

Writing Your Book of Life

I walked the dirt path through Eisner Camp, step by step ascending the hill towards my destination. It was a beautiful August day this past summer, and I was paying my first visit to camp's newest building. The *Olim Beit Am* serves as programmatic space – and fun hangout space – for Eisner's oldest campers, the entering 10th graders whose unit is named *Olim* – literally, "those who ascend." The previous *Olim Beit Am* had been condemned just weeks before camp started a few summers earlier...a rough winter had caused the old building's floor to give way, and the structure clearly needed to be torn down before the campers arrived. This, however, posed a tremendous challenge to the camp's leadership as this building had been filled, floor to ceiling, with wooden plaques...hand painted artifacts of history bearing the names, the artistry, and the inside jokes of decades worth of *Olim* campers. Before the bulldozer arrived to level the building, each plaque had to be photographed, lovingly removed, and stored for safekeeping.

When I arrived at the beautiful new *Olim Beit Am* I discovered that many of the old plaques had been restored to the vaulted ceiling of this new home. Alone in the space, I spent some time lying on the floor, staring up at decades worth of names. I imagined their summers, their stories - based on the images, the wisdom, and the humor enshrined on each piece of plywood.

What is it, I wondered, that compels us to engage in this act...to record our names – our presence in a place of meaning – for future generations to behold? Why do camp bunk walls, and beds, and cubbies all include scrawls of permanent marker..."Josh Golden 1982," "Liz Schwartzman, '06?" Yet this phenomenon does not exist solely at summer camp...names of lovers carved into tree bark, servicemen and women who inscribe their names on the sides of their tanks and planes, graffiti scrawls on building facades or restaurant tables...all of them seeming to cry out from the depths of the soul..."I was here, and my presence here mattered. Remember me!"

This seems, to me, a very human pursuit. Don't we all seek – in one way or another - to etch our names, a lasting record of our presence, into the world around us? What makes us think that we have this kind of staying power beyond our own days? Perhaps because we regularly experience the lasting imprint which others have left behind for us.

When I arrive at Eisner Camp each year, often in the final weeks of the summer, I ask a few staff members to tell me about what I've missed in the preceding weeks. I couldn't help but laugh when one counselor told me about this year's *Olim* play during the first session of camp. Each year these rising 10th graders write their own mini-drama to share with the community, and this summer, inspired by the plaques newly rehung in their rebuilt *Olim Beit Am*, these campers composed a play in which they – the present day *Olimers* - were visited by ghosts – spirits of campers past who bore the names enshrined on the plaques.

In their hearts and minds, these 15-year-olds experienced the names on those plywood scraps as long forgotten ancestors who now – in the teens’ dramatic imaginations – were returning to share their sage counsel on how to live camp life to its fullest.

On one level, I found this hysterical! These people aren’t ghosts. They’re adults living productive and normal lives out in the real world beyond the bubble of camp. With rare and tragic exception, they are not – heaven forbid - departed from this earth...they are 20, 30, 40, and 50-somethings with jobs and families. I know these people, for heaven’s sake!

But their names remain enshrined at camp. And so, from another perspective, the *Olimers’* choice to weave their spirits into this summer’s play was profound in its message, as if to say, “The names on these plaques...these are our forebears. They had experiences akin to our own, and we are the inheritors of what they’ve left behind. They made their mark on this place, and we want to do the same. Now, what do we want that mark to look like? How do we want to be remembered in years to come?”

Are these not the questions that we each ask ourselves when confronted with the reality that we will not be physically present in this space forever? Whether at our businesses, at the places we visit – frequently or infrequently, and most certainly in our homes and the lives of our family and friends, we want to leave our imprint, to know that our time and presence there has mattered. Yet, it is not enough to merely be remembered. The quality and content of our impact is critical as well.

In the early writings of our Sages, "Rabbi Shimon taught that there are three crowns [in Jewish tradition]: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. And the crown of a good name," he taught, "is superior to them all."¹

In Hebrew, כְּתָר שֵׁם טוֹב עוֹלָה עַל גְּבוּיָהּ

Like the *Olim* unit at camp, named for their ascent – a good name “*oleh*” - rises above the rest. For some of us, perhaps many of us, our days are spent chasing after the fleeting crowns...the ones which may enhance our own glory, or wealth, or power, or influence – none of which is inherently bad – but none of which guarantees us what we really want. For we want the name that we leave emblazoned in the places we’ve been to reflect our aspirations for our best selves. We want for others not just to know that we were here...but that our presence here mattered...and made a profoundly positive impact on the lives of others. We sometimes fear that, perhaps, we have not achieved this aim.

World-renowned Jewish author, Herman Wouk, reflected on these themes in “The Caine Mutiny.” There he imagines a father – quite successful in his public and professional life – who learns that he has just a few weeks to live. He writes a letter to his semi-estranged son, Willie, who is off to the navy. In this ethical will of sorts, Wouk imagines that regretful parent penning these words:

¹ Mishnah Avot 4:17 (or 4:13...verse counting differs from one printing to another)

"I am a little too young to go, according to the insurance tables, and I must say I don't feel ready, but I dare say that that is because I have accomplished so little. I look back on my life, Willie, and there's not much there.

I've let slide my relationship with you, as I have so many other things, through plain sloth...

It's surprising how little I have to say to you in these last words...[but] Remember this, if you can: THERE'S NOTHING, NOTHING, NOTHING MORE PRECIOUS THAN TIME. You probably feel you have a measureless supply of it, but you haven't. Use your time while you have it, Willie. Use it to make something of yourself."

