

## Completing a Chapter in the Book of Life

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*for Mieke*

You know the feeling, when you just don't want the chapter to end, whether sitting by a winter fire or in the shade of a summer garden, all the seasons of life. Carried along on a current of human drama quickly flowing, richly textured characters, a gift to be in their company, not quite sure of where it will all go for them or for you, but intimations. How then to put down the book, even if to mark the page at chapter's end? Every bookmark a memento of places traveled to, marking pages in time, bringing one back to revisit notes upon the page, scribbled words that remind of thoughts that had come in a prior moment, now as love letters offering their light upon the way.

A book so full and beautiful, tear drops refracting the soul-light of all who have been part of its telling and of those who will write the next chapter, a prayer formed of prism hues, a rainbow arc that bends toward the future. It is our story, yours and mine, together Completing a Chapter in the Book of Life. It is the story of a community and of all of those who make it so. Long known and tenderly held by many, new and newer information for others, as I complete a chapter in the book of my life, stepping back in the coming summer as rabbi of Nehar Shalom, so the community is Completing a Chapter in the Book of Life that is its collective telling. So for each one who has been part of the story, the completing of a chapter in their own lives, each in their own way of connection, long-time members and new, leaders rising selflessly to the call, each one who is in this space now, even for the first time, all who are sharing in this sharing. In our presence, we are all part of the story of Nehar Shalom, each one needed for its continuing.

Conceived in the womb of an author's creative mind, characters don't write their own story even as they come to life. Within the bounds of what is in our hands to determine, authors and characters at once, giving shape to hope and praying it shall be, as in the life-informing ways of parenting, it is for us to write the successive chapters of our lives. As individuals inhabiting words and worlds of our own, and as individuals gathered into community, words and worlds joined, we are the authors and the characters in writing a living book, the Book of Life, and in the completing of its chapters. As we pray and ask God through these days to help us make it so, each of us taken note of by the Holy One and by each other, *בספר חיים ברכה ושלום / b'sefer chayyim b'racha v'shalom*, may we be inscribed in the Book of Life, blessing and peace, and of good sustenance, for the sake of good life, ever toward peace, *להיים טובים ולשלום / l'chayyim tovim u'l'shalom*.

In the telling of our story, a living book unfolding, as we tell it now and in time to come, there is only one who has been a partner in writing from the very first letter to this place of a chapter's completing; one who has been a source of blessing, of quiet courage and encouragement, unflagging in her attention to details great and small, renowned in her field, yet no detail of communal life too humble for the attention of her loving heart, her skilled hand, her incisive mind; only of one for whom to sing from the Song that is Solomon's, מַעַיִן גַּנִּים בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים / *ma'ayan ganim b'er mayyim chayyim/a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters* (Song of Songs, 4:15). That she not be simply one among the many, itself nevertheless the greatest honor for each of us, I want to acknowledge at the outset of this sharing the debt of loving gratitude owed by all of us to Mieke. I would draw on the words of Rabbi Akiva honoring his beloved Rachel, the burden of his calling upon his family, as he returned home with legions of students raised up through years of learning, "What is mine and what is yours is her's," שְׁלִי וְשֵׁלַחֶם שְׁלָהּ הִוא / *sheli v'shelachem shela hu* (Ketubot 62b-63a).

Though it embarrasses my beloved, I delight in saying that Nehar Shalom was conceived on our wedding night. Following our marriage, we came to Jamaica Plain, where Mieke had worked for years. While still in our wedding finery, we walked around the pond on a beautiful sunny spring day, sun kissing sky, golden streaks upon the blue, the blessings of strangers greeting us to a place we hardly knew would soon be home. Crossing Jamaica Way, we exchanged such words that for the young lovers we felt ourselves to be would soon tell of the future we would shape together, a story whose first chapter we would soon begin to write. A time of transition in our lives, chapters for each of us recently completed, taking up the quill to write together a new one, amazed to hear ourselves say on that spring day, "I could see living here. You know, there is no shul in Jamaica Plain." Our child, as we often joke remembering that night, is about to go off into the world and we cry with pride, with joy, and with yearning.

Marking time as growth rings upon a tree, suffused with the spirit of Song of Songs, our first program was a Tu B'Shevat Seder, marking the 15th of the month of Shevat, the New Year of the Trees. When the sap rises once again as portent of spring and Tu B'Shevat next comes round, another ring encircling the Tree of Life, we shall mark 15 years in the story of the Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue. On flyers placed on trees and lamp posts around JP, our words of invitation then were for us words of prayer as we began a new chapter in the book of our lives, "Come Celebrate the NEW YEAR OF THE TREES -- New Blossoms and New Beginnings -- The Faith to Plant."

It is the same faith that is needed now, the faith to plant, the faith to take up the quill in the collective hand of the beautiful community that has formed through the years, inviting others to come help write the next chapter. The experience of loss, greater and lesser, is part of most new beginnings. Leaving the enveloping safety of the

womb, new life emerges into the world. The world itself came to be in all of its pristine beauty, emerging from God's gentle breath upon the water, the pain of beginnings quickly felt in human encounter, seeking harmony still. Leaving the safety of home, if only it would be for all, we differentiate from our parents and venture forth to new possibility, to school, to jobs, to marriage. It is the paradigm we have known ever since Avram and Sarai heard the call to leave land, birthplace, and parental home and go forth, *lech l'cha/go to yourself*, each of us seeking the way to our own becoming. And so for a community of people, seekers all. Not of endings, but of beginnings, the rabbis taught, *כל התחלות קשות/kol hatcholos koshos/all beginnings are difficult*, words I first learned from my elder cousin Benny in thick old-world Ashkenazic Hebrew as I struggled to make sense of my life in New York. I was a young rabbinical student just beginning the journey that is now turning toward completion. Ironically, the rabbis' words as learned from cousin Benny were offered at the glorious moment of Israel's emerging from slavery to freedom. Teaching of endings and beginnings become as one, they understood that every ending, whether to a time of joy or sorrow, allows a new beginning to emerge, however fraught with challenge. Completing a Chapter in the Book of Life, a new one is enabled to begin, the way of life ever since a gentle breath hovered over the face of the waters and a world was breathed into being.

"Of time and rivers flowing, the seasons make a song," as Pete Seeger, of blessed memory, sang, and so it tells of us, and of life, life as lived by each one and of all together in community. The name NEHAR SHALOM is from the Prophet Isaiah (66:12), part of the Haftorah for every Shabbos Rosh Chodesh, the new moon emerging, beautiful in Mieke's chanting, as she loves to do, drawing out our name, the words above our Holy Ark, *הנני נוטה אליה כנהר שלום / hi'n'ni noteh eleha k'nahar shalom/behold, I extend to her as a river of peace....* They are words that came to me as we searched for a new kiddush cup for our wedding, finding a beautiful cup whose sides are of eight facets, every other facet engraved with one of the four rivers that flowed from Eden at the very beginning. On the inside of the cup are engraved all of the letter permutations formed from the names of the ancient rivers, ever seeking return to the garden, ever flowing toward peace. The cup was designed by an eighteenth century Jerusalem kabbalist, Rabbi Sholom Mizrachi Sharabi, and is described in a mystical siddur that he compiled, Siddur Nehar Shalom, the immediate inspiration for our name.

As envisioned in the beginning, our name was meant to tell of a community flowing as a river out into the world from a source both ancient and deep, a source from long ago that is ever-renewed, carried within each one as Miriam's well, a river of peace that is meant to join those gathered at the source with all of those encountered on the way of the river's flow. I had been fascinated with the Chassidic *shtibl* since my early twenties, the humble prayer room, without airs, egalitarian in its own way, most often located in the rabbi's home. Feeling very much at home in the *shtiblach* I would visit through the years, I also knew that I was not at home, that these holy places of spiritual and social remove from the other worlds I inhabited could never fully be home for me. The question that I never thought I would come to answer was whether the *shtibl* could be transplanted to an egalitarian setting fully open to the world. And so it can, as it has been.

As in the way that all synagogues and religious communities are meant to be, here too we are present for each other, seeking together to soften the harsh passages of life with kindness and caring. We celebrate the seasons of life as they come, those of joy and those of sorrow, the seasons of our own lives and of time in its turning. It is why we are here today. We are different from many synagogues in our effort to unabashedly weave together traditional Jewish practice with progressive political and social values, seeking the harmony of a finely tuned tension. Well beyond the political, honoring the image of God in each one, each one who enters our doors is welcome as a person, a child of God in whatever way their personhood is expressed and God's presence through them made manifest. So it has been from the beginning, welcoming all who come "down to the river to pray," at times to pray with our lips and at times in the streets with our legs, and those who come to shmooze, to sing, to eat, to learn, to watch a film, to organize, each finding connection in their own way, giving and receiving. We stumble at times, striving always, though, to be inclusive in the way of a river, encircling with its living waters, carrying all upon its flow.

Of those down river from now in our people's journey through time, we have pioneered a model in Jewish education that sees children and parents learning together in this space, a family *beit midrash*, an intergenerational house of seeking, older children and younger together, each one present a learner and a teacher. Completing a chapter in the book of its life, preparing to write the next one, *Nehar Shalom* is a model that requires much more thought, even as it now evolves. There is need to wrestle beyond ourselves with hard questions of Jewish belonging, inclusion, and sustainability. These are the real questions, of how, for instance, to be financially sustaining while trying to be truly open, as in not selling High Holy Day tickets, nor requiring a minimum dues contribution, and insuring that equal honor is given to all, regardless of financial or social standing, and yet to live in the real world. In a community that welcomes all as an essential expression of its being, so too how to inspire in each one who comes a desire to give of themselves, each one their gifts of time, of skills, and of resources? These are questions that the Jewish community as a whole needs to wrestle with, and so too each one of us, as we seek return to the river's source in the garden, four rivers again become as one, a river of peace, *Nehar Shalom*. For all the warmth of this beloved place, it is not in the end physical form that defines sacred space. It is the people, the love, the openness, the connections made and nurtured, that offer the warmth of old wood. It is the people who form the living vessel in which collective memory is held and the song of every voice that has ever been among us.

