



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANAH 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 15, 2015
Rosh Hashanah - Day 2

**Is the Book of Life Written
in Braille?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5776*

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ABSTRACT

Books are written in many genres. We are the People of the Book. We should know.

There are books of fiction, non-fiction and science-fiction. There are detective stories, murder mysteries, tragedies, comedies, biographies and anthologies. There are handbooks, guidebooks, self-help books and coffee-table books. There are children’s books, young adult, old adult, and average adult books. All of these books come in a plethora of languages. And many exist only in ether – what we call e-books.

But, today, on this second day of Rosh Hashanah, there is one book we need to talk about more than any other. This is a book that our Sages tell us is open today, at the beginning of the New Year.

That book is the Book of Life.

Its profound secret may be found in the story of Louis Braille, the man who changed reading and writing forever, and who truly opened the eyes of the world to its possibilities and dreams.

IS THE BOOK OF LIFE WRITTEN IN BRAILLE?

1. Well Wishes

Ketivah Vachatimah Tova – May we all be written (*ketivah*) and sealed (*vachatimah*) for good (*tova*).

This is the traditional and quintessential Rosh Hashanah blessing: on this day of creation, may we all be written and sealed for a good and healthy year.

The blessing however does not state where we should be written and sealed for good? Is it on Facebook? Twitter? Perhaps in graffiti script on a subway tunnel wall?

Nay, nay – we shall all be written and sealed in the Book of Life.

And speaking of books...

2. Joke Book (Humor)

I went to a bookstore the other day and asked the saleswoman, “Where’s the self-help section?”

She answered, “If I tell you, it will defeat the purpose.”

3. Book Genres

Books are written in many genres. And as People of the Book, we should know.

There are books of fiction, non-fiction and science-fiction. There are detective stories, murder mysteries, tragedies, comedies, biographies and anthologies. There are handbooks, guidebooks, self-help books and coffee-table books. There are children's books, young adult, old adult, and average adult books. All of these books come in a plethora of languages. And many exist only in ether – what we call e-books.

But, today, on this second day of Rosh Hashanah, there is one book that is on our minds more than any other.

The previously mentioned Book of Life.

What exactly is the Book of Life? Is it a literal book? Is it the only book on God's bookshelf?

Allow me to answer those questions with a moving story.

4. Seeing Deeper (Story)

This story begins 200 years ago in Coupvray, France, a small town some 20 miles east of Paris. The year is 1809. This is the year that Louis was born.

Louis was an inquisitive child, smart, intelligent and inventive. Louis wanted to be just like his dad, who was a leather expert and maker of horse equipment, such as saddles, bridles and reins.

As soon as he could walk, Louis spent time playing in his father's workshop. At the age of three, Louis was toying with some of the tools, trying to make holes in a piece of leather with an awl. Squinting closely at the surface, he pressed down hard to drive the point in, and the awl glanced across the tough leather and struck him in one of his eyes. A local physician bound and patched the affected eye and even arranged for Louis to be met the next day in Paris by a highly respected surgeon, but no treatment could save the damaged organ. The young boy suffered for weeks as the wound became severely infected; and then the infection spread to his other eye.

By the age of five Louis was completely blind in both eyes. His devoted parents made great efforts – quite uncommon for the era – to raise their youngest child in a normal fashion, and he prospered in their care. He learned to navigate the village and country paths with canes his father hewed for him, and he grew up seemingly at peace with his disability.

At age 10, Louis enrolled in one of the first schools for blind children in the world, the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris. At that time the Royal Institute was an underfunded, ramshackle affair, but it provided a relatively stable environment for blind children to learn and associate together.

The children were taught how to read by a system devised by the school's founder, Valentin Haüy. Not blind himself, Haüy was a committed philanthropist who devoted his life to helping the blind. He designed and manufactured a small library of books for the children embossing heavy paper with the raised imprints of Latin letters. Readers would trace their fingers over the text, comprehending slowly.

