

Meditations on a Fountain Pen --
 Writing Ourselves into the Book of Life
 Yom Kippur Morning, 5775
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Of pages long-written, commentary still to be scribed in the margins of time, it is a link to my mother and to the Book of Life that was hers. Of pages yet to be written, days and seasons turning, it is a reminder to me to write well in the Book of Life that is mine. In the years not long before she died, my mother gave me her fountain pen. It is old, probably given to her around the time she and my father married in 1947, her name tellingly inscribed on it as Sireen Reinstein, her married name, the letters faded now but still visible when turned just right to the light. She knew it would have meaning for me, knowing it would become something more than itself, a way of connection. I never did ask enough questions about it, who had given it to her, just when, was it my father, or someone else, too late to ask now, perhaps encouraging her to write, a young woman in a time of change, thoughts and feelings to be put to paper to help focus the way. I never saw her use the pen, but she filled the pages of her days in the way that she lived.

Lying on my desk by its bottle of ink, my mother's fountain pen is dark amber in color, translucent when held to the light, as sunshine glancing on pine-pitch crystals along the wooded trails she loved to walk. Rings of yellow circle the pen, subtly fading in and out of color, forming an interplay of light and shadow in their turning, as in the circle of life. Smooth and slender, comforting to the touch, the pen is not quite five inches in length when closed. There is a small gold-colored ring at the bottom of the cap, as love's token upon the finger, and just above it in similar hue, the familiar arrow of Parker pens that points the way. The nib is gold-plated, a little worn but no less precious, the point of contact with the page, where inner flow is given form in words of heart and soul, ever so slight the turning of a hand to form words of either hurt or healing. Referring to the pen's writing point, or even to the entire pen, nib can also be a verb, originally meaning to sharpen and split the end of a quill, but also meaning to mend or repair. The rounded end of my mother's pen unscrews from the barrel, revealing a clear piston with a small plunger top. With pen held into the ink, depressing the plunger creates a vacuum, allowing with its release for ink to flow up into the pen. A fountain pen is poetically called in Hebrew *עט נובע'א* / *et nove'a*, a flowing pen. Drawing two or three times, cleaning off excess ink and screwing the top back into place, setting the pen into the cap to extend its length, then blotting a bit to start the flow, and I am ready to write.

I use my mother's fountain pen only for special writing. I use it to inscribe books given as gifts, to fill out life-cycle certificates, my mother adding her *mazal tov*, as it were, on births among us, or in welcoming, encouraging, as she would do, young people in their awkward metamorphosis toward Jewish adulthood. I don't use the

pen in signing *ketubot*, wary of an ink blot upon a marriage contract to be framed. Yet, even such a blot would have meaning in its reminding of the entire journey the beloved have entered upon together, moments of imperfection, times when the sun feels blotted out. And I use my mother's pen to write special letters and cards, mostly to write letters, the kind you carefully fold upon completion, place in an envelope with a fitting stamp for the recipient, hold for a moment to insure intention, perhaps for some even to kiss the envelope, then to drop it in a mailbox. A cycle of anticipation begins, first in the sending, knowing that the recipient doesn't know that a letter is on the way, and then in the waiting for response, whether of time long or short, learning of patience and hope, the way of life itself.

During the month of Elul, the month of turning and connecting that leads to these Holy Days, I wrote several letters to people I needed to write to, to one of my daughters, to a former student. I wrote to my friend and colleague in Philadelphia, Rabbi Ira Stone. We are pen pals, each putting ink to paper as the primary mode of communication between us. We know each other's script, something of ourselves revealed in the forming of letters expansive and small, the color of ink and the ways of each other's pens. Ira adds the touch of sealing wax to his envelopes, emblazoned with his name and intricate swirls standing out in relief, a beautiful touch upon the ordinary, as once was ordinarily done. In truth, as acknowledged in the way of an Elul letter, I am the one who most often takes longer to respond, appreciating my friend's forbearance, each letter a gift both in its receiving and in its writing. We write several pages at a time, sharing of life both personal and professional, matters of health and family, trusting enough in each other to share ideas not fully formed, crossing out as needed, welcoming suggestions of direction and advice. With little need to explain their meaning and virtues, sometimes we even discuss fountain pens, writing with the implements of whose mechanisms and ways we try to understand, of where to purchase or repair, and of what our children think of such quirkiness.

