

The Other Notebook

Kol Nidre (BCS 5787) - Rabbi Uriel Romano

My wife Lei's favorite movie is *The Notebook*. A beautiful romantic movie that makes both of us cry. It is the story of an older man who reads, from a notebook, a love story to a woman living in a nursing home. At the end of the movie – and I don't want to ruin the plot for anyone who hasn't seen it, but come on, the movie came out in 2004! – the woman, who suffers from dementia, suddenly realizes that this is her own story. **Allie recognizes Noah. She recognizes herself in the pages of that notebook.**

Notebooks, agendas, diaries – they have mostly gone out of fashion. But for generations, for centuries, they held a central place in our lives. We used them for grocery lists, for appointments, for reminders, and also as personal diaries. Maybe somewhere you still have a diary from your childhood. Maybe you remember a movie where an entire plot begins because someone discovers an old notebook.

Writing things down is not only a human activity. **In Judaism, it is also a divine one.** During these days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the metaphor of books and writing is everywhere. God is a Judge, and the **Talmud imagines three books opened before God on Rosh Hashanah** (b. Rosh Hashanah 16b). Pirkei Avot tells us that this is not something God does only during these Ten Days of Repentance. Throughout the year: **הַפִּנְקָס פְּתוּחַ וְהַיָּד כּוֹתֶבֶת** *"The notebook is open and the hand is writing."* (Pirkei Avot 3:16)

There is a *pinkas*, a ledger, a notebook, somewhere in Heaven. It has your name on it. My name. Our names. And the hand keeps writing. And then, tomorrow morning during *Unetaneh Tokef*, we will say: **וְתַפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזְכָּרוֹנוֹת וּמֵאֱלֵיו יִקְרָא וְחוֹתָם יֵד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ** *"You open the Book of Remembrance... and the signature of every person is in it."* God opens the book. But somehow, our own hand is there too.

A Journey into the Past

Before moving into the present, like in the movie *The Notebook*, let us travel into the past. We are in the Land of Israel, more precisely in Jerusalem, let's say sometime in the fifth century BCE. We are farmers, artisans, shepherds living in Judea. And one day we realize that we made a mistake. We transgressed one of the commandments. Perhaps *bishgagah*, unintentionally. Perhaps *bibli Daat*, without awareness. We recognize honestly that we did something we should not have done.

What do we do? The Torah, our ancient Jewish constitution, gives us a system. For certain inadvertent transgressions, a person would come to the Temple with a *korban chatat*, a sin offering. Not every sin had an animal attached to it. And certainly Judaism never taught that someone could intentionally do whatever he wanted, buy a sheep the next morning, and magically erase what he had done. The sacrifice was never a magic ritual. The person bringing the sacrifice had to recognize what he had done. **He placed his own hands upon the animal. He confessed. He named the wrongdoing. The Kohen then performed the sacrificial service. The animal did not replace teshuvah. The ritual was supposed to give physical expression to teshuvah.** Maimonides later makes this explicit: even when the Temple existed, a sacrifice alone did not atone without repentance and confession. You could not outsource your conscience to a Kohen. You could not purchase innocence with an animal. **But that was the way, through sacrifices for over 1000 years to atone for our mistakes. The ritual was essential for the process of cleansing.**

But then the Temple was destroyed. No altar. No sacrifices. No Kohanim performing the Temple service. So now what? How do we go home after doing something wrong? How do we deal with an error once it has already happened? How do we live with the knowledge that something we did cannot simply be undone?

What Replaced It

This is not a new question. Our teachers began asking about it almost two thousand years ago. What do we do without sacrifices? What replaces them? Our tradition offers multiple answers.

In one rabbinic understanding, our **fixed prayers** correspond to the daily offerings of the Temple (b. Berakhot 26b). Words begin to occupy the space once occupied by animals. The prophet Hosea had already said: **קחו עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי ... וְנִשְׁלָמָה פְּרִים שְׁפָתֵינוּ** "**Take words with you and return to God... and let our lips replace the bulls.**" (Hosea 14:3)

Another rabbinic teaching says that when we cannot perform the sacrifices, **studying** their laws becomes significant in itself (b. Menachot 110a).

And yet Avot DeRabbi Natan tells us that after the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai comforted Rabbi Yehoshua by telling him that we still possess another means of atonement: **gemilut chasadim**, acts of lovingkindness (Avot DeRabbi Natan 4:5).

