

What is the Next Chapter in Your Book of Life?

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro
Yom Kippur Morning, 2020/ 5781
Temple Akiba of Culver City

The late Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, once shared: "I would like to be remembered as someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability."

These powerful words from a prophet in our own day reach into the depths of our souls.

Justice Ginsberg's wisdom reminds me of an article by Rabbi and Scholar Jonathan Sacks. Rabbi Sacks wrote about a man named Alfred, who in 1888 read his *own* obituary in the morning paper. It turns out the journalist made an error, and it was Alfred's brother who had died.

But it was not so much seeing his own name that shocked Alfred. It was the message of the obituary. He was described as "**the dynamite king**" as he had made his fortune from manufacturing explosives.

Alfred decided then and there that he did not want his legacy to be one of destruction. Rather, he wanted to be remembered for building a better world. And so, he used his riches to fund five annual awards in the areas of physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace. Alfred's last name was, of course, **Nobel**. Indeed this is the genesis of the annual Nobel Prize.¹

Alfred Nobel had a wake up call - giving him the opportunity to ask himself the most important question Yom Kippur demands of us: "**What chapter in the book of life am I going to write?**"

Friends, our liturgy today is complicated. In the *Unetane tokef* prayer, our tradition teaches: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed." ... The prayer goes on, depicting a God who is writing out every detail about who shall live and who shall die.

It's a heavy theology.

I was debating it with teens in our High School program recently. Not one of them agreed that God is sitting there with an **Apple Pencil** in hand determining our future. In fact, one participant suggested that this kind of theology is enough to turn people away from religion.

I think there is truth to this.

And so we have to remember: this prayer about who shall live and who shall die This prayer was written by a human being, and it is one of *many* theologies that Judaism teaches.

While it's not the theology I find comfort in, however, it is still a prayer that motivates me. Why? Because it reminds me that our time on earth is finite. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. I have this day, this hour, this **moment in time** to make a difference. I can't allow God to take sole authorship over my life.

¹ <https://www.yonkertribune.com/2015/09/what-chapter-will-we-write-in-the-book-of-life-by-rabbi-jonathan-sacks>

On this Yom Kippur, we close the current chapter and begin to write the next. **What will yours look like?**

Now, just contemplating the next chapter can be difficult, as we are often paralyzed, stuck in the current chapter. Sometimes it's hard to move forward if we are in a time in our lives that is not going all that well. We aren't alone. Let's look at some examples in history:

What chapter was Nelson Mandela in when he was in jail?

What chapter was Steven Spielberg in when he was rejected from the USC school of film for the 3rd time?

What chapter was Colonel Sanders in when his chicken recipe was rejected for the 1000th time?

Our sacred text is filled with similar examples. Let's look at **Jonah**, the hero of our biblical narrative that we will read later this afternoon. Jonah was the prophet who, fleeing God's call to go to Ninaveh, instead boarded a ship heading for Tarshish. We recall the highlights of the story.

There is a huge storm, and all the sailors pray to their gods.

They cast lots and determine that the cause of the storm rests on Jonah who demands they throw him overboard. Instead, the sailor pray to Adonai, Jonah's God, the God of the Hebrews.

But the storm does not cease, and reluctantly they throw Jonah off the ship.

A great fish then swallows Jonah, and he remains in its belly for three days. There Jonah prays to Adonai from the depths of the fish. Finally, the fish spews Jonah onto dry land And at that point, Jonah heeds God's call, and goes to Ninaveh.

What life chapter was Jonah in when he ran away from responsibility? I think we've all been there.

What life chapter was Jonah in when he wanted to end it all, telling the sailors to throw him overboard? Some of us have been there as well.

What life chapter was Jonah in when he was in the belly of the great fish - literally at rock bottom? Yes, many of us have been there too.

Whether we are running away or contemplating life's end or hitting rock bottom ... We need to remember that we can write a new chapter. I am reminded of a long time member of Temple Akiba, Odette Lieberman of blessed memory. Odette was a fine French lady, a Holocaust Survivor, and an active member of our community. Odette used to say, "when life becomes difficult, turn the page."

How?

According to career strategist, Jan Johnston Osburn, if we are in a chapter that we don't particularly like, we can keep in mind that there is always an opportunity to change the story. It's not over until the last sentence has been written.²

So how do we begin this next chapter? First and foremost,

Leave the pain behind (let go of grudges, toxic stuff, etc). And then ...

Be kind to yourself

Make a contribution to something important

Stop being around bad people

Surround yourself with good people

Embrace happiness

Start today

(Shirley Hirschberg, a long time member of Temple Akiba whose life passion is to help people through all this, to help them through difficult chapters in life by guiding them through difficult transitions. Shirley is a true hero.)

