

## Inscribed In The Book of Life: Fulfilling Our Unique Purpose

**K'vod Wieder**

**5773**

### **What Is Your Occupation?**

Many of us are familiar with the verse from Psalms that we sing on all the holidays except Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur - *Pitchu li shaarey tzedek* - "Open for me the gates of righteousness." What is righteousness? A midrash or commentary on this verse understands the "gates" to be the heavenly gates and says:

*In the next world (time of judgment) everyone will be asked, "What was your occupation (or job)? Your work in the world?"*

*If the person answers, "I fed the hungry," they [angels] will say back, "This is God's gate. You, feeder of the hungry, enter." ...*

*And the same for those who raised orphans, performed acts of tzedakah, and embraced acts of loving-kindness.... (Midrash Rabbah on Psalms)*

While the simple meaning of this midrash equates righteousness with kindness and justice, it is possible to connect righteousness with our unique purpose and work in the world. **This means that the effectiveness of our kindness and just actions are directly correlated with our ability to discover and live the unique purpose that we were created for.**

When we reach the end of our lives, we may be asked:

*What was your true work?*

*How did you share your own unique essence with the world?*

If you were asked these questions at the end of your life, what would you say? Are you able to sense it, articulate it? How about each day? What was your true work today? Was it deep listening to a friend or family member? Was it being more patient with our children? Was it working in the garden? Was it contemplating Torah?

### **Inscribing Ourselves In The Book of Life - Living Our Stories**

One of the central motifs of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the books of life and death. We have a popular midrash from the Talmud that makes its way into much of our liturgy which says that:

*There are three books opened on Rosh Hashana: One for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for the intermediate. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed for life; the completely wicked are immediately inscribed and sealed for death. The intermediate are left hanging from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur – if they merit, they are inscribed for life, if they do not merit, they are inscribed for death. (RH 16b)*

My teacher, Reb Mimi Feigelson understands the judgment of the heavenly high court on Rosh Hashanah as asking the following question:

*Did the person fulfill the purpose that he/she was created for this past year?*

Being inscribed in the book of life means living in a way that one's life has purpose, meaning, depth, and joy. This sense of purpose, direction, and meaning is not imposed or contrived, but a natural and organic expression of one's very being.

*Are we aware of our unique gifts and contributions?*

*Have we discovered our passions or do we move through life unsure about how to connect, how to plug-in in a way that excites us and energizes us?*

*Have we created a life that allows us to give expression to our uniqueness, to our sense of purpose, or is our real work relegated to a tiny corner while we struggle to stay afloat financially and relationally?*

The Slonimer Rebbe - a great chassidic master of this past century teaches that the signatures in the Books of Life and Death are not God's signature, but ours. The judgment that we face on Rosh Hashanah does not come from an amorphous diety up in the sky. This day is an opportunity to examine deeply how fully we are using the unique gifts we are given and how we are wasting them away. And, this day is also an opportunity to assess the consequences of living our uniqueness or not, and how connected or disconnected we are from the vibrancy of creation. *What's the reality of loneliness in our life?* We don't have to be single or an isolated hermit to experience loneliness. Much of the time, the greatest loneliness comes from not being able to share our unique gifts and expression - either because we haven't discovered it in ourselves or others, or because we don't know how to share it.

Another word that describes one's unique purpose and gifts is *vocation*. A vocation is not a job, it's a calling. It comes from the latin - vocare - which means to call. Implied in the word *vocation* is the understanding that discovering our vocation means being in relationship with something beyond ourselves that calls us.

How do we hear our call? We can hear it in subtle or cataclysmic ways. We can gather subtle hints of our calling through life events, places, or images that happen repetitively and seem to point us in a particular direction. Maybe we're always running into a particular person, or find ourselves in the same dynamic at work or in relationship. We might have recurring dreams, or have movie scenes, song lyrics, or particular conversations that seem to be speaking directly to us. Any of these patterns, repetitions, or re-occurrences are asking us to pay attention - that there is something essential in us that needs to be heard.

Cataclysmic calls are major experiences where we have the opportunity to hear our call. They can come from sudden and strange coincidences. It can come from difficult things like being fired, a death of someone close, an accident, or a divorce. It can come from positive major life experiences like a new love affair, a birth, or a transcendent mystical experience. Through these experiences a new discovery or a new direction for our life emerges.