Prayer. Torah. Kindness. Tzedakah. All become part of the Jewish vocabulary of repentance and repair. But none of them are magic either. You cannot hurt someone and then give \$100 to charity and declare the account settled. You cannot behave terribly all day, say the Shema three times, and imagine that you have purchased forgiveness. You cannot replace sincere change with a ritual.

Maimonides says it very simply: במנן הזה שאין בית המקדש קיים ואין לנו מזבח כפרה אין שם - *Now, when the Temple no longer stands and we have no altar of atonement, there remains nothing but teshuvah.*" (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:3)

There is no magic ritual. There is teshuvah. **But today I want to offer you a tool for teshuvah.**

Rabbi Ishmael's Notebook

But before a story about **Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha** who was one of the great rabbinic figures of the early generations after the destruction of the Temple. **The Talmud tells us that the Sages prohibited reading by the light of an oil lamp on Shabbat because they were afraid that a person might become distracted and adjust the wick in order to improve the flame**, an act prohibited on Shabbat.

Rabbi Ishmael said to himself: I can read next to the lamp. I will not adjust it. **And as happens so often with the things we tell ourselves we will never do, he did exactly what the Rabbis feared. He realized that he had violated Shabbat. Had the Temple still been standing, he would have known the ritual framework associated with an inadvertent transgression.** But there was no Temple. So what did he do? The Talmud does not tell us that he donated

money. It does not tell us that he recited a special prayer twenty times. It does not tell us that he performed a random act of kindness in order to make himself feel better.

It says: **ישמעאל בן אלישע קריתי והטיתי נר** "And he wrote in his notebook." **וכתב על פנקסו** *"I, Ishmael ben Elisha, read and adjusted a lamp on Shabbat. When the Temple is rebuilt, I will bring a choice sin-offering."* (b. Shabbat 12b)

He took out a notebook and wrote down his transgression. He did not simply write: "I messed up." He wrote his name. He wrote exactly what he had done. In the spirit of the rabbinic idea that confession requires us to give words to our wrongdoing – *I did such and such* – he named it. And then he wrote what he intended to do about it when the opportunity became available.

And this is my proposal on this sacred day: **If Heaven has a notebook with our names in it, perhaps it would be good for each of us to have a notebook with our own actions in it.**

"And My Sin Is Ever Before Me"

More than a thousand years later, in medieval Germany, among the pietists of Ashkenaz, we find the same practice. *Sefer Hasidim*, a major ethical work associated especially with Rabbi Yehudah HeHasid of Regensburg (d. 1217) says in section #21 that **the pious of earlier generations would write down their transgressions so that they could confess them, remember them, regret them and do teshuvah.** This tradition is based in the verse: **וְחַטָּאתִי נִגְדִי תָמִיד** *"My sin is ever before me."* (Psalm 51:5)

And then it adds something fascinating. **Write them privately. Even cryptically. So no one else will see them. Almost eight hundred years ago, a Jewish teacher in medieval Germany was teaching his students to keep a private spiritual diary. Not for public confession. Not for applause. Not to show anyone how spiritual they were. A private conversation between a person, his conscience, and God.**

But here I want to add something that *Sefer Hasidim* does not say explicitly. **We do not write only so that we will remember. Sometimes we also need to write so that eventually we can let go. Not to humiliate ourselves. Not to mortify ourselves. Not to define ourselves by our**

worst moments. We write to become more humble. We write to recognize the marks we leave in this world. And then, eventually, we need to learn how to turn the page.

Notebooks Today

Many times as a rabbi, people come to me with questions that sound something like this: "Rabbi, I keep kosher, and without realizing it I ate something that was not kosher. What do I do now?" "Rabbi, I lost my temper with my child. I apologized. My child forgave me. But I can still hear the words that came out of my mouth." "I should have visited my father one more time before he died. I thought I had another week. I didn't. What do I do with that?" "I was not there for a friend when she needed me. By the time I understood it, the moment was gone." "I stayed silent when I should have spoken. The meeting ended. The decision was made. I cannot go back into that room." "I missed something important in my child's life because I was working. I cannot recreate that day."

