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## POSTERITY

When my son, Adam, announced his engagement to Sarah a few years ago people asked me how I felt about one of my children marrying. I told them that I was excited by the prospect of one day becoming a grandfather. It was the father-in-law thing that I couldn't quite get used to.

To my surprise, I quickly adjusted to having a married son and new daughter-in-law. However, I was caught completely by surprise when Adam and Sarah told me that Sarah was pregnant. I was totally unprepared for the flood of emotions that swept over me when I thought about the upcoming birth of my first grandchild. The preliminaries turned out to be minor, of course, compared with Neriya's birth.

Sarah went into labor in the middle of the night. We were woken up by the telephone around 3:00 a.m. California time. We groggily answered. It was Adam. He quickly and excitedly told us that our first grandson had just been born. A couple of seconds later my cell phone beeped and there on the screen was a photo of Neriya taken when he was about 15 minutes old. This was but one of the many things that have changed since Judy and I had our children.

After I hung up I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. I was not able to fall asleep. I just kept thinking "the birth of this child is surely one of God's greatest miracles and blessings."

I silently uttered the same prayer of thanksgiving when I held Neriya for the first time. I still remember births of my own children as if they were yesterday. I remember holding them and wheeling their strollers. I remember tucking them in their cribs and singing them lullabies. And now, in what seems like an instant later, I am holding in my arms the child of my child.

Like every other grandparent I looked at Neriya and tried to see who he resembled. Did he look more like my daughter-in-law or more like my son? From whom did he inherit the color of his eyes or the thickness and texture of his hair (hopefully not from me), whose personality would be most like his own, and what abilities and talents would he receive?

We all agreed, even Sarah, that Neriya looked like Adam when he was an infant. But we all knew that his looks would change over time, and that he would one day become a combination not only of his father and mother, but inherit characteristics from all who came before them. Within Neriya are the contributions of untold generations.

One of the most unsettling questions Jews ask is: “What do Jews believe happens after we die.” It is not so much that the question is unsettling, but the answer, or I should say “answers,” are. This question is asked most often when people are reflecting on the death or imminent death of a loved one, or on holidays such as Yom Kippur, when Yizkor is recited and we are asked to reflect on our own lives. We consider our own mortality and how we can best squeeze the most meaning and happiness out of every breath we take. The imagery of the “Book of Life” and “Book of Death” invariably leads to questions about reward and punishment and whether and how and if one’s this world behaviors reverberate in the world to come.

Many who ask questions about Jewish belief in an afterlife are dissatisfied when I answer that Judaism does not have a systematic or consistent approach to what happens to the essence of a human being, the *neshama*, the soul, after we die? Judaism has theories rather than answers. One stream of Jewish thought teaches that when the body dies, all that is human about it dies as well. When a human being dies there is no soul that continues on in some future existence. Another tradition teaches that after the human body dies the soul returns to God in heaven, where it is united eternally with all the souls that ever existed before. Still another Jewish tradition speaks of the resurrection of the human body at some future Messianic era at which time the soul will be returned to the body and all creation will live in eternal harmony. Jews who embrace mystical Jewish traditions may also believe in reincarnation.

While none of these beliefs is definitive, they are all authentically Jewish. One may accept them if they bring you comfort or reject them if they seem irrational.

There is, however, one understanding of immortality that I believe all of us can embrace. Even if we do not believe that there is some kind of corporeal immortality after death, we can agree that part of us continues to live on in those people we touch during our lives.

As I held my new grandson I thought not only about the possibilities his future might hold but about all the generations that contributed to his birth. This child is not only the product of his parents, but his genetic and spiritual heritage include the contributions of his grandparents, great-grandparents, and generations upon generations that came before them. Depending on how well families have kept their histories and genealogies, the names, birth dates, and birth places may be known and perhaps even some family history. What is impossible to know is how their lives and deeds were synthesized and transmitted by the generations that followed.

Who we are today is not only a product of our environment and free will choices, but also a synthesis of all the lives, personalities, histories, and values of those who preceded us. Sometimes it is possible to see these contributions directly when we look at babies, children, or adults, and say that they have their parents’ or grandparents’

eyes, nose, mouth, or tempers. But most of the time these generational gifts are subtle and hidden. It is often impossible to know the combinations of genetics and personality traits and transmitted values, hopes, and dreams that create each unique human being.

Last Yom Kippur I asked the question, “How do we want to be remembered?” Do we want to be remembered as a powerful or a generous human being? Do we want to be remembered as the one who accumulated the most wealth or gave away the most to worthy causes? As the one who received or gave away the most love? I suggested that we have the power to remake our lives and make our deeds reflect our values.

However, when confronted by the birth of my grandson I began to realize that in addition to those values we consciously communicate to the next generation, everything we do or say has an unquantifiable and unknowable effect on present and future creation.