There is much to be learned in the use of a fountain pen, ways so obvious and ordinary when we think about it, but elusive in a society and time that values speed and perfection. A ball point pen is easier, and, then again, a computer is a whole lot easier. In getting ready to write with a fountain pen, the preparation allows for *kavanah* / *intention* to form, time in which to focus. Intention before writing, before signing off and sending can save us from the consternation of words released to the world too quickly. The writing can be scratchy at times, not always smooth going, so on the pages of life. All of the magic and messiness of life so near at hand, mistakes come to be accepted, part of the page, part of writing our lives. Picking up a fountain pen, one needs to dare to make mistakes, to believe that perfection is in the striving. Writing over a word we wish to change, or creating an ink blot to cover it, leaves the appearance of a palimpsest. I linger, then, wondering if the reader will try to look through the overlay of ink to decipher what I had written at first, trying to understand a mistake that perhaps really wasn't. It is the way of Torah, errors left by long ago scribes writing with a quill, mistakes that have become holy with time, left unchanged, even as we chant what we know a word should be. Taking time of necessi-

ty to draw from an outer well to fill an inner void, we are ready then to put words to page.

Meditations on a Fountain Pen -- Writing Ourselves into the Book of Life.... I used my mother's fountain pen for the first time soon after she died. I bought a bottle of ink at the Bromfield Pen Shop. Their motto declares, "Make Your Mark with Style." So many pens in the shop, pens of every style and type that speak to all the ways of our being and writing our lives, of personalities and moods as bright as the morning sun, others as deep and reflective as the dark of midnight, some with designs and images inlaid, so many ways to be and write of who we are. I held my breath as I dipped the pen into the ink that first time, having figured out as best I could what was once common knowledge. I had to get a feel for just how to hold the pen, at what angle to the paper the ink would flow most smoothly. It worked beautifully after all those years. There was something magical in that moment. I felt as though I was continuing to write my mother's story, adding commentary to her Book of Life. I understood more deeply, why I speak of the pen as "my mother's fountain pen," I as its keeper and caretaker. But it was really my own Book of Life that I was writing. The pen was now in my hand, writing and affirming my own connections, surely with my mother each time I use it, but also with others to whom I write, and, through the reflection that comes of such intentional writing, affirming connection with myself and the writing of life.

There are times when we feel blocked in our writing, as in our living. There are times when I wonder, in spite of myself, if I should put down my mother's fountain pen, realizing that what I most want to write in the Book of Life is not mine to write, the promise of life itself. It is one of the challenges through these days, through all of our days, one of the prayerful tensions that can block us on the path toward healing and wholeness. It is a tension in the *Machzor*, the prayerbook of these days whose name means cycle, telling of the cycle of life simply in our taking it up to hold in hand and near to heart. In the turning of seasons, the seasons of our lives and of time, our own time so short in the grand scheme, we don't know the length of our own days. From out of that not knowing, the greatest not knowing with which we live, we plead over and over again that we be remembered for life, that we be inscribed in the Book of Life. Sometimes these prayerful words stick in my throat even as I sing them and daven them. I think of people who are struggling with life, who are sick and in pain. I think of people who have died, an old friend even on erev Rosh Hashannah, and I wonder if that means they were not written into the Book of Life last year; some who were younger and for whom there should have been so many pages yet to fill; some who never quite came to be, little ones whose book was never written, at least not in the way that we would assume or want it to be.

