

Yom Kippur 5769  
Sermon Given by Rabbi Paula

L'shanah tovah Tikateyvu May you be inscribed in the book of life.  
Have you ever wondered, what is this book of life?

Picture this:

God is a very old man with a white beard, or an old woman with a white beard, sitting on a big golden throne. He's wearing a silver garment, ok, she would be wearing a flowing dress with heels, looking down from the heavens, with white clouds flying around, holding two enormous books, the book of Life and the Book of Death. God's even got a fabulous pen used to record our fate for the coming year.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we pray the Uneh taneh tokef, an incredibly vivid prayer- which asks who shall live, who shall die, who by fire, who by water? The prayer imagines a heavenly court where God is judge and jury and God decides if we are inscribed for another year of life.

This is how we speak to God in this prayer:

On this day, Your throne is set in place by the power of love, and you come forth to govern in truth. It is You who shall write; You Who shall seal what is written, You who shall read and You who shall number all souls. You alone can remember what we have forgotten; it is You who shall open the Book of Remembrance but its contents shall speak for themselves for it bears the imprint of us all, which our deeds have inscribed...

Since on Yom Kippur we make confessions, I have to come clean about something:

I don't really believe that God is some divine being with a white beard, sitting on a gold throne. I have some trouble with the image of God in the heavens looking down from big white clouds with two gigantic books, and a pen. I don't imagine God having hands and eyes, feet and arms. For some of us thinking of God as witnessing all of our actions and keeping track of how we're doing may hold us to a higher standard. I understand that this theological belief can be helpful. But right now, this year, I am having trouble with this image and, I don't believe that this divine presence is watching my every move, and monitoring my inner most thoughts making lists of who will live and who will die.

So what is the Une taneh tokef prayer saying?

I believe the Une taneh tokef prayer is pushing us to engage the reality of our own death so that we can make choices about our lives. In this prayer we're forced to realize we cannot control whether we live or die. But here's the key- what we can control is the way we're going to live over the course of the year.

I read this prayer as a metaphor that forces us to engage in the difficult work of self-scrutiny. And all of the possible outcomes described later in this prayer are what defines the human condition. We all know that we're going to die and that we mostly likely won't be given the power to choose how we die. The question this prayer raises for me is how am I going to choose to live?

In essence, I believe that we are being asked to write ourselves into the book of life. When I hear these words they remind me that I have a responsibility to make my life count. I hold the book and the pen in my own hands and I decide the way I want to be inscribed for

the coming year. I can't control how long I live but I can decide how I live.

Judaism is a series of texts; practices and rituals that help us add meaning to our lives. It's up to us to explore the tools of our traditions and mine them for their deep potential for transformation. For Jewish practice to have a lasting impact in our lives we have to uncover and bring meaning to the intentions behind our rituals. They have been invested with power over the centuries. That being said we can spend hours in the sanctuary on Yom Kippur, fast, go through the motions and say the proper prayers and that may help us feel that we have fulfilled our obligation but they won't truly move us, or change us, unless we spend time discerning what they really mean and how they apply in our own lives. I'm not saying that praying the prayers and fasting doesn't have the power to influence our lives, but their potential to change us is so much greater if we take the time to unpack their meaning.

If I were to ask you about the primary symbol associated with the High Holidays most of you would probably say the Shofar. We look forward to hearing the Shofar blown. It's a highlight in the High Holiday services. It's the Shofar that wakes us up on Rosh Hashanah calling us to turn back to our highest selves and restore our souls. It's the wail of the Shofar that reminds us of the need to listen to the voice inside that we may not be able to hear during the rest of the year. To ask ourselves how we can improve our relationships with each other and ourselves. How we can reflect upon our actions and be sure that we are living with integrity and purpose. It's the sound of the Shofar that helps us root out the unhealthy patterns and

behaviors that lead to discord in our families and communities. It's the Shofar blast that awakens us to return to what we know is the more powerful, compassionate, loving and peaceful path of living.

Have we had a wake up call this year? And if so, what have we learned? Many of us only change our behaviors when we are confronted with a crisis. We have a health problem, we loose a job or a loved one dies. And we are motivated to reevaluate whether or not we are living in a way that reflects our real values. The curve of the Shofar is a hint towards seeing the way our lives follow unexpected turns in the road. Life doesn't proceed along a straight path and the Shofar reminds us that in the face of the unexpected we can listen to that familiar voice calling us back to ourselves.

