

The Book of Life is Open: Choose Life

The Book of Life: 'Birds sing after a storm; why shouldn't people feel as free to delight in whatever sunlight remains to them?' Rose Kennedy

I'm a big fan of local radio and often listen to BBC Radio Manchester. One morning I was listening to the presenter interview a gentleman called Tariq from Cheetham Hill who had set up a food bank out of his shop, feeding hundreds of people – volunteering alongside his family members and friends, including his young son. The presenter, Becky, asked, what motivated you to start the food bank? Tariq answered – 'a few weeks ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I thought, what can I do? And I decided to start the food bank'. The presenter was clearly affected by Tariq's answer as out of such darkness Tariq did something really beautiful. I can only hope that I respond to difficult times and news with such kindness, purpose and deeds.

Of course, over the past few months we've all been challenged in various ways – our movements restricted, our jobs threatened, our finances stretched, our health affected. Maybe we've lost a loved one, been unable to grieve with community as we need to. We've home-schooled, got used to face masks, cautiously returned to shops and restaurants. We're side-stepping on pavements as we cross paths with people, explaining to our children why they can't see their friends or grandparents. We've been left in homes where we don't feel safe, or places where we can't easily access outside place. We've lived alone, without touch. Been confused by changing guidance. Despondent when new restrictions were again imposed. Our relationships have been tested and sometimes broken. So many challenges.

One way of seeing how we are all collectively feeling is to look at what people have been searching for on Google. Apparently, there have been questions searching for clarity, certainty and a way out – when will there be a vaccine? When will lockdown finish? What *are* the current restrictions? Desperately looking for the end of this intense time. A lot of confusion is behind other questions like – what is furlough? What does the R rate mean?

We've been learning a new language and seeking clarity. How to make a face mask? Who *is* Joe Wickes?! Additionally, there was an increase in searches on mental health and around finding meaning in the midst of the challenges and chaos. Here at Jackson's Row we've seen this turn towards meaning, with more people coming to services than ever and more enquiries about becoming part of our community.

Of course, our High Holy Day period is well ahead of us – asking the same questions which we furiously type into our search bars: What's my value? What does it all mean? Who am I? Why? One prayer, *Unnateh Tokef*, which we'll hear sung towards the end of the service, answers our questions by reminding us of the fragility of life. The prayer mentions the book of life, opened on the New Year and continues:

'B'Rosh Hashanah - On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass away and how many shall be born...who shall live and who shall die...who shall reach the end of their days and who shall not.'

Our liturgy will, time and time again, return us to the terrifying reality before us – that we are mortal and, that, ultimately, we are not in control. Perhaps, this year more than any other, we feel this – we've experienced this feeling with every fibre of our being. It can all change in an instant. These feelings, and associated thoughts, can be completely overwhelming.

Reminding us of our mortality may well be a strange answer to our searching questions but, our liturgy primes us, not for despair, but for hope. The prayer continues and says 'prayer, charity and good deeds can transform the harshness of our reality'. Our texts tell us that finding meaning and beauty in our lives doesn't deny the harshness of our reality, but it offers us a way through the pain. Our ancient words, crafted through many moments of hardship and persecution, shout across the ages and says – yes - you will experience pain and grief and life is uncertain - but the book of life is open – change, possibility, hope, meaning are all here for the taking. Because of the fragility and pain – let go, choose life, find meaning, beauty, and holiness and live!

I believe that the book of life, and our High Holy Days, are a call to action – heralded by the shofar blast. The sound of the shofar wakes us up to the fact that we are living – in this moment we are alive – there is nothing else, no past and no future. We are here, now, together. Our tradition demands that we listen to its core message – **there is always the possibility of finding meaning.** There is always beauty to be found in even the darkest and most uncertain of times. As Anne Frank famously said, 'I don't think of all the misery, but of all the beauty that remains.'

Victor Frankl (an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor) lived through hell – a time and a place much worse that I have experienced and can even imagine. Yet, from the pits of the concentration camp he told stories of finding beauty, connection, meaning in a time when hate, mass murder and deep injustice was everywhere. 'It did not really matter what we expected from life', he wrote, 'but rather what life expected from us.' Victor Frankl's central message was that a person's search for meaning is the primary motivation in their life. This is the question and demand from *life to us* – to find meaning, whatever that is for us, and beauty in every moment, just as Tariq did.

We can see this with the lockdown – the pain, the loss was real – so many people died without loved ones with them, food banks overwhelmed with demand, children going hungry. The reality of racism, deeply part of our society, was seen clearly with the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor – and so many others. Overwhelming pain and anger. Can we find meaning and love alongside it? What would that look like for you? Is it by throwing yourself into activism, as Marcus Rashford has? Is it by being able to finally appreciate the small and vital things in life – a garden, a walk around the neighbourhood, neighbours, care workers, NHS staff, social workers, delivery drivers, teachers and so many more.....Have we been awakened to both the pain *and* the love that we as humans are capable of?

We know, on some level, when we are attuned to it, that the flow of life and death are as one – something which our festivals enjoin us to recognise. Pain and love, life and death, are two sides of the same coin. All this is absolutely *not* to say that the pain we are feeling or the challenges we are facing, are fair, just or right. It is not to say that we are tested through our pain or suffering. It is not to say that we couldn't have find meaning and purposes in other gentler ways.

Finding meaning also, does not mean that when there is a clear cause of our suffering, we become a martyr and zen like and accept the cause of our suffering. We remove pain and injustice where we can.

And, turning to life and finding meaning, does not mean that we avoid the pain – we must go through it, we can't hide from it because it will always find us. But when we are ready, when the pain isn't too great, too overwhelming, through the tears and the screams, on the days that we are able to - we run to the open book of life and say loudly – I am living. I want meaning. I choose life. I am making a conscious decision to live.

Like a tapestry, we know that the reality of such a piece of art is that it's messy – think of all those threads at the back, interwoven, no order, just chaos and mess. We know this is the reality of our life, of creation. We also know that each of those threads, each of us, are necessary and beautiful for we individually add value and worth to our world. Instead of becoming stuck in the messiness we can step back and marvel at the chaotic colour and we can choose to turn the tapestry around and look at the evolving picture – to find the beauty despite of and because of the mess and pain.

On this day – the anniversary of the creation of the world we can task ourselves to remember that in every moment the book of life is open – available to us – and we can ask ourselves – what is meaningful to me? What is beautiful? The Book of Life is Open – choose to live.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's will. Amen.

Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen

Rosh Hashanah, 5781