In the very emphasis on life that pulsates through the *Machzor* is its instructive tension, loving and pleading. Every saying of the *Amidah* during these days, the prayer of rising up, of approaching God alone and together, is framed with a song of life. At the beginning of each saying of the *Amida*, we sing out: *Zochrenu l'chayyim*/זכרינו לחיים, *Melech chafetz ba'chayyim*/מלך הפץ בחיים, *V'chosvenu b'sefer ha'chayyim*/וכתבינו בספר החיים, *l'ma'ancho Elokim chayyim*/למענך אלקים חיים. We can't miss the cadence of life, over and

over, the word *chayyim*/חיים/*life* repeated four times in a prayerful plea of one sentence, *Remember us for life, Sovereign Who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, God of life. It jumps out, for Your sake, God. God needs us to live!* To the degree that tunes, *nigunim*, tell a story deeper than the words they carry, there is a melodic cycle that tells of the churning within ourselves, the tension between faith and fatalism, between living actively or passively in the face of all that life holds, ultimately in the face of death itself. From the doleful strains of the beginning, our first crying out for life, at the end of the *Amidah*, we sing out joyfully, even adding a *nigun* to get us in the mood, *ai, yai, yai, yai...*: *B'sefer chayim, b'racha v'shalom u'farnasa tovah, n'zocher v'nikosev l'fanecha, anachnu v'chol amcha beis Yisra'el, l'chayyim tovim u'l'shalom / In the Book of Life, blessing and peace and good sustenance, may we be remembered and inscribed before You, we and all Your people, the house of Israel, for good life and for peace.* It is a similar swirl through the *U'n'sane Tokef* prayer, beginning with the utter fragility of human life, *a broken shard, withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, a vanishing dream*, rising then to a crescendo of hope, a hint of immortality in the calling of our names, each of our names and all of ours, through God's name, *ush'menu koroso vish'mecha*/ושמנו קראת בשמיד, joined in the essence of who we are with God, forever.

All of the prayers for life are in the plural, as are all of the acknowledgements of sin, both the affirmation of life and of all that would deny life, said together, in each other's company, on each other's behalf. That is part of the message of these days, of these prayers. To be written in the Book of Life, we need each other. We need to be concerned for each other. We are all part of something greater than ourselves, the web of life itself that holds each of us and all of us together in its fragile weave. At the beginning of the *Amida*, it is all of God's creatures whom we plead for, questioning, even challenging God, *Who is like You..., Who remembers with compassion Your creatures for life?* At the end of the *Amida*, whatever our differences, whatever divides us as a people, we are one in our prayer for each other, *u'chsov l'chayyim tovim kol b'nei b'risecha*/בריתך/and inscribe for a good life all the people of Your covenant. The emphasis on life is meant to encourage, to soothe, to offer embrace, all of us held by God and by each other, for God's sake and for ours.

There is an urgency in the words of our prayers, in the unspoken pleas and fears the words carry. The words we sing out together, whether in major or minor mode, can be off-putting, frightening if we don't hear their deeper challenge. Even as we pray to be inscribed in the Book of Life, we know in our hearts that it is not simply about length of days, which if it was, would ironically leave us out of the equation because it is a matter about which we have so little control. But the shortness of life is the reality that impels us to look more deeply at what it means to be written in the Book of Life. We plead for life, for years, but that is not the same as being written in the Book of Life. That is up to us, we are the writers of our own lives, of how we live in the time we have. It is about living with meaning and purpose, living with concern for others and the world around us. The crowning word in the crescendo of hope that closes the *Amida*, that we be inscribed in the Book of Life, is *shalom*.

While the Machzor only hints at what it means to be written in the Book of Life, the Torah itself makes it clear. It is to choose life, to choose the way of our living. In the weeks leading up to these days, we read in *Parashat Nitzavim* Moses' great summation of the essence of Torah and of his life, now at its very end: *I have set life and death before you, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you may live/u'vacharta ba'chayyim* וּבַחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים -- *you and your children*. There is something here, too, that can take our breath away, make us want to cry out. The Torah knows as well as we do, as well as every human who has ever lived, that length of days is not in our hands. The Torah then offers its own *perush*, its own explanation of itself, of its own teaching, of what it means to choose life: *to love God, your God, to hearken to God's voice and to cling firmly to God; for that is your life and the length of your days/ki hu chayecha v'orech yamecha* כִּי הוּא הוֹאֵךְ וְיָמֶיךָ יִמְיָךְ. To love God, to love people, to walk humbly in God's ways, doing good and doing justly, this is the true measure and length of our days.

