

## The Book of Life: Can We Believe?

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5784

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“Secular rabbi” is an oxymoron. Or at least it sounds like one. But there she was, sitting right in front of me, in a group of five rabbis discussing rituals for death and mourning. Galit was explaining that she does not recite the Kaddish. She doesn’t believe in God, so proclaiming God’s sovereignty and holiness would be false, and she will not tell lies.

I asked my new friend if we might reinterpret traditional prayers to make meaning of them, even if we do not believe the words literally. For example, nineteenth century American Reform prayerbooks eliminated resurrection, the ancient belief that, after messianic redemption, the dead will rise from their graves—flesh restored to bones, souls to bodies—to rejoice together for all eternity. A half century ago, though, the editors of *Gates of Prayer* restored the Hebrew phrase praising a God Who “gives life to the dead,” reinterpreting it in English as a hope that God “quickens those who have forgotten how to live” and enables “parched men and women [to] flower toward the sun.”<sup>i</sup>

Early Reform Jews were hardly the first to question whether resurrection may be taken literally. Maimonides, our greatest medieval sage, seems not to have believed it.<sup>ii</sup> He encouraged figurative interpretation of even the Torah—how much more, a rabbinic teaching such as resurrection.<sup>iii</sup>

Perhaps you’ve noticed that I’ve begun my sermon much earlier in the service than I do ordinarily. Those who are familiar with our liturgy may recognize that I’ve seated you right in the middle of the *Amidah*, the central prayer of our service, typically recited while standing. The reason is that we are about to utter the most difficult prayer of our High Holy Days. It’s called *Un’taneh Tokef*. While the Hebrew name may be unfamiliar, the English words are well known: “Who shall live and who shall die...Who by fire and who by water; ... who by famine and who by drought; who by earthquake and who by plague,” and so forth.

I suspect that few among us believe that God utilizes the High Holy Days as an opportunity to judge who will and who will not live until next Rosh Hashanah. We are comforted nonetheless by the prayer’s climax, “But through return to the right path, through prayer and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree.” In other words, if we “do the High Holy Days right,” we will be inscribed in God’s Book of Life for yet another year.

*Mishkan HaNefesh* offers us alternative words on the left sides of the page, the kind of figurative interpretation endorsed by Maimonides. Most years, that’s

what I read. The traditional words feel too frightening, and I fear retraumatizing those in our midst have sought refuge in Judaism after religious upbringings of “hellfire and brimstone.”

Two weeks before I met Galit, that secular rabbi, I attended a lecture by my teacher, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, who suggested that we make room in our lives for myths we do not believe. People do that all the time. He offered a simple example: The Christian child, at a certain age, knows that their parents brought the gifts, but they believe that Santa brought them all the same. They sacrifice neither the magic for the logic nor the rational for the mystical. “The person who embraces myth,” Hartman insists, “is not an idiot.” For **Rabbi** Hartman, the quintessential example is the Exodus. “I cannot believe that the Exodus **happened**, but I cannot live without the Exodus.”<sup>iv</sup>

You have heard **that** sermon from me before: The lack of evidence for the Exodus as an historical event is overwhelming, but its power as a religious truth is indispensable: We are blessed with a measure of freedom and privilege. As a result, we are commanded to bring liberation to others and to work toward ultimate salvation for all God’s creation.

Similarly, to paraphrase Rabbi Hartman, I believe with perfect faith that God is **not** sitting on a heavenly throne, determining who will live to next Rosh Hashanah and who will not—and if not, by what means death will come. Worse, we could be forgiven if we imagined that **nobody** will be inscribed in the Book of Life, whether we are to be consumed by the fires of climate change or the fires of hatred—between America’s tribes, not to mention those of the Jewish people, in Israel, around the world, and even in our congregation. Sure, most of us might make it to next year, but the long-term outlook does not look good—for America, for Israel, or for our planet.

