

Erev Rosh Hashana 9/13/2015 Rabbi Chai Levy. Choose Life.

Shana Tova everyone.

Here we are together again to begin a new year.

We start our new year in community and in prayer.

Our prayers have so many words. So many words.

It's easy to get lost in the many words of the prayerbook and lose track of the essence of the day.

I'd like to ease us into this Rosh Hashana – nothing too heavy for tonight –

With some kavannot, intentions, reflections, my own personal musings on ONE key phrase from our liturgy, one short phrase that could serve as kind of a synopsis of all of our prayers.

Some have joked that most Jewish holidays, you can sum up as:

“They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat.”

Rosh Hashana doesn't fit that synopsis. So I'd like to offer another one.

Take a look at the amidah that we prayed tonight:

Zokhreinu lechayim melekh hafetz bachayim v'khotveinu besefer hachayim lemaancha Elohim Chayim (p. 12)

A little background: The Amidah, the standing quiet prayer,

is the central prayer in any Jewish prayer service –

It's been around for over 2000 years and follows the same structure every time we pray it, whether it be Rosh Hashana, or Passover, or Tu B'shvat, or Friday night or Tuesday morning.

The beginning and end are always the same, and the middle section varies depending on what day it is.

So, starting this evening and for the next 10 days, every time we pray the amidah

(and there will be *many* times!),

we will say this phrase and three other similar ones

that are unique to Rosh Hashana and to these 10 days of teshuva.

These are a big part of the high holiday liturgy and part of what makes our prayers different from the amidah that we do the rest of the year.

These four phrases were inserted into the Rosh Hashana Amidah by the Geonim, that is the Babylonian rabbis of the 7th- 8th Centuries CE.

And what's the essence of what they are saying?

[read English passage on p. 12]:

Remember us for life,

Sovereign who delights in life

*And inscribe us in the Book of Life,
For Your sake, God of life.*

The answer: life!

I guess the Rosh Hashana version of the joke is: "Choose life, now let's eat."

It's really so simple, but deep and important and worth spending 10 days reflecting on and praying about, and I want to spend sometime with you now unpacking just the first of these 4 geonic phrases (I think the other 3 just reiterate the first one) and creating some intention to move into these 10 days of teshuva.

Zokhreinu Lechayim Remember Us for Life

We'll start with the first clause: *Zokhreinu Lechayim*: Remember Us for Life

What does it mean that we ask God to remember us?

This is one of the major themes of Rosh Hashana.

The Kiddush and the Amidah, refer to Rosh Hashana as "Yom HaZikaron," the Day of Remembrance, the Day God remembers us.

But what does that mean? Did God forget us until now?

God's remembering us, or what Rosh Hashana calls Zichronot,

I understand to mean –

God takes note of us – because what we do matters.

Our lives and our actions are important.

Zichronot goes hand in hand with the other theme of Rosh Hashana, Malchuyot, which is God's sovereignty.

We'll see these themes throughout the next two days counterbalancing each other. In the Malchuyot section of Musaf, we'll prostrate ourselves down to the floor as a way to say, "I'm nothing. God is big and I am small."

Together, these two themes of Malchuyot and Zichronot create a paradox which is a central idea to Rosh Hashana – that on the one hand, we are small and insignificant, and on the other hand, we are important and God remembers us. Think of it in terms of the teaching of the Hasidic master Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshishca: he said that every person should carry two notes in their two pockets:

One says: I am but dust and ashes (that's Malchuyot:

I'm nothing. I'm small and God is big).

The other says: The world was created for me.

(that's Zichronot: I'm important. What I do matters. God takes note of me.)

I want to zoom out for a moment to put this Zichronot thing into perspective. There are a lot of people on Earth. Over 7 billion.

Earth is one of the planets in our solar system, and the sun is one of about 100 billion stars in our galaxy. And there are about 10 billion galaxies in the observable universe. Do the math, and that's about a billion trillion stars in the observable universe. A billion trillion.

I think that's even more than a gazillion.

