

Shanah tovah. May each and everyone of us be inscribed and sealed for a new year filled with sweetness and health. So the story is told about a Jewish guy named Yaakov who was on a flight from New York to Los Angeles. Close to him sat a beautiful woman, a real stunner, a fifteen out of ten. He felt hypnotized by her looks, and she was clearly so different from everyone else on the plane.

Everyone else on the plane was watching a screen, playing with their phones, sleeping, eating, reading, and doing other things to pass the time on a plane.

But this gorgeous woman was writing, and not on a computer screen. She was writing in an actual notebook with a real pen, a genuine fountain pen.

Yaakov is so mesmerized by this amazingly beautiful woman that he decides to start up a conversation. “Excuse me,” he says, “but I couldn’t help but notice that you’re writing on actual paper with a real pen. That’s so rare these days.”

“Yes,” the woman answers. “I find all the beeps and noises from a computer to be very distracting. That’s why I prefer to write the old fashioned way.

Yaakov says, “Well, I know it’s probably none of my business, but what are you writing?”

The woman says, “Oh, I’m happy to tell you. I’m writing a non-fiction self-help book called “Hot Guys: The Kind of Men that Women Find Irresistible.” My agent says it will be a bestseller.

Yaakov says, “Your agent is right, that sounds so interesting. So tell me, what kind of men do women find irresistible?”

The woman says, “Women like Jewish men for their brains and financial success and Indian men for their romantic skill and self-confidence.”

Yaakov says, “I’d love to read it when it comes out. What’s your name?”

“My name is Lisa Johnson, what’s your name?” — “Who me? My name is Sanjeev Patel Goldberg

The idea of a book is certainly apropos today. Today, our thoughts turn to a very important book, the Book of Life, Sefer HaChayim. Whether we consider ourselves religious or not, most of us understand the Book of Life from the standpoint of Jewish spiritual culture.

We are taught that if we repent for our sins, especially during this ten day period, God writes our names in a book on Rosh Hashanah and seals it on Yom Kippur. We are furthermore taught that this inscription in the Book of Life is a ticket, a ticket to a sweet, healthy, and happy new year. That’s the basic Hebrew school version.

But what does it really mean that God inscribes and seals us for a good and sweet new year? It is important for us to understand this idea on a higher than Hebrew school level, because if we don’t, we’re likely to brush it off as superstitious nonsense, as Jewish Santa Claus. The Book of Life is not nonsense - it’s serious business.

Today, my message is a simple one: I want you to understand that the Book of Life contains more than our names. Our tradition teaches that the Book of Life contains a record of your pain, your essence, and a factual account of your actions.

And because the Book of Life contains your pain, your essence, and a factual account of your deeds, you must respond by resolving to be more compassionate, more grateful, and more truthful.

That right there is my main point, so I'll repeat it just in case you weren't listening. Our tradition says that the Book of Life contains your name, but it also contains your pain, your essence, and the truth about your character. Therefore, if you want to be inscribed in the Book of Life, you have to balance God's spiritual equation by resolving to be more compassionate, more grateful, and more truthful.

I'll now spend the next hour-and-a-half explaining what I mean in a droning, nasal voice. Kidding - 20 minutes tops.

Let's start with your pain and suffering, all of which is recorded in the Book of Life. We know this because of what the Bible teaches us in the Tehillim, the Psalms, specifically Psalm 56. In this psalm, David cried out to God when the Philistines captured him. He said, "O God, You keep count of my wanderings; You put my tears into your flask, into your record."

God put David's tears into the Divine Record, which is what we call the Book of Life. That's because God records everyone's tears in the Book of Life. It's not just your name. The Book of Life is not like a census record or the book you sign when you vote. Instead, the Book of Life is a universal record of suffering that includes all of your pain, from your first cry to the headache I'm giving you right now.

And because God records your pain in the Book of Life, you have an obligation to become more sensitive to the pain of others. That's what we call compassion. Compassion comes from the Latin words that means "to share in suffering."

Truly being compassionate does not mean you say, "Aww, there there, I feel sowwy for you." Being compassionate requires you to engage in empathy, to share in the bitterness and pain of others even and especially when you have plenty of your own.

Being compassionate means that you don't brush off the suffering of others with quick solutions. Real pain rarely has an easy solution, and doling out our trite opinions on how to assist others is not helpful and can be insulting.

It reminds me of the joke about two businessmen named Moshe and Shlomo. Moshe meets up with this friend Shlomo at the mall, and he notices that Shlomo doesn't look very happy. So Moshe says, "Nu, Shlomo, why the long face?"

Shlomo says, "Oy, do I have a problem. My business is failing and I'm in huge debt. I have to raise one million dollars in the next two weeks or else the bank is going to foreclose on the building and take everything.

Moshe says, "Shloimie, don't worry, I have a simple solution to your problem. All you have to do is go out into the streets and sell one million shoelaces for one dollar each.

Shlomo says, "But I don't have any shoelaces." To which Moshe says, "Oy, you really do have a problem."

Moshe's advice, however well intentioned, was not a compassionate response. His simple solution did nothing to help Shlomo because it was completely unrealistic. It would have been better for Moshe to give Shlomo a hug and say, "I'm here for you. How can I help?"

So when someone tells you he's got heart disease, you should not say, "Oh, I know how you can reverse that. It's simple. All you have to do is lose a fifty pounds, cut out all sugar and fat, and eat nothing but beans, lean meat and raw vegetables." That's not what a compassionate person does. A compassionate person offers no solutions, only love.

When someone says, “I lost my job today,” a compassionate person does not say, “Hey, why don’t you go drive for Uber?” That may or may not be a good idea, but the newly unemployed person is looking for love and compassion at that moment, not employment tips. Those come later. Compassion requires you to open your heart wider than you open your mouth.

So that’s the first step to being inscribed in the Book of Life. The Book of Life contains your pain, and you, therefore, have to respond compassionately to the pain of others.

The second step is to recognize that the Book of Life contains the totality of our essence. Again, we know this because of what the Bible tell us in the Tehillim, this time Psalm 139, where we read, “Your eyes saw my unformed limbs; they were all recorded in Your book.”

God recorded not only our names and our suffering but everything about us in the Book of Life. That’s because God created us. As we will read in the Mahzor next week, “We are the glass and You are the glassmaker. We are the iron and You are the blacksmith.”

Because the Book of Life contains this record of our created essence, we must resolve to be more grateful for having been given this indescribably awesome gift of life. And it’s not just our existence for which we owe gratitude to God – we have to thank God for everything in our lives.

I recently read something in the news that reminded me of how important gratitude is. There is a man in Haifa named Yisrael Kristal. The special thing about Mr. Kristal is that he is 113 freaking years old! He was born in 1903, the year before the invention of the ice cream cone. The ice cream cone!

I have a feeling that Mr. Kristal is appropriately grateful for living one hundred and thirteen years. The reason I think he's grateful is that he's about to have the Bar Mitzvah he didn't have a century ago because of World War I.

Mr. Kristal has ample reason to be grateful: He survived World War I, he survived Auschwitz, he helped build the modern State of Israel, he has children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and to top it all off, he's a retired candy maker.

We should all be as grateful for our own lives, whether or not we have survived World Wars. Modern American life has a tendency to dampen our gratitude. In contrast with most of the planet and, indeed, with the rest of human history, our lives are so unbelievably awesome that we take our comfort for granted.

How should we Jews express gratitude to God? Well, we could start with [tefillah](#), with prayer, what we're doing here today. You can pray in any language you want, and today, you should spend some time thanking God for all the goodness in your life. Consider staying after the sermon for some quality spiritual time.

And what if life has dealt you a raw deal lately? If that's the case, you might want to thank God for the good life that you have had in the past even though you're suffering now.

If you feel that you've had a lousy life since day one, consider thanking God for the goodness in the life of someone you love. And if you really think your life has been irredeemably terrible, please see me after class, because we need to talk.

Another way to express your gratitude is with [tzedakah](#), with charitable giving. We thank God for what the Holy One has given us through generosity to the Jewish community and to all who are in need. As the old saying goes, "There are no pockets in burial shrouds." אין כיסים בתכריכין.

You can't take your money with you, so I encourage you to express your gratitude by giving some of the prosperity that God gave you to your synagogue and the wider Jewish community.

What's that you say? Times are hard and you have no money to give? That's okay, because there is a third option for showing gratitude and that is through [teshuvah](#). Teshuvah means repentance but it comes from the word for "return." Just return to our synagogue after today and become more active in it.

For instance, you could express your gratitude to God by coming to Friday night services twice or three times a month. Seriously, that would help us a lot especially during the fall and winter when many are in Florida and others don't feel safe driving at night.

In fact, if you promise to help us with our Friday night or Thursday morning minyanim, I'll punch your Book of Life card right now! By the way, in case you didn't notice, the three ways of expressing gratitude make up the message of Rosh Hashanah: [Repentance, Prayer and Tzedakah lessen the harshness of our lives.](#) תשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזירה.

The first step to being inscribed in the Book of Life is to be more compassionate, and the second step is to be more grateful. That brings me to the third step, which is to be more truthful. We have to be more truthful because the Book of Life contains a perfect and true record of our actions.

The Mishnah expresses that idea in the Tractate Avot, chapter 2: ["Be aware of three things so that you do not fall into the hands of sin. . . There is an Eye that sees, an Ear that listens, and all of your actions are recorded in the Book."](#)

I know that sounds like the NSA, but the Mishnah is talking about God. Just imagine what it would be like to see a list, maybe a video of all of your actions,

both the great things you did and the not-so-great. Personally, I don't think I'd want to see my video, but it is crucial for Jews to know that the Book of Life contains the truth about us.

What do I mean that the Book of Life contains the truth about us? I mean that the Book of Life describes each of us with true statements that are not debatable and leave no wiggle room.

We live in the Sahara desert of truth these days. Many people don't even believe that real truth exists. Far too many think that every moral principle can be twisted and bent to suit the needs of the moment.

That's sad, because falsehood is a road with lots of attractive billboards that leads absolutely nowhere. The signs on this road say "Happiness - 100 days away," but after a hundred days, the sign says, "Happiness - 1000 days away." Lies and dishonesty just take you in a giant circle, and at best, you end up exactly where you started.

It's wrong for us to lie to other people, but it's even worse for us to lie to ourselves. If we lie to other people, unless we happen to be very good at lying, our falsehoods will be detected and we'll eventually pay the consequences.

But if we lie to ourselves, we're quite likely to believe what we hear. The lies we tell ourselves are a siren song of spiritual opium. And it's only on a day like Rosh Hashanah that the blast of the shofar can grab us, slap us around a little, and tell us to get over ourselves and speak the naked, unvarnished truth.

What lies have we told ourselves? There's a whole ashamnu of those self-inflicted fibs. Here's just a sample of those lies: Our credit card debt is no big deal. I don't have to listen to my doctor. My job is more important than anything.

I know that some of you are upset that lies have played such a prominent role in this year's presidential election. Both candidates have told whoppers that simply beggar the imagination. But I, for one, am happy that we're talking about lies and honesty. For once, we've actually hit on something worth talking about.

Pundits are always saying that we need to have a national conversation on this or a national conversation on that. I have an idea, how about we have a national conversation on the truth! We don't need to debate the details of the truth yet. We're ready for that, not even close. No, we need a more elementary discussion on why the truth is important in the first place.

Ultimately, realizing that our truth is recorded in the Book of Life means realizing that it is not God who writes our names in the Book at all. We are the ones who write our names in the Book. When we tell the truth, the ink flows freely. When we lie, the nib is dry.

I know that it is we who do the writing because of what Daniel will sing in the Unetaneh Tokef tomorrow: **“ותפתח את ספר הזכרונות ומאליו יקרא, וחותם יד כל אדם בו.”**

“You will open the Book of Remembrances, which speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page.” I wish all of you good luck in living lives of compassion, gratitude, and truth. If you do that, your inscription and sealing in the Book of Life is a sure bet. Shannah tovah.