My husband Aryeh told me a story about a woman he met at a retreat. She had suffered from Carpel tunnel syndrome and experienced great pain in her wrists. She went to see her doctor who had known her for many years. She expected him to refer her to surgery or some other dramatic medical intervention. Much to her surprise, he said to her, "What is it that you used to enjoy doing that you no longer do?" She told him that many years ago she loved to paint and draw. He told her she should begin painting again. She thought he was crazy. That's quite a prescription. After some time she decided to try his advice. As she explained it to Aryeh, when she began painting the pain in her wrist began to decrease. She rediscovered her passion and so felt more alive. This doctor must have had a sense that she needed to be more in touch with the activities that brought her pleasure and joy. I give great credit to her doctor for seeing something beyond his patient's physical symptoms.

He understood that this woman's pain had a source beyond what surgery or medicine could heal. And she chose to embrace a part of her life she had left behind. When she started painting she connected with the life-giving act of creativity and in doing so became more alive. Ironically, Aryeh met her at a movement retreat and she was fully capable of participating without pain in her wrists. If she hadn't shared her story he would never have known that she had spent years of her life with debilitating pain.

The call of the Shofar, the ram's horn also symbolizes the wake-up call Abraham received, as he stood above Isaac bound to the altar, ready for sacrifice. This voice pulled him away from the brink of tragedy and helped him see the ram stuck in a bush, a more suitable sacrifice.

When I was a child I remember there was a time when all of the children were encouraged to leave the room. The Yizkor service was going to begin. As an adult I am now in the room and the Yizkor service carries great power for me. The root of the word Yizkor is zachor, memory. The ritual of Yizkor is another way we connect with the purpose of life on Yom Kippur. Through remembering our loved ones, we return our thoughts to the legacy they left for us. What were the gifts they shared with us when they were still physically present in our lives? And how can we embody that legacy in our own lives? During the Yizkor service we are reminded that while we are alive we are to contemplate what impact we want to have in the world. How do we want to be remembered after we die?

The last service of the day, Neilah, takes its name from the Hebrew word na'al, which means lock. As Yom Kippur comes to an

end, the books of life and death are closing. Is there a request or a blessing that has been left unsaid? As the sun sets, we feel a sense of urgency to complete the work we are asked to do during the Ten Days of Awe. We are invited to dig deep and reveal the purpose of our lives, commit to the changes we want to make for the coming year and reveal the gifts we carry that have yet to be shared.

During the Neilah service this evening, we will invite you to come up to the bimah and offer a silent prayer before the open ark. As we invest our rituals and practices with meaning we also invest particular places with special power. When I stand before the open ark I feel the responsibility that comes with this honor. And I have the sense that what I say, do or feel in that sacred place makes a difference. It's hard to describe but I can sense a connection with Jews who have stood before the ark in years past and Jews that stand before arks all over the world on this holy day. I encourage you to accept this awesome invitation. Take some time during the day to create the intention you want to bring with you when you come up to the ark this evening. This is the first year we are extending this invitation and I hope that every year a few more people will be moved to experience this traditional practice. Even if you're not sure about how you want to use your time before the ark, come forward anyway. You may be surprised by what you might receive.

Rabbi Shalom Noach Barzovsky was among the most influential of contemporary Chassidic rebbes, and his impact was felt among Chassidim and non-Chassidim alike. He taught that each and every person has the ability to become a tzaddik, a righteous person and according to his understanding, a tzaddik is written into the book of

life during the High Holidays. This in itself is not a radical concept. But he continued to explain that it's up to us to inscribe ourselves in this book of life. We do the writing ourselves. We determine our level of righteousness. It's in our hands to enliven the year ahead and we do this through revealing and remaining true to our purpose. Do we want to inscribe ourselves for a year of living life to the fullest? Well, it looks like this Chassidic Rebbe and I are on the same page, so to speak. Let's pick up the pen while the book is still open and inscribe ourselves for the coming year.

When you and I gather this evening at the Neilah service and we hear the last tekiyah g'dolah -the long wail of the final notes of the Shofar, may the sound echo in the days ahead calling us back to ourselves so that we always remember to live our days to the fullest.