The mind can't fathom it. That's Malchuyot – we're really nothing.

But on Rosh Hashana, we celebrate the birthday of humanity –

it's the anniversary not just of the creation of the world, but specifically of the day on which human beings were created, the 6th day of creation, and

we're the only living beings, as far we know at this point at least, in this vast universe of a billion trillion stars.

And when we say *Zokhreinu Lechayim*, we assert that even in our little corner of this vast universe, we matter, we have a purpose, we make a difference.

(we know this clearly when we consider the human impact on climate change)

We have to stop and look at our lives because our lives are important.

But here's another thing that this focus on life, life, life, life means:

What are the chances that you would even be alive?

Among those billion trillion stars in the infinity of time, what are the chances that human life would emerge here on earth? And what are the chances that every one of your ancestors happened to survive and meet each other at just the right moment and that one sperm amongst millions happened upon an egg at just the right moment such that YOU would be born?

It's like you won the lottery a thousand times, maybe a million times.

The statistical probability is so tiny, again, the mind cannot fathom it.

So, perhaps when we say *Zokhreinu Lechayim*, remember us for life, it's a chance on this birthday of humanity for US to remember the wonder of life, the wonder of OUR lives, and to try to take in the utter miracle and blessing of being born and getting to live for a few years in this vast universe of time and space, and also to take responsibility for this miraculous life we've been given by knowing that we're important and that our actions make a difference in the world.

Melech Hafetz Bachayim

The second clause in our special phrase in the Amidah says: *Melech Hafetz Bachayim*. “Sovereign who delights in life.” or God loves life and wants us to love life too,

On Rosh Hashana, we eat a lot of honey, right? We dip apples in honey, put honey on our challah, enjoy a piece of honey cake. All for a sweet year. Let’s just meditate on honey for a moment.

We all know that honey is made by bees.

They drink nectar from flowers and convert it into honey in their stomachs and

then spit it back out into the honeycomb.

I was on a retreat this summer where I spent a lot of time sitting in this gorgeous garden filled with breathtakingly beautiful, colorful flowers and, of course, bees.

I would just quietly watch the bees do their thing, and it was amazing and inspiring, and I realized this is what *Melech Hafetz Bachayim* means, that God loves life and wants us to *Bacharta Bachayim*, to “choose life,” as our Torah portion put it yesterday.

So, think about the bee: they go right into these gorgeous flowers to drink the sweet nectar. Why? So they can make life and sweetness.

They are pollinating flowers to make more beauty in the world, and they are making sweet honey; they are pollinating food crops too (which by the way, is a big reason we should be seriously concerned about the great decline in the bee population)

Watching the bees - they are totally committed to their project. They don’t just kind of sit on top of the flower getting a little pollen on their toes, but they would literally put their whole bodies inside a closed flower, just to extract that nectar of life. It struck me as such a powerful visual metaphor for what it means to choose life, to suck the nectar out of life, to make honey, to put your whole body in the flower, to drink life and make life. We’re often so distracted, so preoccupied, so half-asleep in our lives, just going through the motions on auto-pilot.

Rosh Hashana is the time when the shofar calls us to wake up, to pay attention, to make changes, and to attend to our lives so that we can live fully.

Perhaps when we dip our apples in honey, think of the bees and how they model for us what it means to drink the nectar out of life, and to make life and beauty and sweetness.

So that's *Melech Hafetz Bachayim*. "Sovereign who delights in life."

V'khotveinu besefer hachayim

The third phrase is *V'khotveinu besefer hachayim*, write us in the Book of Life.

Ok, so I've said this many times before, but can I just remind us?:

this is a metaphor, an image. Please don't take it literally.

There isn't a giant book in the sky and God is not making a list and checking it twice to see who has been naughty or nice.

But we mean it with all our hearts when we pray that God write us in the book of life. It's a primal expression of our yearning to live, and we need this annual reminder of how fragile and precarious life is to remind us to appreciate life, of how short and how precious life is to have the chance to reflect on our lives, to make changes, to make amends, to course-correct.

