

The Book of Life (Well Lived)

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We had an interesting Talmudic-style debate at morning minyan today.

It was about the Book of Life into which we pray to be inscribed during the High Holidays.

One participant, Shelley from Chicago, asked: Why does our High Holidays mahzor call it “the Book of Lives Well Lived” instead of the plain old “Book of Life”?

“We’re praying just to be alive next year,” she said. “What’s with this ‘life well lived’ business? Isn’t that going too far?”

Howard responded: “Maybe it’s aspirational. We don’t want to just be alive. We want to live our lives well.”

It turns out both of them were onto something.

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The prayer they were discussing comes from the Amidah:

“Zochreinu l’chayyim, melekh chofetz bachayyim, v’khotveinu b’sefer hachayyim l’maankha Elohim chayyim.”

“Remember us for life, O Sovereign who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life for Your sake, O God of life.”

This aligns with what Shelley remembers: that some of us will live and some will die in the coming year.

That truth is scary—especially because it’s beyond our control. We long to see another year, but there are no guarantees.

So, the prayer expresses two contradictory emotions:

One, the humble acknowledgment that our fate isn’t in our hands. And two, the leap of faith that perhaps, through *t’shuvah*, we might influence our destiny.

The Talmud says:

“Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: one for the wicked, one for the righteous, and one for those in between.

"The completely righteous are immediately written and sealed for life; the completely wicked are immediately written and sealed for death. The in-betweeners are suspended until Yom Kippur: If they merit it, they are written for life; if not, they are written for death." (Rosh Hashanah 16b)

Since none of us is purely righteous or purely wicked, the Talmud's point is that each of us, in this liminal moment, can do *t'shuvah* and find our way into the Book of Life.

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Of course, we Jews have long struggled with this theology. Good people die every year, sometimes far too soon. We can't believe it's simply because they didn't do enough *t'shuvah*.

So, we've reinterpreted the image of the book. We know it's possible to be physically alive yet not truly *living*.

Too many of us go through the motions but feel hollow inside.

We compromise our values for comfort or success.

We act from convenience instead of conviction.

This, I think, is what Howard meant. The "Book of Lives Well Lived" isn't about survival into next year. It's about how we live while we're here.

It's a prayer for purpose, courage, integrity, and living in alignment with our values.

In this sense, *t'shuvah* is a chance to recalibrate and become the person we aspire to be.

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Interestingly, even the sages of our liturgy were undecided about which version to use.

While the standard prayer today is the one that says, "*b'sefer chayyim*—inscribe us in the Book of Life," some early prayer books actually say "*b'sefer chayyim tovim*—inscribe us in the Book of Good Life." Or, more poetically, "the Book of Lives Well Lived."

It turns out, today's minyan debate is actually an old one—and Shelley and Howard were both right.

So...What are your deepest hopes for the year ahead?

To live long enough to see your grandchild's bar mitzvah or graduation or wedding?

To walk with strength and enjoy time with friends?

To be bolder, kinder, more generous?

To live more truly in line with your values?

The good news is: There's no wrong answer. Because as the prayer says: God is "*melekh chofetz bachayyim*—the Sovereign who delights in life."

In all life. In every way.