The Book of Life

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For Gavi Yona, Nomi Yael, and their Papa Jonny, after whom they are both named

Five weeks before his son was born, Michael Bahler learned that his mother was dying. She had lived with ovarian cancer for five years -- and now, just five weeks before she was supposed to become a grandmother, it seemed that the end was nearing.

Every day, Michael would visit her in the hospital. And every day, as he entered the room, his mother would summon the strength to lift her head off the pillow, if only for a moment, and ask, "Did the baby come yet?" "Not yet," Michael would tell her -- and she'd sink back down into the hospital bed, her face a mixture of resolve and exhaustion.

A small clock-radio stood at his mother's bedside, and on the antenna, Michael had taped a printout of his wife's most recent ultrasound. It hung there like a flag, flown at full mast, urging his mother to continue onward. And although the hospital ethicist had encouraged them to begin end-of-life care; and although both Michael and his mother knew that all of her persistence had only elongated her suffering -- still, she clung to life.

A few weeks later, in the very same hospital, the baby was born. The medical team gave Michael permission to wheel his mother, in a gown and mask, up to the maternity ward. As she held the baby in her arms, tears in her eyes, she looked into her grandson's face and whispered: "We made it." She died six weeks later.

Perhaps you know a story like this one. Perhaps it is your own story: the wedding ceremony that is rescheduled to an earlier date so that a dying parent can be there; the bar mitzvah that is made bittersweet by the glaring absence of loved one; the grandparent after whom a new baby is lovingly named, an honor that the parents would rather not have to give.

"To everything, there is a season," the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. … A time to laugh and time to weep. … A time to dance and a time to mourn. … A time to seek and a time to lose."[1]

If only our lives were this orderly. If only our experiences could be sorted into neat little boxes -- where the time for mourning never intruded upon the time for dancing, where the time for laughing and the time for weeping never touched, forever separated, like two sets of dishes for milk and for meat.

[1] Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

“Ecclesiastes got it wrong,” charges the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai.[2] “A person doesn’t have enough time in his life to have a time for everything. He doesn’t live enough seasons to have a season for every purpose. He must love and hate at the same moment; must laugh and cry with the same eyes; with the same hands, must cast away stones and gather them.”

How are our hearts not to break? When the death of a loved one can interrupt even the happiest day of our life, how are we not to conclude that death is more powerful than birth?

The High Holidays ask exactly this question. Rosh Hashanah is a symbol of birth; just ten days later, Yom Kippur is a metaphor for death. Taken together, these High Holy Days simulate what Michael Bahler experienced in real life: that the time to mourn does often intrude upon the time to dance. The High Holidays test our resolve, asking us: do we dare to affirm that birth is more powerful than death?

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Rosh Hashanah is a symbol of birth. It is our New Year -- and like a newly born child, we are reminded of our unlimited potential. Our prayer book calls Rosh Hashanah the day that humanity was born -- a metaphor for the day that human beings, with our capacity for change and growth, emerged from the spirals of evolutionary history. We eat pomegranates on Rosh Hashanah, a symbol of fertility -- a fruit so round it resembles a pregnant belly, a fruit whose insides are filled with seeds. We blast the shofar and it sounds like a baby crying -- a wordless, full-throated wail that wakes us from our sleep and calls us to our duty.

Many times over the past few months, my wife, Leah, and I have arisen from our sleep to the sound of a baby crying. We welcomed a new baby into the world this June. Holding our newborn, only a few hours old, we felt the sense of wonder that Rosh Hashanah seeks to inspire. Where did this new life come from? What adventures await her? Who is the person inside of this tiny body?

Author Annie Dillard[3] captures this sense of wonder in her book *For the Time Being*. She visits a hospital maternity ward, and observes the strange and marvelous things that take place there: the ritual of it all, at once ancient and modern; the doctors, nurses, and midwives dressed each in their respective uniforms, performing their sacred duties like priests in their vestments; the mothers like goddesses, with the power to create life; the newborns with wise eyes, who knew how to be born without having to be told. “This is surely the wildest deep-sea vent on earth,” Dillard writes. “This is where the people come out.”

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[2] “*Adam b’chayav* / A Man Doesn’t Have Time”

[3] I am grateful to my mentor and friend, Rabbi Ellen Lippmann, in whose writings I was introduced to Annie Dillard and Leon Kass. See, specifically, her “Sermon in a Dream” in her book *Raising My Voice* (CCAR Press).

Birth brings us to the precipice of life and allows us to soak in the breathtaking view. The Jewish New Year hopes to do the same -- to cause us to believe that anything is possible, that life contains limitless potential.

But even there on the precipice of life, we know the dark truth. All that is born must die. Even though our eyes may now be filled with tears of joy, there will inevitably come a time when those same eyes -- the only pair we have -- will be filled with tears of sorrow. And so, only ten days after Rosh Hashanah, we move on to Yom Kippur -- a day that is a rehearsal for our death.

On Yom Kippur, we do not eat -- making ourselves like corpses, who have no need for bodily sustenance. Some Jews dress entirely in white, evoking the white shroud in which they will someday be buried. During the *Ashamnu* prayer, as we recount our alphabet of shortcomings, we beat our chests with regret -- pounding upon our hearts, as if we were trying to resuscitate those parts of ourselves that have grown cold and stiff within. As the cantor intones the haunting Kol Nidre chant, we remove our Torah scrolls and stare into the open ark -- an empty wooden box, like the plain pine casket[4] that will someday be our final resting place.