Rarely are we called by a direct voice that booms - "This is your vocation" although it can happen. Mostly, it comes from learning to understand and interpret the events in our lives in a meaningful way. There is a norwegian folk tale that illustrates this:

*A father handed his son a piece of smooth oak, and said to him, "this is your board. For every mistake you make, I will hammer in a nail." By the time the boy was thirteen, the board was covered corner to corner with nails, some rusted, some shining new. The father took the board to his son and said, "For every good thing you do to fix all these wrongs, I will take one nail out." And it was not too long before the father took the last nail out and proudly showed his son the*

*clean piece of oak. Yet when the son saw the board, his eyes brimmed with tears. He turned to his father and said, "But father, what about the holes."*

We are all pieces of oak covered with nails, holes, and smooth spaces. We each come into the world with our own unique orientation to life. Our mistakes and the wisdom that comes from them all shape and refine our gifts. Are we willing to learn to read and understand all the holes and smooth spaces that make up our piece of oak?

Our ability to live our calling, our unique purpose is not just for our own fulfillment. A vision of a healed world depends on it. A kosher sefer Torah must be handwritten. A handwritten Torah means that no letter is exactly like any other. There is a midrash that all the letters of the Torah represent all the souls of humanity. Each one is necessary for the voice of holiness to ring forth into the world. In order for us to experience a society based on the values of connection and respect, we have to be able to see each others' letters. They can't be smudged, ambiguous, or whited out. If we can't see them, the larger whole cannot emerge.

### **Distinguishing the True Call**

Our biblical tradition has numerous examples of God calling to Abraham and to Moses. With Abraham, God calls: *Lech L'cha me'artzecha umeemolad'cha umeebeyt aveecha el ha'aretz asher ar'eka*. Go to yourself (your unique calling) from your land (distinguished from what society expects of you) and from your birthplace (distinguished from the expectations of your family) and from the house of your father (from all of the internalized messages about yourself that you have received from your parents) to a land that I will show you (to your own unique essence and purpose).

This chassidic interpretation of the verse assumes that while one's calling or vocation may line up with societal, familial, or internalized expectations, it is experienced independently from them. Sometimes, one has to listen carefully to all the voices inside oneself to hear which ones are "shoulds" that come from the outside, and which ones are expressions of our unique calling.

Most of us are all too familiar with the story that we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah where Avraham is called to sacrifice his son Yitzhak on an altar and at the last minute an angel intervenes, having Avraham substitute a ram. The ram's horn is where we get the shofar. For many of us, this story is very troubling because the tradition holds up Avraham as a man of holiness for being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for God, his son.

I've heard a radical interpretation of this passage based on a text from the Zohar - a 13th century mystical work. The Zohar says that the voice Abraham heard calling him to sacrifice his son was an "*aspaklarya delo nahara*" - a clouded mirror. Abraham wasn't really sure about the call he heard. Now, if we look at the midrashim around Avraham's past, we learn that his father, an idol-worshiper tried to throw him in furnace of fire to appease the town's perceived godlike king Nimrod. His father tried to kill him because he thought that's what the god/king wanted. What great modeling for his son! So according to this interpretation, Avraham heard a voice that he thought was his calling when it was really a compulsive repetition of his father's behavior. The reason that Avraham became a hero was because in spite of the fact that he grew up in a culture of idol worship and human sacrifice, he heard God's call the second time, telling him it was immoral to sacrifice his son and to offer up a ram

instead. He had the courage to act on that call and break the pattern set by his father and possibly his father before him.

### **Looking Past Labels**

We don't just internalize messages from other people and our culture about what we should do or who we should be, but also about who we are and what we are capable of achieving or being. We affix certain labels to ourselves because significant people in our lives have labeled us that way. "I'm not creative. I'll never be good at math. I'm not the volunteer type, etc..." The result of these labels is that we may estrange ourselves from our true vocation, not being willing to recognize it because it's not congruent with the way that we've labeled ourselves. Our very essence becomes a stranger to ourselves. You may remember Billy Joel's popular song from the 70's called "The Stranger."

*Though we share so many secrets, there are some we never tell*

*Why were you so surprised that you never saw the stranger?*

*Did you ever let your lover see the stranger in yourself?*

### **Our Responsibility To Each Other**

Did you know that the commandment "Deal kindly with the stranger" appears no less than 36 times in the Bible? A stranger is anyone whose essence is blocked from view by the various labels we give. "Dealing kindly with the stranger" can mean that we never let external labels transform the other or ourselves into a stranger. We are continually open to looking past the externals to recognize and affirm the unique essence and gifts that are a part of everyone around us.