In 1972 meteorologist Edward Lorenz presented a paper at the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled: “Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?” Lorenz, a mathematician and meteorologist, had conducted experiments that led him to assert that very small actions can lead to unpredictable results. That is, in an interconnected world such as ours the flapping of butterfly’s wings could change the atmosphere in minute ways that might combine with other atmospheric variables to set off a chain reaction that might lead to the spawning of a tornado in another part of the world. This is known today as the “butterfly effect.” It is an aspect of what scientists call “Chaos theory.” “Chaos theory” holds that some systems are too complex and have too many variables to be completely predictable.

Planetary weather, for example, is one such complex system. The nearly infinite number of atmospheric variables makes it impossible for meteorologists to be 100% certain in their forecasting. There is a large margin of unpredictability in meteorology.

I think that the “butterfly effect” also applies to human moral behavior as well. That is, in a complex interconnected world, one never knows just how far reaching one’s words or behaviors may turn out to be. Any word we speak or deed we perform can literally change the world.

Although it is not exactly parallel to what I am discussing, I am reminded of the tale that explains the far reaching effects of indulging in *lashon hara*, gossip and slander.

In a European *shtetl* a prominent citizen once made extremely disparaging and libelous public comments about the town’s rabbi. The rabbi heard and summoned the man to his study. The rabbi confronted the man with his misdeeds, and the man immediately apologized and begged the rabbi’s forgiveness.

The rabbi said, "I will forgive you on one condition: that you go to your home and bring me one of your pillows." The man was puzzled but immediately complied. When he brought the pillow to the rabbi's study the rabbi ordered him to rip it open and let its feathers fly in the wind. The man was even more puzzled, but he did as ordered. The rabbi then said: "I will forgive you for speaking ill of me once you gather all of the feathers and stuff them back in the pillow."

The man was stunned. "But rabbi," he said, "the feathers are already spread over half of the *shtetl*, if not beyond. It is not possible to gather them all back!"

"So it is with your words," the rabbi concluded. "Once you let them out of your mouth there is no telling where they went and upon whose ears they will fall. Once you utter them there is no way to get them back."

The same holds true for everything thing we do. Once we act there is no way of telling who will ultimately be touched, and undoing that which has already been done. We never truly know what effect our acts will have on those around us and future generations.

The ultimate effect and influence we have on our children, grandchildren, loved ones, family, friends and society at large is largely ephemeral and impossible to quantify. But there can be no doubt that who we are, how we see the world, and the deeds we perform are like ripples in a pond, spreading ever outward from where they began.

While Lorenz's theory about the "butterfly effect" is useful in helping illustrate the unknown repercussions of our actions, I would not apply all of his conclusions about the physical world to the spiritual/religious world. Lorenz's theory states that minute differences in initial conditions can lead to grossly different outcomes. Since one can never know all of the variables, it makes it impossible to predict outcomes in complex systems.

While this may be acceptable and necessary in understanding the physical world, we must reject these conclusions in the religious and moral spheres. If we believe that there is unpredictability and chaos in the moral and spiritual realms, we would soon arrive the position of the Epicureans, whom I discussed last Rosh Hashana, who said, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." That is, if there is uncertainty over the ultimate effect of performing a good deed versus a bad deed, than why should we favor one over the other? If a good deed may ultimately lead to a bad result, and a bad deed may lead to a good result, why should we ever favor performing a *mitzvah* over performing an *aveirah*, a sin?

Theories that embrace unpredictability might be acceptable in the physical world but not in the religious world. From the Jewish point of view good and bad deeds do not lead to uncertain results. Judaism teaches that acting in Godly, moral, and beneficent

ways leads to a better world and life for all. Conversely, rejecting God, doing evil, and acting with unbridled selfishness destroys the earth and the lives of those living upon it.

Or as our sages put it: *mitzvah goreret mitzvah, v'aveirah goreret aveirah*—performing a *mitzvah* leads to performing another *mitzvah*, and acting sinfully leads to further sins. There is a direct connection. Good leads to good and evil leads to evil. There is no doubt about it.

Herein lies one of the basic differences between faith and science. To be science, a theory has to be provable through controlled repeatable experimentation. Once it is proved, it is fact. Faith is not subject to the same test. Faith is a matter of belief, of what our hearts and souls, as well as our minds, tell us to be true. Perhaps it is not quantifiable and scientifically unprovable, but I believe from the depths of my soul that God, no matter how one thinks of God, wants us to perform *mitzvot*, Divine commandments, and *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, and if we do, it will uplift not only us, but those around us, and future generations as well. Performing *mitzvot*, doing good deeds, acting kindly, and loving your neighbor will heal the world and bring it closer to perfection.

One of the most enduring images of the High Holy Days is that of the Books of Life and Death spread open before God. The *midrash* says that on Rosh Hashana God opens two books, the Book of Life and the Book of Death. *Tzaddikim*, righteous people are immediately inscribed into the Book of Life for the coming year and *Reshaim*, evil people, into the Book of Death. On Rosh Hashana most of us are suspended somewhere in the middle. We are neither *tzaddikim* nor *reshaim*. Since the books must be completed and closed by the end of Yom Kippur, we have ten days to pray, do *teshuvah*, repent, change our lives, and convince God that we should be inscribed in the Book of Life.

This *midrash* is elucidated and expanded in one of the most revered and awesome prayers of the liturgy: *Unetaneh Tokef*. In this prayer Rabbi Amnon of Mayence describes the scene in heaven on Judgement Day. All souls pass before God, as sheep before their shepherd, and God decides *mi yichye u'mi yamot*, “who shall live and who shall die.” The congregation solemnly chants *brosh hashana yikateivun u'v yom tzom kippur yichateimun*, “on Rosh Hashana it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed” as the *chazan* chants the terrible ways those inscribed in the Book of Death in the coming year will perish.

Last *Shabbat* I reviewed this prayer at services and asked those present: “Do you believe this *midrash* literally or metaphorically? That is, do you believe that God sits in heaven on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and ordains who will live and who will die in the coming year, or do you interpret the *midrash* of the Book of Life and the Book of Death in some other way?”

It was no surprise that not one person at the service took *Unetaneh Tokef* literally. No one believed that their future is determined during the High Holy Days and that they have no opportunity to change their fate once the Books are “sealed.” They, for the most part, asserted that human beings have free will, control much of their own fates, and believe that illness and death are no more punishments for evil behavior, than power, glory, and riches are rewards for those who do good.

I want to suggest this morning that even if we do not take the heavenly Books of Life and Death literally, we can still find the imagery meaningful.

Rabbi Kass Abelson, whose writings I often use at funeral services wrote: “... the phrase *b’sefer ha-chayim* - usually translated as “In the Book of Life” - can also mean *B’Sefer* “In the Book” *Hachayim* - of “The Living”. If we understand it, in this sense, then we realize that everything we do is written down in the human record - becomes part of somebody's Book of Life - is woven into the plots and dramas of human destiny. Each day we make entries into the biographies of our loved ones, of our neighbors and friends, into the ledger of the general community, into the chronicles of Judaism. Thus, it is at this season that we are bidden to ask ourselves what kind of entries are we making into the *Sefer Hachayim* - into the books of those among whom we are living.”

I find great meaning and wisdom in Rabbi Abelson’s interpretation. Each of us is writing our own *Sefer Hachayim*, “Book of the Living.” Our *Sefer Hachayim* contains the records of our personal histories, our thoughts, and our deeds. It contains our accomplishments, triumphs, and successes, and our failures, losses, and regrets as well. Our book contains the dreams we have dreamt, the goals we have attained, and the record of when we have fallen short or given up. It also contain the truths we murmur in our innermost heart, and the lies we have told to ourselves. In our book is inscribed the times we have reached or exceeded our potentials or fallen miserably short. All these inscriptions we carry within ourselves all of our lives.

But at the same time as we are writing our own *sefer hachayim*, “Book of the Living,” we are also making entries into the *Sefer Hachayim* of those around us. Everything we do or say becomes part of someone else’s life story. When we are angry the hurt is recorded in someone else’s heart. When we are happy, we uplift. When we do a good deed we encourage warmth and beneficence in others. When we do evil, we cut, abrade, and damage. When we perform a *mitzvah* we inspire others to perform *mitzvot* as well. When we commit an *aveirah*, a sin, we may lead others to permit themselves to do the same, or hopefully, to vow to avoid doing the same.

Perhaps if all of us recognized that all that we do and say is recorded not only in our own Books of Life, but in the permanent record of everyone we touch, and the generations that follow as well, we would be much more careful about every aspect of our lives.

At birth my grandson was a genetic composite of all who came before him. As he grows he will integrate the contributions his parents, grandparents, and those around him make to his ever expanding heart and mind. As he matures he will continue to grow and learn, and develop his own lenses through which to see the world, and filters which he will use to separate the useful from the harmful, the good from the bad. And one day, God willing, he will have his own children to whom he will pass on all that he received and his own unique contribution as well.

My obligation to him, as a grandparent, is to do my best to make the entries I make into Neriya's *Sefer Hachaim*, Book of the Living, the most Godly, kindest, generous, and loving ones of which I am capable.

Our obligation, as Jews and human beings, is to make our entries into the *Sefer Hachaim*, the Books of the Living, of all those whose lives we touch, contributions that will help bring our world and its inhabitants closer to *Tikkun*, to healing, hope, holiness, and redemption.