In his bestselling memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*, Dr. Paul Kalanithi captures how the prospect of our death ignites an urgency for living. Kalanithi was a prominent neurosurgeon, who throughout his career frequently had to deliver the news to patients that they had late-stage cancer. Invariably, his patients would respond with one pressing question: How long have I got left? Not wanting to get pinned to a number, Kalanithi would regularly dodge the question, and instead advise his patients to take it one day at a time.

But only when Kalanithi learned, at the age of 36, of his own cancer diagnosis was he finally able to understand that his patients were asking about more than just a number. If he could know for certain how much time he had left, it would allow him to set his priorities straight. If he only had a week, he would spent it with his family; if he knew he had five years, he might go back to practicing medicine. The prospect of his death forced him to ask: Have I spent my time wisely?

Yom Kippur causes us to confront not only the prospect of our own death, but also the deaths of the people we love. During our Yizkor service, we recite aloud the names of people who have died since last we met on Yom Kippur -- those people whose presence in our sanctuary must this year be no more than a memory, no more than the empty pew where once they sat, no more than the soaring melody that once moved them to tears, and now, in turn, moves us to tears.

[4] The Hebrew word for “ark” is *aron*; so too, the Hebrew word for “casket” is *aron*.

It's been said that grief is the price we pay for love. Jewish tradition affirms that this is true. Our sages teach that the dead are never really gone -- that the space between the living and the dead is "a window, not a wall."[5] Grief is love passing through that window.

But even this is only a cold comfort. Even if we might commune with them in our grief, our dead remain forever dead. Although we may carry them along with us to every family *simcha*, they cannot, in any real way, walk us down the aisle at our wedding or hold our newborn child. Their presence will always only be by way of absence -- which causes us to miss them all the more.

Where Rosh Hashanah raises up the potential of new life, Yom Kippur reminds us that we all must meet our end. Like Michael Bahler simultaneously preparing for the birth of his child and the death of his mother, we are forced, on the High Holidays, to face both the beginning and end of life.

When this happens, it would not be unreasonable to lament how quickly time passes -- how the 85-year-old great-grandmother holding a new baby was once a new baby herself. It would not be unreasonable to wish for a firmer boundary between joy and sorrow -- how on Monday, we might be digging in the sandbox with a favorite niece, shoveling sand into a toy dump truck; and on Tuesday, we are burying her grandmother, shoveling earth onto the lid of a casket.

In a way, it is this -- the problem of mortality -- that all religions,[6] at their core, seek to address. Many religions, from the ancient Egyptians onward, solve that problem by holding up the promise of an afterlife -- an eternal heaven that allows us to transcend our death. We Jews also believe that there is a gateway to immortality -- but we differ from other religions on one critical point. We believe that we achieve immortality not through our death, but rather, through our participation in birth.[7]

Birth, the creation of life, is our antidote to death. Birth may not allow us to live forever, but it does allow us to extend ourselves beyond our mortal boundaries.

By birth, we do not exclusively mean biological birth -- though that, of course, is certainly a part of our immortality. The children who carry our genetic code do, in a very concrete way, allow

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[5] Simcha Paull Raphael, "Grief and Bereavement," in *Jewish Pastoral Care*, ed. Friedman, p. 426.
[6] Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens*, p. 266-267: "Of all mankind's ostensibly insoluble problems, one has remained the most vexing, interesting and important: the problem of death itself. Before the late modern era, most religions and ideologies took it for granted that death was our inevitable fate. Moreover, most faiths turned death into the main source of meaning in life. Try to imagine Islam, Christianity, or the ancient Egyptian religion in a world without death. These creeds taught people that they must come to terms with death and pin their hopes on the afterlife, rather than seek to overcome death and live forever here on earth. … That is the theme of the most ancient myth to come down to us -- the Gilgamesh myth of ancient Sumer. … He returned home empty-handed, as mortal as ever, but with one new piece of wisdom. When the gods created man, Gilgamesh had learned, they set death as man's inevitable destiny."
[7] This idea is articulated beautifully in Leon Kass's article "L'Chaim and Its Limits": https://www.firstthings.com/article/2001/05/lchaim-and-its-limits-why-not-immortality

some part of ourselves to live even after we have died. We may stumble across an old childhood photo of our long-dead parent and startle at how much that face looks like our own child's.

But our gateway to eternal life[8] is wider still than this. We human beings are more than just a face. We are made not just of our genetics -- but rather, of our ideas, values, and beliefs, our traditions, hopes, and stories. Equally to our DNA, it is this -- our humanity -- that we are able to extend beyond the boundary of our death. When our children inherit our values, when our students advance our ideas, when the causes we've championed are taken up by others, when our stories are retold by the people whose lives we've touched -- some part of us is reborn in the world, even long after we have died.

This, then, is our task: to create, to teach, to build, to serve -- to prove through our actions that birth is stronger than death. This is why, on the High Holy Days, we are forced to confront both the beginning and the end of life -- to force us to choose how we will live: in constant fear of our eventual death, or inspired by the fact that we ever were born.

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"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." There is a time to be born. And there is a time to die. And in between them, there is a messier time -- where birth must collide with death, where joy must meet with sorrow, where victory and pain and defeat all must intermingle: a tangled, disorderly time known as life.

On the High Holy Days, we pray that we might be inscribed in the Book of Life. Like all good books, our lives must come to an end. And like all good books, our lives will contain many stories that are messy and left unresolved. But like all good books, even after they are finished and have been put back on the shelf, our life's story can always be retold -- and in this way, it will outlast us. We may close the cover and kiss the binding, but the story is written forever -- forever inscribed, the Book of our Life.

[8] For a stirring narrative exploration of this theme, see Dara Horn's novel *Eternal Life*.