

CANTOR'S MESSAGE

September 2010

It's that time of the year again. The school season will be starting in a few days, and the High Holidays are coming too. From the time I was a young child, the picture of God inscribing us in the Book of Life on Rosh Hashannah and then putting his final stamp in the book on Yom Kippur, became a familiar sight emblazoned in my mind's eye. As a child, I imagined the image of an old man with white hair and a white beard sitting on a golden throne with a large book in his hands. As I matured, that image changed, but did the concept of being inscribed in the Book of Life change as well?

In the High Holiday liturgy we find the "Who shall live and who shall die" text. "Who by fire and who by water" etc. The very next line separating paragraphs reads "But repentance, prayer and charity avert the severe decree." Does any of this make any sense? The statisticians will tell you that we have a certain life expectancy which will determine who shall live and who shall die. So, does it really matter?

Who is the beneficiary of our prayers? Is it God? Honestly, I think not. When Jews offered animal sacrifices, was God nourished by the nice smell of the burning fat? If you believe that, you probably failed Theology 101. Who benefits if we repent and are charitable? I am often asked by a mourner why they can't say the Kaddish at home alone. Our tradition says that Kaddish is only recited in the presence of a minyan. The minyan must listen to the words of the Kaddish and respond at a certain place in the text. When the mourner hears the community respond, they know they are not alone in their grief but supported by others around them. Does this mean that if a mourner says Kaddish at home alone that it doesn't count? What exactly does making it count mean? Does the departed relative or God benefit in any way from the recitation of Kaddish? I think that the recitation of Kaddish makes the mourner feel better as does prayer in general. As a caring person, I cannot tell a mourner that their recitation of Kaddish doesn't count.

When we as a people fill our synagogues on the holidays, and we pray, and we seize the moment for introspection, for self examination to see how we can do better, we are the beneficiaries. Why then do we need to recite the same prayers over and over again every year? Perhaps because maybe we are not experts in prayer and using the written texts helps us to pray and to get to that higher spiritual plane.

My prayer for all of us is that we be enabled to pray, enabled to repent and enabled to attain that higher spiritual plane. If being inscribed in the Book of Life by that old man with white hair and a white beard, sitting on that golden throne, is important to you, I pray too that you be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year.

Shanah Tova,

Cantor Richard Nadel, Andrea, Abby, Josh, Seth and Zoe