

RECLAIMING OUR JUDAISM

Shabbat Shuvah, October 7, 2016 / 5776

Shabbat shalom!

During these High Holy Days, as every year, we Jews have a number of special ways we greet each other. We wish each other a Happy New Year, of course – although in the Hebrew “Shana Tova” literally means a “good” year, as a wish that goes beyond mere happiness. We wish for each other a sweet year, and of course a year of health and peace. And on Yom Kippur we might wish for each other an easy fast – although one might ask: if the fast is easy, what’s the point?

One of the more traditional greetings is *L’shanah tovah tikateivu* – may you be inscribed for a good year, bringing up the image of God sitting in judgment over each of us, quill and the Book of Life opened on God’s desk, and our fate for life and death hanging in the balance. “Inscribe us for life, O God” is a common prayer repeated during each of our High Holy Day services, and recited at one additional service each year – tonight, on Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Return (or Repentance), as we did a few moments ago on page 48.

We have heard and sung these words before; the image is powerful, and emotional, the more so when sung so beautifully by our choir. What I thought I would explore this evening is the meaning behind the image – because it is so easy to recite well-known texts that sometimes they lose the power of prayer, if they roll too easily off the lips.

For being here must mean more than just reciting texts or even hearing beautiful music or repeating worship patterns that go back into antiquity.

Sometimes during these High Holy Days I share with you some of my thinking about the great themes of Judaism, or about the world in which we live. Tonight I want the Holy Day liturgy to do the talking. I would like these services of worship to talk to you, not about the world, but about you who live in this world. Our services can speak directly to us, if we but let them.

The special prayer we inserted on page 48 reads: “Remember us for life, O Sovereign who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, Living God” –23 words in English, only 11 words in Hebrew: *Zachreinu l’chayim melech chafetz b’chayim, v’chatveinu b’sefer hachayim, l’ma-ancha Elohim chayim.*” A very short prayer, packing much meaning.

First, *Zachreinu Lachayim* – not “remember me,” but “remember us.” Every time we utter these words – 7 times during the High Holy Days – we must recognize that we’re not alone. We affirm that the hope to life is just as strong in others as it is in us. We do not, dare not, cannot pray only for ourselves alone.

“Us” is all humankind. “Us” is the land of Israel – now six and a half million Jews still facing an existential threat against forces that are stronger than ever, and more insidious, accompanied by the demoralizing struggle from within to balance the tensions of preserving Jewish values in a Jewish nation committed to remaining a strong democracy. “Us” is Israel, and we cannot say those words unless we strengthen with our deeds our brothers and sisters there who pray this night exactly as do we, *Zachreinu lachayim*, “Remember us unto life.”

Remember us. We’ll be reading Leviticus 19 on Yom Kippur afternoon, including how we must welcome strangers on exactly the same basis as citizens – because we were strangers in Egypt who knew about being without class and worse. “Us” includes refugees and “us” includes the entire LGBT community, and the full array of colors and diverse backgrounds that have made our country great. Making America “great” is not about walls, but bridges – and easing the burden of those who struggle for life is part of our prayer, “remember us unto life, O God.” Thus “us” includes poor families in American ghettos struggling to earn a livelihood, and a chance to live in something better than the slums to which the color of their skin all too often condemns them.

And “us” extends to our human capacity, if only we could work together, to feed those who are hungry; those who will fast on Yom Kippur not because they choose to, or are even Jewish, but because there’s just nothing to eat.

The words “Remember us unto life” have meaning, more than at times we want to know.

And then there’s the phrase that follows: *Melech chafetz bachayim*, O Sovereign Who delights in life.” Our God is a God of life, not of death. Our God does not die for others, nor offer up His children or His child in sacrifice – and we do not have to die to find God. We do not have to die to find salvation or redemption, grace or mercy or reward.

For us, life is not a curse, but a blessing. We are not born in sin, but with a clean slate – and though we cannot control the date of our birth or the date of our birth, we have control over the days in between. Yet unlike in some religions, life is not seen as a period of trial – some dark and drafty vestibule wherein we sit impatiently, awaiting our admission to a better world beyond. The good name we receive is really entirely up to us or, as we will read from Torah on Yom Kippur morning, “See, I have set before you life

and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore, choose life that you may live, you and your seed.” No wonder we refer to God as *melech chafetz chayim*, the Sovereign who delights in life.

Finally, *V’chatveinu b’sefer Hachayim*, we pray that we might be inscribed in the Book of Life. It’s an ancient concept, the Book of Life. Our ancestors believed that our fate would be sealed, though the power is ours to repent and turn in new ways.

The concept of Book of Life is elaborated in another High Holy Day prayer, which begins with this paragraph:

“On the first day of the year it is inscribed, and on the Day of Atonement it is sealed: How many shall pass away, and how many shall be born; who shall live and who shall die; who at the full measure of days, and who before it. Who shall perish by fire, and who by water; who by the sword, and who by wild beasts...” and so forth.

Our forebears literally trembled in reciting this prayer, in dread and foreboding. Compare with today, when the Book of Life is often reduced to a greeting card sentiment – the Jewish New Year cards that say “L’shana tova tikateivu,” “May you be inscribed for a good year.”

Now I do not see a great ledger in the skies wherein my fate is written, signed and sealed; Personally, I take all religious language as metaphor. But the symbolism is powerful, and it says many things.

It says to me: “You are recorded! You count!” What you say is more than words whispered to the wind, or printed by the millions on greeting cards. What you are is something more than a pebble on a beach. What you do has, somehow, an effect. You might not know this, but it is so. You have an effect upon those you know, and upon those you do not know. Everything you do results in something, good or bad, helpful or hurtful, here or there. You are recorded. And you do the recording – you do it with your life.

It says to me: “You are related! Your life is attached to every other life. You and all mankind are bound up in the same book, attached by the same binding. Your entry is part of the story, and part of the worth of it.”

It says to me: “You are responsible!” You cannot know how many pages are allotted to you, but you can determine what is written on them. Not the length of your life, but the quality of it. It is for this you are responsible.

These are the thoughts that whisper to me on hearing that prayer.

Is it so difficult to imagine all mankind recorded somehow, somewhere, some way that what we are and what we do has meaning?

There will be a day when someone will discover, or uncover, or stumble upon the chapter of our times; not every page of every life, but the chapter of our times. They will read, wonder and evaluate – and pass judgment – just as we should be doing ourselves during these holy days. In those days, the book will be closed, beyond editing or amendment. Time itself will have sealed the book.

But for us who are here, the Book of Life is not yet sealed. Not yet. And we still have time, perhaps, to make our pages worthy. We do not know, we cannot know, what time we have left, you or I. A year has passed. It will not come again. Has that not meaning? We are older than we were. Has that not meaning? We are one year older now. Are we one year nobler, too? Are we one year kinder? One year wiser? We are one year closer to the end. Are we one year closer to our goals? To our God? Has this not meaning? That is why we say, with urgency, “Inscribe us in the Book of life.”

The prayer ends: *L'ma-an Elohim Chayim*, “For Your sake, O God of Life.” These words cry out that life is sacred; life is precious. Anyone who prays these words commits himself or herself to reverence human life; protect the weak; aid the poor; lift up the fallen and defend the victims of life’s cruelty. “For Your sake, O God of life.”

We have prayed this little prayer a thousand times. Tonight that prayer is ours. Having heard the words we must now, with our lives, begin to make them true.

Zachreinu l'chayim melech chafetz b'chayim, v'chatveinu b'sefer hachayim, l'ma-ancha Elohim chayim. “Remember us for life, O Sovereign who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, Living God.”

Amen