The decision to step back from the rabbinic leadership of this community that I love has not been an easy one, as momentous decisions rarely are. It is hard to know and to acknowledge when the time has come for *Completing a Chapter in the Book of Life* that is one's own. Our community is at a place of natural transition, so many young people, so many little ones, new needs arising that I believe are best served by new leadership. In Mieke's and my stepping back, the river is already rising to greater fullness with the emerging of communal leaders newly empowered. In completing another chapter in my life, I look forward quite literally now to writing, and thereby to completing chapters long delayed, never knowing the time that remains in the book of life that is mine. For all the sadness that I feel and the yearning yet to

hold on to what has been, I try to embrace all that yet can be. To be in the midst of such a beautiful community as it has come to be, gives me great *nachas/soul pleasure*, a *fargenig'n*, as my Bobi would say in Yiddish.

Completing a Chapter in the Book of Life, I try to take to heart the wisdom in the words found at the end of many holy books, the completing of a chapter sometimes marked in abbreviation by the first letters of each of these six words, תם ונשלם שבה לאל, בורא עולם / *tam v' nishlam shevach l'el boreh olam/whole and complete, praise to God, creator of the world*. I don't know that we always feel whole and complete in the completing of a chapter, yet praying that in the gathering and binding of all of our chapters into their final form we find wholeness, the creator of the world praising us then and saying תם ונשלם / *tam v' nishlam*, you are whole and complete. *Tam* can also mean *wholehearted, upright*, a way of becoming *nishlam* as emerging from *shalem/whole, complete*, the root and source of *shalom*. And so we strive to be, whole and upright, at peace, doing our best, knowing we have made mistakes along the way, yet knowing that in our striving there is wholeness. It is the way of God, as well, as creator whom we praise, and who comforts us in the knowing that all in the world is not complete, yet so beautiful, needing our help to complete the work, as we need each other's help if we would say at chapter's end, תם ונשלם / *tam v' nishlam/whole and complete*.

As the chapters in the book of our lives turn one to another, pages lovingly marked to revisit in time, so the journeys we record with the quill of our days and our deeds. Though we delude ourselves at times, life is not a linear progression. Through ups and downs, dead ends and detours we find ourselves in places we never imagined to be. Opportunities are given to each one, as to nurture into being an egalitarian *shtibl*, its opening chapter blessed now to complete. Hardly a straight line, our people's freedom trek from Egypt to the Land of Israel is never described in Torah as one journey, but as a series of journeys, אלה מסעי בני ישראל / *eleh massei v'nei yisra'el/these are the journeys of the children of Israel* (Numb. 33:1). Of forty-two journeys enumerated, the holy Baal Shem Tov teaches of the journeys that become as chapters in the book of each one's life: כל המסעות היו מ"ב / *kol ha'massa'ot ha'yu mem"bet/all the journeys were forty-two, so for every person from the day of their birth until they come to their world..., from the day of their birth and coming forth from their mother's womb, in the way of the Exodus from Egypt..., and afterwards journeying from journey to journey/נוסע מנסע למסע/nose'ah mi'massah l'massah until coming to the land of the living above... (Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Par. Massei).*

From journey to journey, each with its own chapter to complete, as spring turns to summer in the year just begun, I will have been a rabbi for forty-two years, a time of arrival. Of years and of journeys that turn one to another, each with its own story and song, a place of wholeness now. "Of time and rivers flowing," in the echo of Pete Seeger's gentle voice, so for Nehar Shalom, God's hand and ours extended in time as a River of Peace, song of a new chapter waiting to be sung. As hard as it is to put the book down, pages touched by my tears, I try to say תם ונשלם / *tam v' nishlam/whole and complete*. I am grateful to God, creator of the world, that amidst the natural coming of change as part of going forward, we are blessed that together, in my life

and yours, we are Completing a Chapter in the Book of Life. Notes upon the pages of each one's remembering, now as love letters offering their light upon the way.

תם ונשלם שבה לאל בורא עולם / *tam v'nishlam shevach l'el boreh olam*

*Whole and complete, praise to God, creator of the world.*

As I sang years ago when the river had only recently begun to flow and the chapter of its writing was new, part of a Yom Kippur story then, and still it is, if you should wonder of the river's deepest source and its name, look at each other and remember, "We are the River."

In the way of song to soothe..., let's sing together, antiphonally at first:

(left side)

*We are the River*

(me)

*(you and me and us, you and me and us)*

(foyer / all)

*the River of Peace, the River of Peace*

(right side)

*We are the River*

Of rivers returning home, journeys complete, all of their chapters gathered into the Book of Life and bound, we come now to Yizkor and remember them....