

YOM KIPPUR 2024

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I know it's Yom Kippur, but I want to begin in a rather unexpected place. The Land of Egypt.

Pharaoh is crouched on the floor, behind the great doors of his palace, looking out at the infestations swarming over his fields, the rotting frog carcasses, the palace-workers stumbling about, scratching their skin in agony.

Everything that once felt solid, now feels out of control. The gods to whom Pharaoh had prayed since he was a child, had gone silent.

And the Torah tells us that these experiences *do something* to Pharaoh. Specifically, they do three things to his heart.

They make his heart ***kasheh***, hard.

kaved, heavy.

chazak, firm.

Kasheh. Kaved. Chazak.

Pharaoh's heart calcifies. This hardening leads him to double-down and refuse to free the Israelites from Egypt. This refusal enrages the Israelite God further, leading to the total destruction of Pharaoh, his family, his community.

Civilisational collapse, whose root cause is a hardened heart.

This is what I want to explore together today.

Firstly, what is a hardened heart?

And secondly, what does it have to do with the Book of Life that we speak about on Yom Kippur?

If we can understand these two questions, I hope we can understand more deeply what today is all about.

Let us begin with the hardened heart. I know what that feels like - maybe some of you do as well.

In so many ways over the last 12 months, I have felt all three of Pharaoh's hearts - the kasheh, the kaved and the chazak. The hard, the heavy, the firm.

It is difficult to understand in myself and even harder to explain to you all. I hear it only as a *kol demama daka* - a quiet, still sound.

I sense it in the very small moments; like at times when I expected to cry, now there are fewer tears. Where I expected the hairs on my skin to stand on end, now they are more limp. Where I expected my pulse to quicken to life, it is more dull.

Have you felt this hardening in yourself?

I know this hardening *has* happened in me, that it *is* happening, and that it matters gravely.

But why does it matter? And why pay attention to it on Yom Kippur?

At a simple level, and most people don't notice this, it is because in the Yom Kippur mussaf, we specifically and repeatedly say:

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך באמוץ הלב

For the sin we have sinned before You in hardness of heart

More deeply, it matters because this hardening of the heart feels like a kind of death. And Yom Kippur is fundamentally supposed to be about avoiding death.

But on Yom Kippur, I fear we have been thinking about death all wrong. While we may all merit to get to Kol Nidrei of *next* Yom Kippur having avoided the Book of Death - that is a far stretch from being signed in the Book of **Life**.

We would be excused for thinking that mission-accomplished today is avoiding the call of *U'netane tokef*. Avoiding death by fire, by water, by sword, by beast, by hunger, by thirst.

But this elaborate lexicon of death distracts us from what seems to be a glaring omission, namely, that it is not enough to know what death **is** and how to run from it. We must have an inkling of what **Life** is and how to live it.¹

So let's go find the Book of Life.

I want to suggest that the reason we cannot find nearly as many references to "Life" as we can to "Death" on Yom Kippur, is because *Life is hiding under a different name*. And there is an afikoman prize for any of the children who can find it.

[Aside, with all these references to Pharaoh and afikomans, I'm hoping to get double use out of this drash on Pesach this year.]

What is this different, hidden, name of Life?

We will now look to the late, great Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's explanation of what *God* is, to discover what *Life* is. Kaplan founded the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism in the 1950s, arguing that Judaism should be a unifying and creative force.

His daughter had the first public celebration of a bat mitzvah in America in 1922, so Kaplan should have a special place here at Shira.

¹ This inversion is modeled on Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's comment on God: "*It is not enough to know what God is not like. We must have some inkling of what God is like.*"

I feel deeply that in Kaplan's words we find the best counterbalance - maybe the *only* counterbalance - to Yom Kippur's lexicon of death:²

Kaplan asks in a diary entry in 1942 the following question: *We know what God is not like - God is not finite, not tangible, not human, doesn't have human emotions etc etc etc. We know all these things that God is not. But what is God? We must figure out what God is.*

Kaplan provides his answer:

"God... [is] the will to make the most of life. The will to exploit to the utmost all of [Life's] possibilities for growth and happiness. It is a single beam of light, radiating from some inexhaustible source. That beam of light is the best in each of us. It is our personality. It is what we term "I". The inexhaustible source of my will-to-make-the-most-of-life is God.

Now as we know from high school algebra, if $A = B$, then $B = A$ (not the most advanced mathematical equation).

That is, if God is our will to make the most of life, then, our will to make most of Life... is God.

That means every time we read "God" in our machzor over the coming hours, imagine a keyboard in front of you, and you hitting the Ctrl+F function on the machzor to find and replace all references to "God", with the phrase "the best in me" or "the will to make the most of my life".

[pause to consider]

Now we have scratched in some colour to the Book of Life. Not only in Kaplan's explanation do we find a stunning depiction of a Godly life, but we may also have an answer to the question: *What is a hardened heart?*

²

https://www.facebook.com/groups/2536296106437194/posts/7610233809043373/?paipv=0&eav=AfaJ0lB SqAJ3-Z-9_gmK_iK-UXYguV3NiVc4UPhw9T6FI-_YDh_0RAQXz72_IN6l7GY&_rdr

It feels immediately true to me that the hardened heart is the death of God within us - this specific God that Kaplan just described.

So many times over the last year has the best in me been denied to others; to Jews of all kinds, to non-Jews of all kinds.

So many times over the last year have I felt my light diminish, have I not chosen to live out the best in me, have I failed to see the very best in us.

So many times have I not given the best of me to a world that needs us. And yes, the world *does* need us, even though *some* within it may have rejected us.

For example, in an area I and many in this room care a great deal about, the world needs me and every one of us doing *one more thing* to help prevent a runaway climate catastrophe for our kids and generations to come.

Pick any issue that you care about that has hit the back-burner over the last 12 months, and consider how this hardening of the heart, this diminishing of your unique beam of light, has robbed the world of what you have to give.

In so many ways, the hardened heart is a simple failure of gratitude. And worse, a failure of *Jewish* gratitude. As the late Elie Wiesel put it:

“No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night... We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; [and] not to share them would mean to betray [those who’ve gone before us and those who need us desperately].”³

So how do we begin to soften the hardened heart, to live in this Book of Life which is not simply the back page of the Book of Death, but is its own book, in its own right.

³ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/acceptance-speech/>

For this question, I go to Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger, a student of Elie Wiesel who co-founded the Witness Institute, a project dedicated to maintaining Wiesel's ethical message in the world.

I recently asked Ariel his views on how we should **be** and **act** in this inconceivable moment in Jewish history. He replied with a Whatsapp voice recording a few months ago that still reverberates in my mind - never underestimate the power of a rambling Whatsapp voice note to change the world.

He said to me, Joel:

*For every **one** unit of grief, pain, terror or anger that we feel right now, we need **two** units of strengthened Jewish connection. That could mean more Torah study, more kindness to each other, more singing, expressing more Jewish values, thinking about the person who's not getting a phone call who needs connection. Doing more, deeper, better, as much as possible. Raising the volume on all of this to 11 out of 10."*

This is our task. This is how we get into the Book of Life, particularly now, at this time, of all times.

And these additional units of Life need not be done privately, they should be projected to the world. As the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, we are "seal[ed]... in the book of life so *that* we can fulfill the task [God] has set us, namely, *to be [God]'s ambassadors to humankind*".⁴

An "ambassador" is not a quiet position. They interface with humanity, with the world, communicating the message they have been mandated to share. That means projecting Mordecai Kaplan's explanation of God; projecting the best in us, projecting our will-to-make-the-most-of-life. In short

To be ambassadors of life.

⁴ Sacks, YK Machzor, Koren, p1110.

When we choose to step into this role, our hardened hearts soften slightly and we are then gifted immediate access to gratitude, access to the Best in Us.

Before I finish, I want to offer you an image. At any point as we stand praying together in the next couple of hrs, I invite you to close your eyes in your own time, and bring into your mind's eye that inexhaustible beam of light that Kaplan spoke about. Imagine this beam flowing down from the heavens above you, through the top of your head and into your body, filling you up entirely, cascading over your body with light and warmth. Bask in this bright, warm light as you move through the machzor and see if you can hear a quiet voice - your voice - the voice of the Best In You that wants to burst forth.

Every time that voice says something, anything, one more pixel of your name is printed in the Book of Life.

Gmar chatima tova.