Louis was helped by the Haüy books, but he also despaired over their lack of depth: the amount of information within such books was necessarily small. And, because the raised letters were fashioned through a complex process using wet paper pressed against copper wire, the children could not hope to “write” by themselves.

Also, the handcrafted Haüy books came in uncomfortable sizes and weights. They were laboriously constructed, very delicate, and greatly expensive to produce. Despite their drawbacks, Haüy promoted their use with zeal. To him, the books presented a new and handsome system that would be readily approved by those with eyesight. Certainly nothing better existed. Louis and his schoolmates, however, could detect all too well the books' crushing limitations.

And then, in 1821, a former soldier named Charles Barbier visited the school. Barbier shared his invention called “night writing,” a code of twelve raised dots and dashes that could be interpreted entirely by the fingers, letting soldiers share information on the battlefield without needing light or having to speak. The captain's code turned out to be too complex for practical use, but it inspired Louis to develop a system of his own

Louis worked tirelessly on his ideas, and his system was largely completed three years later, when he was just fifteen years of age. He simplified Barbier's "night writing," maximizing its efficiency. He made uniform columns for each letter, discarded the dashes, and he reduced the twelve raised dots to six. Crucially, Louis's smaller cells were capable of being recognized as letters with a single touch of a finger.

Unbelievably, and heartbreakingly triumphant, Louis created his own raised-dot system by using an awl, the very same kind of implement that had blinded him.

At first, Louis's system remained rather obscure. Even at the Royal Institution, where Louis was named professor after he graduated, his system wasn't taught until after his death. Louis' system began to spread worldwide only in 1868, when a group of British men, the founders of the Royal National Institute for the Blind, took up the cause.

Now practically every country in the world uses Louis's reading system for the blind. Signs using Louis's system help blind people get around in public spaces. And, most important, blind people can communicate independently, without needing print. You will find Louis's system in elevators, airplanes, airports, and virtually any public space.

Today, they have displays for computers following Louis's system, so that someone with difficulty seeing can read by touch what the monitor says. There is also a vast Jewish library of sacred books in this system – from Torah, to Talmud, to prayer books.

Of course, we all know Louis by his last name – Braille, the name given to the system of writing he invented.

Louis Braille took the awl, the very same tool that blinded him, to create a revolution that would allow the blind to see.

What can Louis Braille and his revolution – giving eyes to the blind, to read and communicate independently – teach us today, on Rosh Hashanah, as the Book of Life sits open before the Heavenly Judge, the Holy One Blessed Be He?

5. The Talmud: Three Books

The Talmud¹ states that three books are opened before God on Rosh Hashanah – one for the utterly wicked (*reshoi'im gemurin*), one for the utterly good (*tzaddikim gemurin*), and one for the intermediates, in-betweeners (*beinunim*).

The good are written and sealed immediately for life. The wicked are written and sealed immediately for death. The in-betweeners are left suspended from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur; if they merit they are written into life, if they do not merit, they are written to death.

Before we continue with the Talmud, let me explain what is meant by the “Book of Life” and, God forbid, the “Book of Death:” Life and death in Torah refers to something much more than biological. It means spiritual life and death: True “life” is by connection – by being connected to eternal and immortal life, the divine source of all life. “Death” is defined by disconnection, becoming severed from the source life through living a wicked life, for the “wicked even in their lifetimes are considered dead.”²

Cause and effect. When we dedicate our lives to moral and ethical ends, when we sanctify our lives through G-d’s holy Torah and mitzvos, we become connected to the eternal source of all life – inscribed in the “book of life.” When, G-d forbid, someone lives an immoral life, he cuts himself off from his divine mission, disconnecting himself from the divine life supply which is the very source of his sustenance, and thereby gets inscribed in the “book of death.”

Now let us continue with the Talmud about the three books opened on Rosh Hashanah, for the good, the wicked and the intermediate:

Asked Rav Avin, “What is the scriptural verse that upholds this?” [And he answered quoting the Book of Psalms:] *May they be erased from the book of life, and may they not be inscribed with the righteous.*³ *May they be erased from the book, this refers to the book of the evil; of life, this refers to the book of the good; and may they not be inscribed with the righteous, this is the book of the in-betweeners.”*

¹ Rosh Hashanah 16b.

² Talmud Berochos 18b.

³ Psalms 69:29.

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak disagreed. [He cited the Book of Exodus:] *“But if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written.”*⁴ *erase me now* this refers to the book of the evil; *from Your book*, this refers to the book of the good; *which You have written*, this is the book of the in-betweeners.”

Contrast this with a later Talmudic passage⁵ which seems to imply that there are only two books, the Book of Life and the Book of Death.

So which is it? Are there three books, one for the good, one for the evil, and one for the in-between? Or are there two books, the Book of Life and the Book of Death?

6. Sfat Emet’s Explanation

The Sfat Emet⁶ asks this very question and answers as follows:

There is the Book of Life and the Book of Death. There aren’t three books for three different people, one for the good, one for evil and one for those in-between. Rather, each and every person has three books: one in which his good deeds are recorded; one in which his bad deeds are recorded; and one in which his intermediate deeds are recorded.

These three books are open on Rosh Hashanah as part of the person’s evaluation process, and all the person’s deeds are recorded in each of the respective three books: good deeds in the book of life (connection). Bad deeds in the book of death (disconnection). And the intermediate – in the book waiting to be determined by Yom Kippur.

Now, those who are utterly and completely good – i.e. never made a mistake – are written and sealed for life immediately. Those who are utterly and completely evil – i.e. never did a good thing in their lives – are written and sealed for death immediately. While the rest – all of us in-betweeners – are evaluated until Yom Kippur.

⁴ Exodus 32:32.

⁵ Rosh Hashanah 32b.

⁶ Commentary on the Talmud to Rosh Hashanah 16a.

7. The Sfat Emet's Proof (Optional)

The Sfat Emet draws his answer from the scriptural proof cited by Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak in the Talmud: Following the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses asked God to forgive the Jewish people for what they had done. When God refused, Moses declared: *Erase me now from Your book, which You have written.*

Erase me now – refers to all the wickedness and negativity in this world, which erases and blinds things from seeing clearly. This is the opposite of a book. Books are written, not erased. Books inform people and open them up to seeing things clearly. Books are revealing, not blinding. Books open minds, while erasers close them. *Erase me now* thus refers to bad deeds (such as hateful words or dishonesty), which are the opposite of Your book (of life), and these erasers – i.e. bad deeds – will surely be erased themselves. Says Moses to God: if all You see is evil in Your people, then erase me too from such a “book” only filled with erasers.

From Your book – refers to the holy Torah, the Book of Life. This is the opposite of erasing; this is the written and established reality. Your book, the Torah, the ultimate Book of Life, refers to the utterly righteous deeds we perform and these surely will live on for they are connected to the very life source itself.

You have written – refers to everything in life that is still being written, the everyday deeds that are in an intermediate state – in-between good and bad – our average, ordinary activities that are neither purely righteous nor absolutely hurtful. This covers the majority of living, from working to walking in the street, from eating to shopping, from sleeping to vacationing. The jury is out: will we infuse these intermediate deeds with Torah and mitzvot, with the divine and immortal breath of life, or will we do the opposite, erasing and “killing” our potential, negating our ability, and “blinding” ourselves to a higher truth in face of instant gratification. Will we write into reality truth and peace and life, or will we erase them (for is not writing them the same as erasing)?

Will we use the awls of life to blind the eye or to create languages and systems that will allow the blind to see? Will we allow the “norm” to blind us or will we do everything in our power to open the world’s eyes, allowing it to read, write and create?

Will we, in effect, write books, or erase them? Will we reveal or will we conceal? Will we take even our blind-spots and blinded moments redeem them by turning them into tools of communication?

Moses is effectively telling God that this struggle between writing and erasing, between the book and the internalization of it, is the struggle of humanity. If You, God, do not forgive the people from their iniquities and doom them to death, then I too deserve to be erased from this book. However, by allowing them hope to repent and redeem themselves, You God, are giving them the opportunity to transform their momentary blindness into a new vision.