In my mind, Herman Wouk must have authored this passage just after attending Yom Kippur services. For it is during these hours of fasting, of denying ourselves the nourishment needed to live, during these hours of reflection, and regret, and remorse...during these hours when we come face to face with the reality that we will not live forever and that we want desperately for our names to be remembered for good – it is now that our Jewish tradition calls out to us, "Use your time while you have it!" Not just to make something of yourself for your own sake, but to make your self matter - profoundly – as a source for good, and healing, and inspiration in the lives of others.

Our liturgy throughout these Days of Awe speaks of the Book of Life. It imagines that God is keeping a heavenly journal, recording and recounting all of our deeds. The imagery evokes apprehension - even dread - as we consider the possibility that God determines our fate in the year-to-come based on our behavior in the year that has just passed. We rush to make amends with those whom we've wronged, to seek forgiveness for our misdeeds before – tomorrow, as the sun sets – the gates of repentance are closed to us...before God writes our names on one side of the ledger or the other and, in so doing, seals our fates.

I am glad that our Jewish tradition provides us this added motivation to hurry in mending the errors of our ways. And yet, this is not the only way to interpret this imagery, as my colleague, Rabbi Laura Geller teaches:

"Your Book of Life doesn't begin...on Rosh Hashanah. It began when you were born. Some of the chapters were written by other people: your parents, siblings, and teachers. Parts of your book were crafted out of experiences you had because of other people's decisions: where you lived, what schools you went to, what your homes were like. But the message of [these High Holy Days]...is that everything can be made new again, that much of your book is written every day – by the choices you make. The book is not written and sealed; you get to edit [what is inscribed there], decide what parts you want to emphasize and remember, and maybe even which parts you want to

leave behind. *Shanah tovah* means both a good year, and a good change. Today you can change the rest of your life. It's never too late."²

But wow, can it be challenging. It is all too easy to highlight the good we've done in our own minds while erasing the memories of our words and actions which have inflicted pain on others, which have needlessly made others' lives more difficult.

Forbes Magazine contributor, Kathy Caprino, authored an article that cuts straight to heart of the matter, entitled, "Do You Know How People Will Remember You?"³ In it, she made several powerful suggestions for discovering the true answer to that unnerving question:

1. "Ask your clients and colleagues to give you an honest appraisal of what it's like to engage and interact with you, and how it can be improved.
2. Request your family members and friends to share the one most positive thing and the one most challenging thing that stands out about you over all the rest [of your qualities] (and ask them to be brutally honest).
3. Think about the past ten years – do you have any relationships that have gone terribly wrong? Any rifts that need to be repaired or addressed?
4. When you have problems at work or with people, do you take accountability to address how you've co-created the problem, or do you blame others 100% for what's gone wrong?
5. Do you have a different moral and behavioral code with family than with others in your life? If so, how is it different, and why?
6. Finally, [and this is the biggie] take some time to think long and hard about what you want to leave behind and be remembered for. Are you [consistently behaving in ways that will help you] to achieve your desired vision?"

Well, are we?

When I first spent summers at Eisner Camp in the late 90's, the last night of camp was known to be *Olim* prank night. The last morning of each summer was tinged with disappointment as staff would discover the results of the oldest campers' bad behavior under the cover of darkness...spray paint on buildings, camp property ruined, people's possessions displaced or gone altogether. These *Olimers* of the past certainly left their marks on camp – a sure reminder that the traces of ourselves which we leave behind are not always positive or inspirational.

This year, however, the camp community awoke to discover something quite different. Throughout the night, this summer's *Olim* campers had lived up to their unit name and truly risen to the occasion. Rather than inflicting damage on the camp they love, they had foregone the *Olim* prank night antics of years past in favor of something much more positive... *Olim* Legacy Night. As we walked the roads of camp we found chalk art along

² purl.org/net/mhno2 – as appears in *Mishkan HaNefesh for Rosh Hashanah*, CCAR Press, 2015, p. 5

³ "Do You Know How People Will Remember You?" by Kathy Caprino in Forbes.com, July 29, 2013.

each path. These eldest campers had inscribed their blessings on the ground before us – the lessons they wanted to leave as a legacy to the younger campers who so looked up to them, my own daughter included.

“Take a breath and look around,” one taught, “Life is what you make it.”

“Love each other more,” yet another suggested.

Then a pair found side by side: One *Olimer* had traced his body and inside the outline expressed what all of those plaque artists had really been trying to say throughout the years when he wrote, “I was here!” And beside that declaration another message to the younger campers was found, one surely authored by a 15-year-old now lamenting that this would be her final day as a camper in this holy place, “You are still here. So make it count.”

Indeed, we sometimes write our names in chalk, sometimes carve them into wood, or paint them onto walls. Sometimes what we write lasts for an hour, or for a day, and sometimes for many, many years. And someday our names will be carved into stone to mark the place where we lay, one final declaration that “I was here.” Yet, what that name conveys to those who read it...whether or not we have made it count...that’s up to us. As one writer put it, “What we have done for ourselves dies with us. What [good] we have done for others...remains and is immortal.”⁴

Indeed, when we write our names onto others’ hearts for good, this is truly the most lasting imprint of them all.

A new year has arrived, a clean page in the Book of Life awaits our imprint. As we *Olim* – we ascenders along life’s path - each continue our journey, we should do so with a keen eye to what we’ve already left inscribed on the road behind us, and to what we yet want to write while we can. Let’s celebrate the fact that we are still here...let’s make it count.

May our names be inscribed for blessing, for goodness, for compassion, care, and love...inscribed by God...by our choices...by the words of our mouths and the work of our hands. And let us all say, Amen!

⁴ Attributed to *Albert Pine* in Day by Day by Rabbi Chaim Stern, Beacon Press, 1998, p. 198