
Our Lives as Texts: Scripture and Erasure

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אָמַת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דָן וּמוֹכִיחַ, וְיִדְעַ נְעֵד,
וְכֹתֵב וְחוֹתֵם, וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֵה,
וְתִזְכֹּר כָּל הַנְּשָׁכָחוֹת:
וְתִפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזְּכוֹרוֹת,
וּמֵאֱלֹוֵי יִקְרָא,
וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם
בּו

It is true that You are Judge and Reprover and Knower and Witness
And Writer and Confirmer and Scribe and Accountant
And You will remember all forgotten things
And You will open the Book of Memories
And it will read of itself
And the signature of every person
Is within it
(Maḥzor for the Days of Awe)

This exalted prayer from the liturgy of the Days of Awe tells us that when we plead before God to be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life, we should not be imagining that book as a kind of ledger sheet, with our names entered into appropriate columns, or checked off in the desired blank space. The image we are given has God actively engaged in writing our lives down.

This is striking. Let us explore this idea a bit further. If, in our tradition, we have a picture of Moses Our Teacher faithfully sitting before God, taking down Divine dictation so as to write the Book of Instruction, the *Sefer Ha-Torah*, this *piyyut* has God, as it were, taking dictation from us, in order to compose another book. This book is called – סֵפֶר הַזְּכוֹרוֹת – The Book of Memories. It is a book that reads of itself. We each have one, unique, individually signed by us.

Why are our lives written down? So as to escape oblivion. So as to constitute a – סֵפֶר הַזְּכוֹרוֹת – a Book of Memories. To be remembered and not forgotten. This is another way of saying that if we imagine our lives as texts we do so in order to imagine that our lives mean something, that they are readable.

So who reads this text?

The first and most immediate reader of a text is the one who writes it. This is a peculiar kind of reading, though, as anyone who has studied the beginning of the second chapter of Massekhet Berakhot might agree. Because to be readable a text must be there already. It must have a beginning, a middle and an end. It must make some kind of sense. It must “read.” Following along with the writing as it happens, proceeding letter by letter, word by word – such reading hardly qualifies as reading at all.

wicked. He said to him, “Consider for what [personal pleasure] you have [in return] brought death to the righteous.” When Adam heard that he began to feel anguish. He said before Him, “Master of the World, so this is what I have done! I don’t care that the wicked die, but [what can I do] so that the righteous will not complain against me? I beg of You, anything, just so that You will not write about me that I brought death upon them.” Said the Holy Blessed One to him, “This is what I will do. When a person comes to depart from this world, the Holy Blessed One will appear to him and say to him, “Write down the deeds you have done, for you will die based on the deeds you have done.” Once he writes it He says to him, “Sign it,” and he signs, as it says, “*Making a seal for every person.*” And in the World to Come, when the Holy Blessed One sits to judge His creatures, He will bring all the books of the people and He shows them their deeds. Therefore it says, “*Making a seal for every person.*”

In our *midrash* we have turned our situation inside out. Instead of the seal of every human hand being the sign of our own impotence before the awesome powers of God’s natural forces, the seal becomes our signature, our acceptance of personal responsibility for our own actions. Furthermore, when we affix our signatures to the books of our lives we are not only confirming the authenticity of our own texts, but we are also engaged in a re-writing, or, more to the point, an erasure of the text of the first Adam, who had stood “sentenced” – that is, the sentence had been written about him – for the crime of bringing death to humanity. Adam recoiled from such a sentence and begged for its erasure. Our individual acceptance of personal responsibility relieves Adam of responsibility. Our texts are written so as to allow Adam to re-write his own. And we go even further. For Adam had been content to accept responsibility for the deaths of the wicked. We have taken even that responsibility from him. We write for ourselves and erase for Adam. We are, thus, far from impotent.

And there is more to this. For, even as we erase the “death sentence” from Adam’s book, we are wresting from Adam the right to write out for us the texts that will be ours. Only we, each of us, can write out and sign our own text. Indeed, the import of this *midrash* is precisely that phrase found in the *U-netaneh Toqef* – that because no one else writes our book, no one else controls its reading. ומאלי יקרא – each individual book reads of itself, for it is sealed personally and uniquely with our signatures.

