

Yizkor 5777: The Book of Life

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We speak, on these days, of a book of life.

But we come to Yizkor cognizant of another book: the book of those whose lives have ended, the book of those we mourn.

And the finality of the memorial prayers reminds us of the distance between those books, of the living and of the dead; just as we gently placed earth on the casket, so too do we now use words. Our loved ones are, we pray, *tachat canfei haShekhina* – sheltered in the wings of the Divine presence. Wherever they are, they are not here. The line between life and death feels painfully clear when we remember those we have lost, when we feel their absence beside us.

But I want to share with you a story that suggests those lines are not always so clear.

There was a great act of chesed, of lovingkindness, in the Montreal Jewish community this past year. Many of you know that Rabbi Ron Aigen, who served as the rabbi of Dorshei Emet for forty years, died suddenly, just before his retirement this past May. For me, he was a mentor, a colleague and a friend, deeply spiritual, humble and humorous, always learning. When I lived in Montreal twenty years ago, his was my congregation, and he was my rabbi. He was deeply beloved, in his community and far beyond its walls.

An article soon after Rabbi Aigen's death shared a picture from a tribute in his honour. The inscription on the cake read: "Ron's heart will go on."

Ron's heart may have stopped. But his liver has gone on. And his kidneys. And his eyes. I spoke with his widow, Carmela, and share with her permission, the story of his choice. The family did not know he had signed up to be an organ donor, but when the moment came, they were told and they agreed. They sat vigil with him, waiting for death to be declared so that the gift of life could be made. "He was so traditional in many ways," Carmela told me, "but he wanted to give life." And despite the misconception that Judaism is against organ donation, Ron knew that there is no greater mitzvah than saving another's life.

Carmela shared with me the letter from one of his recipients. This is how it reads:

Dear donor family: Please accept our condolences on the loss of your loved one. The generosity and life-saving gift will always be on my mind and in my heart. I am so grateful for receiving this liver, as is my family... We are blessed with two sons and six grandchildren. This incredible gift is making it possible for me to see my grandchildren marry. You and your family donor will always be a part of my life, for which always our family will be grateful. God bless.ⁱ

What a phenomenal blessing – to give life, even with one's death. To add pages to someone else's book. "We were so inspired by it," Ron's son said, "look how Abba is still alive in other people." And so he is.

This year witnessed another significant story: physician Paul Kalanathi's book, *When Breath Becomes Air*. Paul, a neurosurgeon, was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer at the age of thirty-six. He chronicled his illness with a memoir; the epilogue is from his wife Lucy, written after his death. Soon after his diagnosis, Paul and Lucy have to decide whether or not to have a child, knowing that if they do so, Paul will almost certainly not live to see her grow. They do decide to conceive, and he describes being present at her birth, lying on his hospital cot in the room as Lucy labours. Of holding his newborn daughter, Paul writes:

They wrapped her in blankets and handed her to me. Feeling her weight in one arm, and gripping Lucy's hand with the other, the possibilities of life emanated before us. The cancer cells in my body would still be dying, or they'd start growing again. Looking out over the expanse ahead I saw not an empty wasteland but something simpler: a blank page on which I would go on.ⁱⁱ

Painfully few pages later, Lucy begins her epilogue with these words: "Paul died... surrounded by his family, in a hospital bed roughly two hundred yards from the labor and delivery room where our daughter, Cady, had entered the world eight months before."ⁱⁱⁱ She will become her own person; she will write her own book. And yet, she continues her father's. *A blank page on which I would go on.*

Two remarkable stories, each, in different ways, a death that led to life. The books may not be quite so separate after all. But as much as these stories inspire, we too can write our own.

Last Sunday, when we visited Temple's cemeteries, I bore witness to love that lives on, to lives that stay present in our books. A widower standing silently and lovingly by the grave of his wife. Parents, decades later, still grieving the loss of a child. Grandparents remembered by a third generation, trying to carry their legacy on.

A man at the grave of his father, who had died at the age of forty-two. "I came here before my bar mitzvah, before my wedding. I still come here to talk to him," he said. "I don't always listen to what he says," he remarked with a smile, "but he always lifts me up."

That same spirit is here, today. Every time we remember those we love; every time we open our ears and our hearts to their voices, trying to discern what they might have said or done; every time we tell their stories; every time we learn from what they did wrong or what they did right, we write them back into the book of life. We carry them forward in the books of our lives.

Lucy Kalanathi writes:

I expected to feel empty and heartbroken after Paul died. It never occurred to me that you could love someone the same way after he was gone, that I would continue to feel such love and gratitude alongside the terrible sorrow, the grief so heavy that at times I shiver and moan under the weight of it. Paul is gone, and I miss him acutely nearly every moment, but I somehow feel I'm still taking part in the life we created together... Caring for our daughter, nurturing relationships with family, publishing this book, pursuing meaningful work, visiting Paul's grave, grieving and honoring him, persisting... my love goes on – lives on – in a way I'd never expected.^{iv}

It is true of Dr. Kalanathi; it is true of Rabbi Aigen. And it is true of all those we remember today.

Kotveinu b'sefer hachayim – write us in the book of life. *Chotmeinu b'sefer hachayim* – seal us in the book of life. And when our days are done, may our lives continue in others' books: just as we remember our loved ones now, inscribing them in the books of our lives.

ⁱ Letter shared by permission.

ⁱⁱ Paul Kalanathi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (London: 2016), pp.195-96.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.201.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp.223-24.