conscience? If this is you, try taking this moment to remind yourself that you do good things too, and most of the time. Can you grant yourself a *moment* of heavenly gentleness?

Or, are you someone who entered the sanctuary today with your ego in pretty hearty condition—feeling, perhaps, that the spiritual demands of the day don't really apply to you this year? Then take just a moment to reflect on the areas of your life that may need more attention than you've been giving them. What were the costs of your success and achievement? Who paid the price?

And, if you are someone who entered the sanctuary today having defined another human being by but a single standout act they committed, then take this moment to recall that our eyes are not heaven's—that as mere mortals, sometimes our sight is limited and our judgment flawed—that it is not, in fact, our role to condemn someone for all eternity. Our names and our acts may fill the *Sefer Chayim*, but it is not our Book to keep. Heaven is in charge... thank God. [Pause]

B'Sefer Chayim b'rachah v'shalom—"In the Book of Life is blessing and *shalom*—the wholeness of who we are, inscribed by the Divine."

G'mar chatimah tovah.

ⁱ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2015).

ⁱⁱ https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame

ⁱⁱⁱ Harold S. Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996).