There are mistakes that can be corrected. There are mistakes that require restitution. There are people from whom we still need to ask forgiveness. There are behaviors we still have the ability to change. And when that is possible, Judaism does not allow us to hide behind a notebook. But there are also moments that are simply gone. Words that cannot be unsaid. Opportunities that cannot be recreated. Decisions that cannot be reversed. People who are no longer alive for us to call.

And sometimes we have already apologized, already returned what we owed, already tried to repair what we could repair – and still the guilt remains. So what should my answer be? **Should I say: Give tzedakah and then you will feel better? Should I prescribe three Shema Israels so God will forgive you? Should I invent some ritual so that you can feel that now everything is clean? Perhaps some ritual can comfort us. Prayer can certainly transform us. Tzedakah can certainly make us better people. But there is no magic ritual that changes yesterday. The past is stubborn. What happened, happened. So what remains? Teshuvah. And sometimes, as a tool for teshuvah: A notebook and a pen.**

Today we write constantly. But usually we write publicly. Posts on social media. Responses to other people's posts. Pictures. Achievements. Vacations. Anniversaries. Promotions. The beautiful dinner. The smiling family. Social media is, by definition, curated. We write what we

want other people to know and remember about us. And there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. **Keep writing your achievements on social media.**

But in this notebook, write your other side. Because you are both. You are not only your highlight reel. But you are also not only your failures. Your accomplishments are real. Your mistakes are real. Your generosity is real. And that ugly thing you said yesterday was real too. You are both. This notebook is not for public confession, not for spiritual exhibitionism, and not for permanent shame.

We do not write down our mistakes every night in order to torture ourselves with them. We do not write them to say: this is who I am. We do not write them to magically expiate them. **The notebook is not there to accuse you. It is there to stop you from forgetting yourself.**

So we write. We write as an intellectual exercise in spiritual honesty, a daily **cheshbon hanefesh**, an accounting of the soul. **We write so that we do not simply dismiss what happened. We write because memory is fragile. We write so that tomorrow we might begin to notice patterns. That gesture. That word. That tone of voice. That half-truth. That unnecessary comment.** Those eyes that judged someone before giving them a second thought. That moment when I should have spoken and did not. That moment when I spoke and should have remained silent. We write so that isolated actions do not quietly become habits, and habits do not become our nature.

And then we close the notebook. We do not have to carry every mistake into tomorrow as a permanent sentence against ourselves. We mark it. And we turn the page. Literally and metaphorically.

Bookkeeping of Our Soul

Bahya ibn Paquda lived in eleventh-century Muslim Spain. In his *Chovot HaLevavot*, *The Duties of the Heart*, an entire section is devoted to what he calls **cheshbon hanefesh**, the accounting of the soul. He tells us that a person should regularly make an accounting between oneself and God. Ideally constantly, even hourly. And then he gives a very practical instruction: if you failed to do your accounting during the day, do it at night. And if a whole

day passed, return to it the next day. This is what we mean by **cheshbon hanefesh**. Bookkeeping of our soul.

We arrive at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and we try to remember the year that has passed. What did I do? Whom did I hurt? Where did I fail? Where did I become a little smaller than the person I want to be? Where do I need to change? But who remembers an entire year? Who remembers a small comment from eleven months ago? A tone of voice from January? A moment of arrogance from last November? A promise we made and slowly forgot? A life without memory becomes a life without responsibility.

And because our memory is fragile, we give ourselves a notebook. A notebook for responsibility, but also a notebook for release. A notebook that can make us more humble and more conscious, but also help free us from pains, anxieties and guilt over things about which there is truly nothing more we can do.

And this notebook I am talking about tonight is not only a metaphor. Tonight, each one of you will leave with a notebook. A notebook for the bookkeeping of your soul and your actions. And if you wish, every night, perhaps before saying the Shema, before going to sleep, take a few minutes.

Ask yourself:

What did I do today that I wish I had done differently? Is there something I can still repair? What do I want to do differently tomorrow? And write. Not ten pages. Not an autobiography. Maybe one sentence. Maybe three words. Write it so you do not pretend that nothing happened. Write it so you recognize the mark you left. Write it so you can learn from it tomorrow. But once you have written it, close the notebook. Do not let what is marked on that piece of paper remain permanently engraved upon your heart. Mark it and release it. Remember and move forward. Take responsibility and turn the page. With the same hand. With the same pen.

Chatimah Tovah,
Rabbi Uri