Consider this story:

*Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, (1745-1812, founder of Chabad Chassidism) was raising money to ransom Jewish prisoners.*

*He went first to a city that was famous for its miser. It seems that this stingy man, despite his considerable wealth, was loathe to share his blessings, no matter how worthy or urgent the cause. Rabbis and beggars alike avoided his home. Anyone who did unwittingly end up on his doorstep was offered a single rusty copper coin, which even the most desperate pauper would promptly refuse.*

*When Rabbi Schneur Zalman arrived in the town, the elders of the community graciously received him. But when he announced that he wanted to visit the house of the miser and wanted two rabbis to accompany him, he was met with serious resistance. The Rebbe was adamant, however, and they finally acquiesced and gave him the escort he requested.*

*The next afternoon the three of them were standing in front of the miser's mansion. Before knocking on the door, the Rebbe turned to his companions and requested that they not utter a word, no matter what they hear or see. Several moments later they were sitting in the luxurious front room and the owner was returning from his safe with a small velvet money pouch.*

*"Yes," said the rich man. "A touching story indeed! Widows and orphans in captivity. Ah, the suffering of the Jewish people! When will it all end? Here Rabbi, take my humble donation."*

*To the miser's surprise, the Rebbe seemed pleased by the gift. He was actually smiling at him warmly as he put the coin into his pocket and said, "Thank you Mister Solomons, may G-d bless and protect you always." The Rebbe then proceeded to write him a receipt, adding all sorts of blessings in a most beautiful script.*

*"Thank you again, my friend," said the Rebbe as he stood and warmly shook the man's hand looking him deeply in the eyes with admiration. "And now," he added, turning to his two companions, "we must be on our way. We have a lot of collecting to do tonight."*

*As the three rabbis walked to the door, the Rebbe turned and bade his host yet another warm-farewell. "You should have thrown it back in his face," hissed one of the rabbis after they heard the door close behind them.*

*"Don't turn around and don't say a word," whispered the Rebbe as they walked down the path to the front gate.*

*Suddenly they heard the door opening behind them and the miser calling: "Rabbis, rabbis, please come back for a minute. Hello, hello, please, I must speak to you, please... please come back in."*

*In a few minutes they were again sitting in the warm, plush drawing room, but this time the rich man was pacing back and forth restlessly. He stopped for an instant and turned to the Rebbe. "Exactly how much money do you need to ransom these prisoners?"*

*"About five thousand rubles," the Rebbe replied.*

*"Well here is one thousand... I have decided to give one thousand rubles, you may count it if you want," said the miser as he took a tightly bound stack of bills from his jacket pocket and laid it on the table. The other rabbis were astounded. They stared at the money and were even afraid to look up at the miser, lest he change his mind.*

*But the Rebbe again shook Mr. Solomons' hand, warmly thanking him, and wrote him a beautiful receipt replete with blessings and praises, exactly like the first time.*

*"That was a miracle!" whispered one of the rabbis to the Rebbe as they left the house and were again walking toward the gate. Once more the Rebbe signaled him to be still. Suddenly the door of the house again opened behind them. "Rabbis, please I have changed my mind, please come in once more. I want to speak with you," Mr. Solomons called out.*

*They entered the house for a third time as the miser turned to them and said, "I have decided to give the entire sum needed for the ransom. Here it is, please count it to see that I have not made a mistake."*

*"What is the meaning of this?" wondered the Rebbe's astonished companions after they had left the rich man's home for the third time that evening. "How did you get that notorious miser to give 5000 rubles?"*

*"That man is no miser," said Rabbi Schneur Zalman. "No soul truly is. Think about it. When he gave the rusty penny, that's all he could give. Everyone to whom he gave that rusty penny of his threw it back in his face. I knew that if he could feel that his giving, his offering could be fully received, then he would have the strength to give more, should he choose. I looked past the label of the miser and saw his soul."*

I don't know if any one of us discovers our calling alone. It's through being willing to fully receive and be open to another that we allow ourselves the possibility of reflecting back to them their own deep essence. And, maybe in some mysterious way, through our receiving of another, we receive ourselves.

Based on the Slonimer Rebbe's teaching that we inscribe ourselves in the Book of Life, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach z'l encourages us on Rosh Hashanah to have enough ink in your pens for your loved ones. When you sign yourself in the book of life by living your purpose, pray that they will be with you this year, living theirs. When we look into the book see our name written there before we put the pen to paper, we'll know that someone else believed in us more than we believed in ourselves.