This argument prevailed of course. And we might ask: Why? Why did God not erase Moses and Israel and start over

Perhaps the example of Braille can answer this question.

8. You Can Judge this Book by its Cover

Books are a great metaphor for existence.⁷

Existence is a book; every positive act causes new energy to be written; every “sin” causes some energy to be erased. Every good deed generates and writes a new chapter. Every bad act erases a chapter in the eternal narrative.

(Sure, *teshuvah*, repentance and return, allows us to refill or rewrite those “erased” spaces with even higher and deeper light, but at the outset, a “sin” is negative in that we could do so much better without).

There are intermediate acts for which the jury is still out – the process of writing itself which only the end book product will reveal if it’s the Book of Life or the opposite, the lead side of the pencil or the eraser side.

But perhaps there is even a deeper message here:

⁷ See Ralbag (Gershonides) to Exodus 32:32.

Ink letters may be erased or whited-out. Braille letters, however, like engraved letters, cannot be erased. The only way to destroy Braille letters is to destroy the pages of the book itself.

Moses told God (paraphrasing in so many words): “Your people Israel are written into the Book of Life; they are the letters that make up words of holiness. Yisroel is the acronym *yesh shishim riboi oisiyos l’Torah*, “there are 600,000 letters in the Torah,” for each Jew (of the 600,000 collective Jewish souls) is an integral letter in the Torah.⁸

But these letters aren’t written in ink. Oh no, these letters are inscribed, engraved; they are hewn into the pages of existence with an awl. Even when they transgress and are blinded,⁹ the Jews are akin to the letters of Braille, engraved and etched into the paper itself, part and parcel of the book. Destroying Israel is analogous to destroying the world. The only way to erase these letters of Braille is to destroy the book.”

But, in truth, when Moses communicated that message, he was talking to us just as much he was talking to God. Moses was reminding us that we aren’t written *onto* the Book of Life; we aren’t even written *into* the Book of Life. Rather, we *are* the Book of Life, just as letters of Braille become part and parcel of the page itself.

When we realize this level of connection, we regret any erasing we have done in the world – any blindness we may have caused ourselves or others – and we reach a place of life, vision and holiness. Then we are truly written into the Book of Life.

And when God sees that Israel realizes its true nature, God too reveals His “true nature,” which loves His people, His children, and He does not turn a “blind eye” to them. Instead, He forgives His people – “I have forgiven as you [Moses] have said”¹⁰ (as we will declare Yom Kippur eve following Kol Nidrei).

Rosh Hashanah, today, is when we realize and remember that we represent the Book of Life and commit to authoring its pages. And Yom Kippur, in one week, is when God smiles at our commitment and seals the book with a kiss.

⁸ Megaleh Amukos oifen 186.

⁹ See Talmud Sotah 3a: “A person does not commit a transgression unless the spirit of folly enters him,” blinding him from the truth.

¹⁰ Numbers 14:20.

9. Epilogue

Every book worth its spine has an epilogue, the story that continues after the book has been returned to the shelf.

The epilogue here may be the difference between words of ink that only those with open eyes can read, and the words of Braille, that even those whose physical eyes may be closed can still read with their fingers and with their souls.

Reading words of ink requires seeing; reading words of Braille requires feeling.

We may not see God and we may be blind to a higher reality. But every single Jew feels God with his or her heart and soul, especially during these Holy Days of Awe. The things that are seen may be erased; the things that are felt can never be erased.

The Book of Life is not written in ink; it is engraved in stone and written in Braille – that is, it is engraved, ingrained, etched and embedded into the essence of our being.

And this is truly eye-opening.

The story of the Jewish people is one for the books.

And each of our personal stories writes the next chapter of the Book of Life, which we have the privilege and responsibility to compose.

Yes my friends, we have the power and the ability to define and write the unfolding drama of our lives.

Ketivah Vachatimah Tova – May we truly and eternally be written and sealed into the Book of Life and may this story reach its apex immediately – enough suspense – when we all live happily ever after in the Land of our Promise!

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