To choose life is to choose to write ourselves into the Book of Life. Our prayers to be inscribed then become an imperative for action, a call to live with purpose, to fill our days with depth of meaning, and to make the world a better place for our having been here. Surely, we pray for length of days, but it needs to be more than that, a prayer whose outcome is in our hands, each the scribe and the inscribed. Each of us can be as a fountain pen in God's hand, our prayers to be inscribed becoming as prayers for God to write with us in the Book of Life. Each of us is a wellspring of sacred ink, the fluid of life drawn from the depth of our souls, our essence expressed in the point of contact with the page, the point of repair, the nib giving form to words that tell of who we are. In that telling is affirmation of our presence and of our desire to live, our readiness to act for the sake of life. All that we do for good in this world inscribes us in the Book of Life, from simple acts of kindness, whether for strangers or loved ones, to the pursuit of justice and equality, to playing our part to insure that there will be a world in the future, one in which all people shall live in peace and unafraid. We write ourselves into the Book of Life by helping others to live, by helping ourselves to live, seeing and creating beauty, taking Shabbos time to breathe and behold. At whatever age we are, each day opens as its own page, and at the top a reminder, *u'vacharta ba'chayyim* וּבַחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים/choose life! When the writing is hard, I have an image, sometimes a sensation, of God's hand upon my own, "come, let's write together...."

In the way of writing ourselves, even with God's help, into the Book of Life, of writing the book of life that is each of ours to write, I learned recently of a little known eighteenth-century Chassidic rebbe, Rebbe Dovid Biderman of Lelov. On his deathbed, Rebbe Dovid was asked by his disciples which *sefer kodesh*, which holy book, he expected to learn with the Holy One in the world to come. For Rebbe Dovid, it would be none of the holy books of our people that sustained him in life. It would be *Sefer Dovid Lelover* that he would learn with the *Kodosh Boruch Hu*. "I have been writing that book all my life," he said, "and all my life, the Holy One has been writing commentary in the margins. And now, we are going to learn it together." Rebbe Dovid of Lelov never wrote a book of ink-on-paper pages bound between covers. Known for his compassion, for being an *ohev Yisro'el*/a lover of Israel, of every Jew re-

ardless of status or way, he was the *sefer* and he wrote upon its pages with his deeds.*

Of life teaching from another time and place, in approaching Yom Kippur this year, I came to appreciate an old joke in a very different way, delighting at the unexpected wisdom shining in the folk humor of a certain sort, of a certain era, in the American *shtetl*. There was a time, when as a veritable rite of passage, every Bar Mitzvah boy received a fountain pen. So arose the joke of the proverbial first line of the Bar Mitzvah speech, "today, I am a fountain pen!" If there is any day on which the old joke can be appreciated for its ironic wisdom, it is today, Yom Kippur, when through laughter and tears, we realize that we are each the instrument for writing ourselves into the Book of Life.

My mother would have appreciated the humor and its wisdom. She filled the pages of her life with warmth, with joy, more often of a quieter sort, drawing from an ink well of richly reflective depth, trees and flowers as pens upon the sky for her. She felt deeply the pain of the world, wishing to rewrite the story of so many lives, as of the young people she taught until the very day she came unknowing to the last page of her life. Helping others to turn the page and see the fresh expanse in each day's possibility, my mother knew that in the end it is for each of us to fill the pages of our own lives. Of those we remember, whose pages are complete in the Book of Life that was theirs, no longer to write in the way of body and soul together, of pen and ink, our *Yizkor* memories become as commentary on the pages of their lives. As a beloved fountain pen reminds, with each day's turning, it is for each of us, the living, to inscribe ourselves in the Book of Life.

*Learned with appreciation from Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin