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### **Your Book of Life is a Memoir**

On Erev Rosh HaShana, I spoke about the 50th Anniversary of the Moon Landing. You may have heard this urban legend:

When NASA first started sending astronauts into space, they realized that the ball-point pen would not work at zero gravity. The story has it that after two years and a one million dollar investment, a new pen was invented that could write in space. When confronted with the same problem, the story goes, the Russians used a pencil.

Though my High Holiday sermons are typed by the time I stand here, I typically begin with hand-written notes and outlines on a lined pad (preferably yellow); pencil markings adorn the margins of my drafts. I feel particularly engaged with my thoughts and ideas when I write by hand.

In a recent book about technology, a professor of English notes: "Email has become so prevalent in our lives. [But] how much richer old-fashioned letters are. An email is like a letter shorn of almost everything people liked about letters: the feel and smell of stationary, the confident authority of letterhead, the art of penmanship, the closing signature in the writer's hand."

My mother wrote in a soft and lovely cursive. When I come across one of her many hand-written birthday cards or notes, saved for decades, my memory of her washes over me far more than the meaning of the words themselves.

Indeed, a person's signature is as unique as they are. Hand-writing is a window into a person's soul.

I recently learned that January 23rd is "National Hand-Writing Day," honoring the birthday of John Hancock, the first signer of the Declaration of Independence. It is a day to celebrate the virtues of hand-writing.

Nonetheless, today the tendency is to compose notes and letters, even shopping lists, at a computer keyboard or by tapping a finger on the screen of our phones. It is often neater and more legible; our ideas may feel more organized that way. At a keyboard we can rearrange the paragraphs or change the font with a few clicks. The finished product looks more polished and professional.

On the other hand, in ways our words can become a little less personal, less relevant, less connected to our souls and spirits when we toss aside our pencils or our million-dollar pens - whether literally or figuratively.

There is one set of books that can never be typed, computer-generated or mass produced. These books are heavier than any other volume; they are filled with more meaning and urgency than all the books in a library.

The Talmud explains:

*“On Rosh HaShana, three books are opened in Heaven: one for the thoroughly wicked; one for the thoroughly righteous and one for those in-between. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life; the completely wicked are immediately inscribed in the Book of Death. The fate of those in between [most of us, I’m quite sure] is suspended until the [closing of the gates] at the end of Yom Kippur.”* (Rosh HaShana 16b, 32b)

Just as a scribe counts each letter when a Torah scroll is written, the traditional image depicts God, keeping count and filling the Books of Life and Death, with some cosmic, divine quill and ink.

On the mornings of Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, we hear the haunting musical setting as the Cantor chants, *“Unetaneh Tokef kedushat hayom... Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day; it is awesome and full of dread...”* The ancient words are terrifying and theologically problematic. The traditional liturgy warns, “who shall live and who shall die in the new year.” I wrestle with these words and the image of these Books on high. “On this day the prayerbook continues], You write and You seal, You record and recount, You remember deeds long forgotten. You open the book of our days.... **V’chotam yad kol-adam bo.**” These last few words have changed everything about the Book of Life for me this season. The words were there all along, but somehow, this is the first year I actually noticed them. **“V’chotam yad kol-adam bo, Chotam-yad,** the stamp of the hand of each human being is in [the book].”

While God may be the publisher of the Book of Life, the words are written **[b’]Chotam-yad** by our own hand and we are its author. The letters and words are not typed neatly nor penned by anyone but ourselves. I understand these words to direct each one of us to (figuratively) lift a simple pencil or pen to compose our own Book of Life. On this sacred night, we write and we sign with our own signature.

Rabbi Rena Blumenthal wrote: “Our book [may read like] an ungainly mess full of random encounters, unexpected dead ends, irrevocable mistakes. Yet we cling to the story of our lives, searching for purpose and connection, longing to discern and then do what is right, striving to weave coherent narratives out of the frayed fibers of experience.”

This season calls us to power-off the screens and replace keyboards with our own handwriting. Writing by hand, a font cannot disguise us or hide us from ourselves. Our Book of Life is not concerned with chronological facts, or computer generated lists of our deeds and possessions. It is not a spreadsheet or even biography. This Yom Kippur I understand our Book of Life to be a **memoir**. When we compose a memoir, we consider our lives from different angles and

perspectives; we assemble scattered pieces into a whole, as a quilter sews individual squares into a pattern. Exploring our own stories with new eyes, writing with a new pencil, so to speak, prepares us for the New Year.

When we write with a pencil or pen, literally or figuratively, we have the opportunity to regain a sense of self, to uncover meaning and insight. Through **memoir**, we can find the path back to ourselves; we can provide meaning for others around us. Through memoir, we can find our place in the world and bring voice to the silenced.

Tonight this is the meaning of **Chotem Yad**, crafting and creating our own narratives. Reflecting this way can be both revealing and healing.

I wrote my first memoir when I was in fifth grade. Though I didn't label it as a memoir at the time. I called it, "Old Friends Are Best," adopting the title from a quotation I found, "*Old friends are best. King James used to call for his old shoes; they were the easiest on his feet.*" The summer before fifth grade on visiting day at camp, my parents told me that we would be moving in the upcoming school year. The move was 13 miles away but for me it could have been 13,000 miles. I was surprised and sad and scared. When I wrote my story, I began with the day I was told about the move; it included the letter my mother wrote to me at camp, trying to reassure and comfort me. I wrote about my friends and my reluctant agreement to move with my family. It ended with a very tentative hope that I would survive this traumatic time in my ten-year-old life.

I still recall that composing that brief memoir allowed me to express the sadness I felt and freed me to look forward to the future. "Old Friends are Best" has become one small but significant chapter, in my own Book of Life.

Psychologists suggest that by turning the events of our lives into language actually effects changes in our brains and immune systems. Writing makes us more human and humane. As we compose our words, we are choosing life, adding to our Book of Life.

Looking back from the vantage point of the present, we can connect the dots among experiences we have had. Only then can we understand the present and anticipate the future. For we cannot know where we are going, without knowing where we have been.

The beauty and power of composing the memoirs of our lives is akin to a concept called "Sankofa" of a community in West Africa. Sankofa means, "*It is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot.*" Sankofa teaches: "Reach back to achieve your full potential as you move forward. Whatever has been lost, forgotten, or stripped away can be reclaimed, revived, and preserved."

As we write our own books, notes in the margins that are meaningful and helpful find their place; the erasures do not disappear entirely but they don't have to continue to take up

valuable space on the page. In memoir, we may ultimately find that the jagged pieces of our lives begin to make sense.

This summer, as we commemorated several events which occurred 50 years ago in 1969, the New York Times Book Review compiled a list of “The 50 Best Memoirs of the Past 50 Years.”

One of them is a 2013 memoir of Sonali Deraniyagala called Wave. It describes the tragic death of one woman’s sons, husband and parents in the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka. She herself survived by clinging to a branch. Her words recount her terror and her grief. As the reviewer notes, “[The author’s] return to life was gradual, tentative and difficult; she learned the only way out of her unbearable anguish was to remember what had happened and to keep it close.”

The process of writing this chapter in her Book of Life, her memoir, provided the path and direction she needed.

We, too, benefit from including all points in the past, even those that are difficult or exceedingly painful, not as footnotes, but as integral chapters of our lives. Compiling an incomplete Book of Life can leave us broken and fragmented too. As author, Brene Brown, wrote: “Owning our story can be hard, but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it.” In our Book of Life, all narratives find their place. Composing our books can bring meaning not only to ourselves, but to others if we choose to share them.

Temple Grandin’s memoir, Thinking in Pictures, documents the insights she gained from her personal experience as an individual on the autism spectrum. The Times explains, “Memoirs are valued, in part, for their ability to open windows onto experiences other than our own, and few do that as dramatically as [Grandin].” Oliver Sacks, writing in the introduction to her book, explains that “Grandin’s voice came from a place which had never had a voice, never been granted real existence before.”

The freedom to write our own memoirs and stories is noteworthy. For example, for many generations, those who wrote about women’s lives suppressed the truth of the female experience. A study of women’s autobiographies of the 19th century reveals that even the authors themselves were not free to speak their own truths.

When we pick up our own pencil or pen, in the privacy of our minds, we are free to compose with authenticity and candor. When we write in our own handwriting, we decide what stories to tell. This grants us a power over our own lives that no one can take from us. When we connect moments and sparks of holiness into the whole, we can leave a mark on our souls and in our world.

On this night of nights, I take this to be the message of the ancient words: *“Unetaneh Tokef kedushat hayom... Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day; On this day...You write and You seal, You record and recount, You remember deeds long forgotten. You open the book of our days.... **V’chotam yad kol-adam bo**, the stamp of the hand of each one of us is there.”*

I pray that we each find the courage to look back at the year and years behind us, that we find meaning in the events of our lives which will guide us into the new year. I wish you "*Gamar Chatima Tova.*" May your Book of Life be inscribed with the memoir of your days; may you sign it *b'chotem yad*, with the strength and beauty of your own hand.

SOURCES INCLUDE:

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