We are not the first to question whether God really punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. Dr. Alyssa Gray, a professor at Hebrew Union College, asks: “Is there innocent suffering? No (Deuteronomy); yes (Job). Do or should descendants suffer for the sins of their ancestors? Yes (Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy); no (Jeremiah, Ezekiel).” Turning to the Talmudic sages, Dr. Gray notes that they “acknowledge that some individuals die unfairly, before their time and even because of what the [Talmud] unnerving portrays as supernatural ‘bookkeeping’ incompetence in the tracking of human lives.”<sup>v</sup>

Bookkeeping incompetence? That strikes close to home for people spending sacred holy days asking to be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life! But we are moderns. We are rational, so we aren’t really surprised that God does not reliably

reward the righteous or punish sinners. We are right there with our thoroughly baffled sages and the mixed messages of our Bible.

Considering these questions, Rabbi David Stern's mind turned to Maui in the days after America's deadliest wildfire in over a century. He told of a part of the island far from the fires, the north coast, where the late U.S. Poet Laureate M.S. Merwin found a barren wasteland in 1977, the devastating consequence of a decades of environmental abuse. Rabbi Stern recounts the words of geobiologist A. Hope Jahren, who tells of Merwin's response: He "planted a sapling in the blight, then got up the next day and planted another one. The day after he did the same, and the day after that also. His trees made soil, and the soil made more trees. He planted a tree every day on that land for years, until his friends took over the planting under his direction." Forty years later, when Jahren came to the place now known as The Merwin Conservancy, she found that what was once a wasteland had become "a verdant throng: 400 different species of tropical trees all springing from the same sumptuous soil."<sup>vi</sup>

We could respond that Merwin did not end climate change and its devastating impact. His work did not even prevent destruction of human and animal life, property, and environment on his own island.

Did he do enough? Do any of us? Merwin lived **as if** his work had meaning and value, without ever being able to **know** that to be true. None of us can. And still, we affirm: Making a positive impact in this world **is** good—and, if there is no tangible benefit beyond our own lifetimes, still, we must live **as if** there can be.

Rabbi Stern calls our attention to a Talmudic passage. Rabbi Eliezer instructs his students, "Repent one day before your death," prompting the students to ask how they might know when that day might come. Rabbi Eliezer replies, "All the more so: One should repent today, lest death come tomorrow; and by following this advice, we will spend our entire lives in a state of repentance."<sup>vii</sup>

Rabbi Eliezer is, on the one hand, expressing skepticism about God's "bookkeeping," that is, "who shall live and who shall die." On the other hand, he insists that we live **as if** we absolutely believed that "repentance, prayer, and charity temper judgment's severe decree."

M.S. Merwin did not plant with certainty that the results would change the world or even his corner of it. We cannot know that our acts of goodness will turn down the heat—in our nation, among our Jewish people, or on our all-too-hot planet; heck, even in our congregation. Still, "through return to the right path, through prayer and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness" of this world, **as if** there really were a Book of Life.

Let us end, then, with the poetry of M.S. Merwin:

On the last day of the world  
I would want to plant a tree

what for  
not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit  
is not the one that was planted

I want the tree that stands  
in the earth for the first time

with the sun already  
going down

and the water  
touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead  
and the clouds passing

one by one  
over its leaves.

Let us all plant this year—with prayer, with righteous giving, and by living as God calls us to live. Then, may we each be inscribed, **as if** in the Book of Life, for a good year.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Chaim Stern, Editor, *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook*, New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975, pp. 255-6.

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Donniel Hartman, “Creed and the Liberal Jew,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 4, 2023.

<sup>iii</sup> Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* II:25.

<sup>iv</sup> Hartman.

<sup>v</sup> Alyssa Gray, J.D., Ph.D., “Uncertainty, Action, and Faith: Talmudic Theological Musings for the Year(s) of COVID,” *Scriptions: Jewish Thoughts and Responses to Covid-19*, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, <https://scriptions.huc.edu/scriptions/uncertainty-action-and-faith-talmudic-theological-musings-for-the-years-of-covid>. The reference to bookkeeping incompetence is from the Babylonian Talmud, *Hagigah* 4b-5a.

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<sup>vi</sup> A. Hope Jahren, “The Poet Who Planted Trees,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/opinion/w-s-merwin-poet-trees.html>.

<sup>vii</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 153a. Rabbi Stern shared these observations in a sermon at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, “Planting,” on August 11, 2023, and in “Sermons for 5784: Preaching to the Heart and Mind,” a Central Conference of American Rabbis webinar, August 17, 2023.