The imagery of the Book of Life is ancient, from the Talmud, and it's central to the High Holydays.

We say L'shana Tova Tikatevu –

may you be written for a good year in the Book of Life.

We all know that there doesn't seem to be any simple causality between our actions and the reward of a good life or not.

But we enter the poetry of this image of the Book of Life

because it's powerful motivator to examine our lives and make the changes that we need to make.

Tomorrow in the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer,

we'll invoke that frightening and powerful image:

on Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed
who will live and who will die?

In this prayer, there is an important and often overlooked line about the book of life: *V'chotam yad kol adam bo* –

Each person signs the book with their own hand.

In other words, we help determine what is written.

We are working together with God on our autobiographies.

That doesn't mean we can always control what happens to us -

sometimes we can, but certainly there are things that happen to us that are beyond our control, and we decide how we live with that.

It's like: life provides the music, and we decide if we dance, how we dance, how we respond.

We don't determine *if* we will live, but we determine *how* we will live.

AA got it right with the serenity prayer:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

The courage to change the things I can, and

The wisdom to know the difference."

That's *kotveinu besefer hachayim* - write us in the book of life –

we ask for help in writing the next chapter of our life story –

what do we want it to say, whether we can change our circumstances or not?

Lemaancha Elohim chayim –

And the final phrase in our Rosh Hashana insertion into the amidah –

Lemaacha Elohim Chayim, for YOUR sake, God of life.

This is where we get humble and drop the ego.

What's all of this choosing life and choosing the kind of life we want for?

It's for Your sake, God, not ours.

The prayer sets us straight and reminds us of our values -

All of this desiring and choosing of life is not so that we can *achieve* -

The biggest house, the greatest job, the most attractive spouse, the most money, prestige, fame, or number of friends on facebook. No, we want life so that we can serve something beyond ourselves, for the sake of the God of life.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that the whole point of religion is for us to go beyond serving ourselves, for us to respond to that sense of awe, gratitude, and connectedness with the sense that something is asked of us, that we want to give back in return, rather than with the sense of:

How can we acquire, dominate, get what we want?

Or said more simply by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, the great 20th century teacher of Mussar, or the Jewish ethical tradition,

"Every human being has the choice to be a Giver or a Taker."

Lemaancha Elohim Chayim means we want life not for our own self-indulgent pleasure but so that we can transcend our small selves in service of something greater.

There was a study published last year in the *Journey of Positive Psychology* (Baumeister) in which researchers studied the difference between a happy life and a meaningful life. In some ways, happiness and meaningfulness overlapped, but in other ways, they didn't.

For example, they found that happiness was linked to being a taker, but meaningfulness was linked to being a giver.

Interestingly, we don't wish each other a Happy New Year, like we do in English. In Hebrew, we say: *Shana Tova* – a good year.

We're less concerned with: are we happy, that is: what are we taking from life? And we're more concerned with:

are our lives meaningful, that is: what are we giving to life?

That's *Lemaancha Elohim Chayim*, for Your sake, God of life.

So these are some thoughts, kavannot, intentions for us as we enter this Rosh Hashana and these 10 days of praying repeatedly:

Zokhreinu LeChayim Melech Hafetz BaChayim V'khotveinu besefer hachayim lemaancha Elohim Chayim

It's a little more involved than simply "choose life, now let's eat" but not that much more complicated.

We begin the new year:

- Remembering the utter miracle of life and the blessing of our lives and the responsibility and sense of "what I do matters" that comes with that life.
- We're reminded to wake up so that we can live fully, so we can dive wholeheartedly into that flower to suck the nectar from life to create sweetness and beauty and nourishment
- We remember that we're writing our own life stories, and we consider what we want the next chapter to be about.
- And we remember that all of it really isn't for us and for what we can take, but rather, it's for what we can give to something greater than ourselves.

Remember us for LIFE, Sovereign who loves LIFE, and write us in the book of LIFE, for your sake, God of LIFE.

I wish you all LIFE and a *Shana Tova u'metukah*, a good and sweet new year.