I want to share a concept for how we can start today. A colleague, Rabbi Danny Cohen of Stamford, Ct. recently wrote a book entitled, "What Will They Say About You When You're Gone?" In it, he discusses the concept of discovering your "**Elijah Moment.**"

Let me share in Rabbi Cohen's words: "*What does it mean to discover your Elijah moment? The concept emerges from the "standing room only" phenomenon at a funeral. We've all experienced it before. You go to the funeral of a loved one and notice that there's a person there whom you don't recognize. If you could ask the deceased who the person was, he or she wouldn't know either. If you ask the family, they don't know either. Yet the person stands on the side to honor the deceased because of one moment in time when he or she made a difference in their life. Perhaps it was a fleeting encounter, when one human touched another and made an indelible impact.*"³

Why is this called an Elijah moment? We are mostly familiar with Elijah as the prophet who comes to our homes for Passover Seder. We open the door and sing, "Eliyahu Hanavi." We welcome Elijah as a symbol that the world can become a better place.

But this Passover encounter with Elijah is based on a much broader understanding of Elijah throughout Jewish history. You see, we are taught that Elijah has appeared many times in every generation to help humanity. Elijah appears as the great mediator bridging the generation gap. Elijah appears as a jovial presence bringing levity to synagogue life. Elijah appears throughout Chagall's colorful artwork as a symbol of comfort.

What we ultimately learn is that Elijah is not a remote prophet. Rather, Elijah is revealed through the works of each human being who strives to make the world better. We can enter someone's life so they can experience an Elijah Moment. How will you embody Elijah in your next chapter?

² <https://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/time-write-new-chapter-your-life-five-ways-get-you-started.html>

³ ibid

I witnessed an Elijah moment the other day as I was waiting to exit a parking garage. The car at the front was taking a long time because the driver could not find his credit card. Horns were blaring as impatient people were getting frustrated. I then saw a person jump out of her car and run to the front. She took out her own credit card, paid the \$2.00, smiled a REAL smile, and ran back.

The driver who had been blocking traffic will most likely never see this woman again.

Who was this woman? Elijah.

Another example ... About a year ago I had just boarded a flight, and I was seated toward the back. As passengers in front were finding spaces for their bags, an older gentleman was having difficulty lifting his carry-on to the overhead bin. I could see the disgruntled looks on people's faces, as they wanted to get settled but were delayed. A bunch of people were sitting nearby just staring. One person spoke up, "This lousy airline, there aren't enough flight attendants to help."

Just then, another passenger jumped up from his seat and helped the elderly man.

Yes, this other passenger was also Elijah.

Folks, it's not about performing random acts of kindness. I don't buy that. It's about creating focus in our lives that we be mindful and filled with purpose. As we write this next chapter in our book of life, let's harness Elijah - and make a difference for others. What will your first Elijah moment be in 5781?

While I didn't come up with this Elijah moment concept, as most people know, I do write a weekly blog entitled, "**A Moment in Time**." Its purpose? To focus our perspective to capture the small, incredible things that happen each and every day. People often ask, "How do you come up with a new idea each week?" I'll let you in on a secret. I don't! My messages are very similar in focus: *there are miracles out there at all times. Just open your eyes and be part of them, for just a moment in time.* When we embrace these moments, we are writing our next chapter in the Book of Life.

When I first started writing my message for today, the original title was, "What chapter of your life are you in?" But as I wrote, my thought process evolved. While we need to be reflective of our journey that got us here, it's so important to turn the page and write a new chapter in our book of life.

There are so many possibilities that can help us begin the next chapter. I read in the headlines just this week, "Justice Ginsberg spent her final weeks living as if their would be many more."

This headline made me think of my father, Dennis, and I will close with this.

First, a little background. Whenever our extended family is together, whether in person or now, on zoom, we make time to go around the room and share what is happening in our lives. Our tradition is to start with the youngest and work our way up to the oldest. Our last call was just 10 days ago on Rosh Hashanah. There were about 20 of us spanning over 85 years of age. Each person began with sharing how they are related to a common matriarch or patriarch, and then he or she would update us. For the past few years, my father has been the last to speak, as he is the oldest at 87. Dad was diagnosed almost 3 years ago with Pancreatic cancer. When he spoke, my father said, "**My hope is to be the last speaker for many more reunions to come.**" Dad isn't dying with cancer. He is living.

Dad, you are writing a new chapter in your book of life. Thank you for giving us inspiration to remember that we all have the opportunity to ascend from the belly of Jonah's great fish into the dawn of a new opportunity.

Elohai N'Shama shenata bi, t'hora hi. Oh God, the soul You have given me is pure. I have the ability to wake up to this year refreshed and ready. As we write our next chapters in this Book of Life, guide us with wisdom, smile upon us with comfort, and inspire us to make the world better, one moment at a time.