But is that really so? Once written, how can the text protect itself from the reading of others? Perhaps this pristine state of ומאלי יקרא – of opening out toward a reading from within – can only exist for an instant, the instant we celebrate and dread on the Day of Judgment. For Judgment implies the reading by the Other. After that pristine moment our books, our lives as texts, wholly inscribed by ourselves and ourselves alone, lose that autonomous power. We become subject to the readings of others, to good readers and bad

readers, to insightful readers and superficial readers. We can no longer maintain control over the texts that bear our signatures, the marks meant to declare our exclusive authorial control. Our final signatures lock us in to the confines of our text, locked in just as surely as is the forlorn prisoner of that rain-drenched room.

מה אנחנו, מה חיינו, מה חסדינו, מה צדקתינו,
מה ישועתנו, מה כחנו, מה גבורתנו?

“Who are we? What is our life? Our piety, our righteousness, our salvation? What is our strength, what is our might?”

At the very moment we are confronted with our ultimate individual responsibility for ourselves, we are stymied by our sense of powerlessness. All our writing is in danger of being read, of being read and of being deemed worthless.

There is only one way to prevent this. The only way a text can be protected from being read is by erasing it. The deep ambivalence we feel as we seek to assume control over our life/texts – by writing them and by erasing them – is alluded to by another phrase in our liturgy for the Days of Awe, as explicated by R. Eleazar Roqeah. He writes – tersely and a bit cryptically:

וּכְתוּב לַחַיִּים כָּל בְּנֵי בְרִיתְךָ – ה' תִּיבּוֹת, נֶגֶד

ה' חוֹמְשִׁים, מַחֲנֵי נֹא מִסְפָּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ – ה'

תִּיבּוֹת, וּכְנֻדָּן תִּקְנוּ וְכָתוּב לַחַיִּים. (פִּל' הַסְּדוּר אֶתְרַנֵּב)

“And write down all the children of Your covenant for Life’ – five words, corresponding to the Five Books of the Torah. ‘Please erase me from Your Book that You have written,’ (Ex. 32:32) – five words, and corresponding to them they instituted ‘And write down for Life . . .’”

R. Eleazar Roqeach shows us the linkage between our prayers during the Days of Judgment and the prayers of Moses after the sin of the Golden Calf. Enraged, God wanted to destroy the Jewish people and start over again with Moses. But Moses refused:

וַיֵּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי חַטָּא הֵעָם הַזֶּה חַטָּאָה

גְּדוֹלָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהִי זֶהָב: וְעַתָּה אֲמַסְתָּא חַטָּאתָם

וְאֶסְחֶיךָ מִחַטָּא נֹא מִסְפָּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ:

And Moses returned to God and said, “Please, the people have sinned a great sin, for they made a golden divinity. And now, if You forgive their sin . . . , And if not, erase me from Your Book that You have written.” (Ex. 32:31-32)

Moses is pleading for forgiveness here. “If God, You will not forgive,” says Moses, “then erase me from Your Book.” But why should this erasure depend on God? Let us remember that this prayer is spoken precisely after Moses himself has erased whole passages from God’s Book, for, in his rage and despair at seeing Israel in its degradation, he has just smashed the Tablets. Indeed, the *midrash* noticed this chain of events and speculated that they were all connected.

ד"א וארא והנה חטאתם לה' א-להיכם ראה שאין לישראל עמידה וחבר נפשו עמהם ושבר את הלוחות אם מוחל אתה להם אף לי מוחל שנאמר (שם שמות לה) ועתה אם תשא חטאתם כן לחטאתי מוחל ואם אין אתה מוחל להם אל תמוחל לי אלא מחני נא מספרך אשר כתבת (שמו"ר. כי תשא. מו:א)

(Another interpretation:) "Look, you have sinned a great sin to God your Source of Strength." (Deut. 9:16) He saw that Israel had no leg to stand on and he joined his soul with them and smashed the Tablets. Then he said to the Holy Blessed One, "They sinned and I have sinned, for I have smashed the tablets. If you forgive them, then You can forgive me, as it is said, 'And now, if You forgive their sin . . . ' then You can forgive my sin as well. 'And if not,' – if You do not forgive them, then don't forgive me, but, rather, erase me from Your Book that You have written." (Ex. Rab., Ki Tissa, 46:1)

To force God's Hand, as it were, Moses shatters the Tablets and thereby shows God what it would be like for God to erase Moses from God's Book. But will God listen? Moses is afraid. Perhaps God will refuse to accept this equation. Moses recognizes that God must be persuaded. Moses' astounding demand, "מחני – Erase me!" is immediately turned into an abject petition, "מחני נא – Erase me, please." We should understand, then, that Moses' plea has an additional meaning. Moses is saying – "My life as text depends on Your forgiveness. Please. I cannot abide the thought that my life will be inscribed into a text of punishment and wrath."

What Book is Moses referring to? It cannot be the rest of the Torah, for that had not yet been written. Nor would it have been written if God did not forgive Israel. No. The entire story of Israel would disappear if God were to refuse to forgive them. If that text were to disappear then Moses' name would automatically disappear as well. But Moses is not talking about a book that is yet to be written. Moses refers to the Book – אשר כתבת – that God has written already. So from what book would Moses be demanding that he be erased? We conclude that Moses refers to the earlier stories of the Torah. But if so, where in those stories is Moses to be found? The Talmud (BT Hullin 139b) asks this question and answers it:

משה מן התורה מנין? (בראשית ו) בשגם הוא בשר.
Where is Moses to be found in the Torah? [In the verse] "In that, verily, he is merely flesh. (Gen. 6:3)

The verse reports God's disgust with humanity and with the problematic relationship between the Divine and the human. God declares, "My Spirit cannot abide in the human forever, in that, verily, he is merely flesh." The term "in that, verily" in the Hebrew is the strange word – בשגם. Its numerical equivalent, notices the Talmud, is the same as that of the three letters that make up Moses' name – משה (345). But is this merely a curiosity noticed by the Sages? The deeper connections they are alluding to are made more explicit in another *midrash*:

רבי אומר, ויאמר דור המבול לה' לא ידון, א"ר עקיבא (תהלים י) על מה נאץ רשע א-להים אמר בלבו לא תדרוש, לית דין ולית דיין, אבל אית דין ואית דיין, א"ר חנינא בר פפא אפ"י נח שנשתייר מהם לא שהיה כדי אלא שצפה הקב"ה שמושה עתיד לעמוד ממנו שנאמר בשגם זה משה דחושבניה דדין הוא חושבניה דדין. (בראשית רבה כו:)

Rabbi said: "The generation of the Flood [is the one who] said to God, 'He shall not abide (*vidon*) [judge].'" Said Rabbi 'Aqiva, "About what did the wicked blaspheme God? He said in his heart 'You won't investigate. (Ps. 10:13) – There is no Law (*din*) and no Judge (*dayyan*).' But there is a Law and a Judge!" Said Rabbi Hanina bar Pappa, "Even Noah, the one who survived from them all, did not survive because he was worthy, but because God saw that Moses would eventually rise from him, as it says, 'in that, verily – בשגם.' This is Moses, for the numerical value of one is the same as the numerical value of the other." (Gen. Rab. 26:6)

Only the ultimate appearance of Moses, through the survival of Noah, could justify the salvation of the human species. Indeed, were it not for Moses, God had resolved:

אמחה את האדם אשר בראתי מעל פני האדמה
(בראשית ו:ז)

I will erase the human that I have created from the face of the Earth (Gen. 6:7)

Only because of Moses was humanity, through Noah, inscribed in the Book of Life, God's Book. Now Moses takes a page from God's book, as it were. "Once You tried to destroy the world. For forty days and forty nights You sent Your mighty rains, sealing Your one surviving servant in a tight room, locked inside the *teyvah* – the ark – with barely a window from which to peer out to behold Your awesome power that was erasing all vestiges of life on Earth. If now, after You have showered me with Your words of Torah, words compared to life-giving rain, for forty days and forty nights, if it is Israel that You wish to destroy this time, then erase me, please, along with them." According to the *Tiqqunei Zohar* (69, fol. 113a) Noah and Moses are one and the same:

ובגין דכד אתא נח לא בעא רחמי על אילין גוברין
דטופנא אתבייש לבתר ואמרוואם אין מחני נא
מספרך אשר כתבת. (מחני אותיות מי נח.)
(תקו"ז סט' עמ' קיג)

And because, when Noah came he did not ask mercy for those people of the flood, he was embarrassed afterwards and said, "Erase me, please, from the Book that You have written." Erase me – מחני – are the same letters as "the waters of Noah – נח."

The waters of Noah beat down on the sealed room that was his ark (his *teyvah*, his word?), presenting Noah with the brute revelation of God's unrelenting power. They recall our earlier image from the book of Job. Who could withstand such awesome power? Certainly not Job himself. If the story of Noah is the story of God's guarantee toward the preservation of one righteous man, along with his loved ones, amidst the terrible destruction of a corrupt world, the story of Job is about the terrible affliction of a righteous man, and the destruction of his family, authorized by God, amidst the ongoing flourishing of a corrupt world. Is such a story believable? In fact, we know that there are conflicting opinions about whether Job really existed. The Talmud (BT Bava Batra 15a) records an opinion that:

איוב לא היה ולא נברא אלא משל היה
Job never existed. He was, rather, a parable.

Others disagree. The *midrash* records a compromise view, that Job lived in early times:

אלא לא היה בייסורים שנכתבו לו, ולמה נכתבו לו,
אלא שאילו באו עליו היה יכול לעמוד בהם.
(בראשית רבה, וירא, נ"ד)

Rather, he did not live through the sufferings written about him. So why were they written about him? [To say that] had they happened to him he would have been able to bear them. (Gen. Rab., Vayera, 57:4)

What does this say about the relation between the text of the Book of Job and Job's life? It was the remarkable insight of R. Eliezer Ashkenazi (1512-1585) that this was, in fact, one of Job's strongest claims against God. Listen to these calls from Job:

כמה לי עונות וחטאות פשעי וחטאתי הדיעני:
למה-פניך תסתיר ותחשבני לאויב לך: העלה נדף
תערוץ ואת-קש יבש תרדף: כיתכתב עלי מררות
ותורישני עונות נעורי:

How many iniquities and sins do I have? Let me know of my transgression and my sin. Why do You hide Your face, and regard me as your enemy (אויב – when I am merely איוב)? Will You terrorize a driven leaf? And will You hound a piece of dry straw? Yet You write bitter things about me, and make me inherit the iniquities of my youth. (Job 13:23-26)

Job accuses God of ignoring him in his innocent reality. Instead, God writes terrible things about him. Why? Is God's intention, to make of Job's life story an edifying text? R. Eliezer Ashkenazi explains:

שאיוב בעצמו הרגיש שנברא למשל והיה מתרעם על זה
ואמר

That Job himself intuited that he had been created to serve as a parable, and he protested against this and he said:

והצגני למשל עמים ותפת לפנים אהיה:

He has made me parable for peoples; and I will become a horror to face. (Job 17:6)

What life-text did Job yearn for? He appeals to his friends if he cannot appeal to God:

חנני חנני אתם רעי כי יד-א-לוה נגעה בי: למה
תרדפני כמורא-ל ומבשרי לא תשבעו: מייתן אפו
ויכתבון מלי מייתן בספר ויחקו:

Have pity on me, have pity on me, O my friends; for the hand of God has touched me. Why do you, like God, persecute me, and are not satisfied with my flesh? Oh that my words were now written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! (Job 19:21-23)

But Job's friends cannot understand his complaint, his source of pain. They repeatedly insist that the moral lessons of his story are sufficient to justify his situation. Abandoned by God and by his friends, to whom could Job turn? Says the Talmud, "Moses wrote his own book [and the portion of Balaam] and [the book of] Job." (BT Bava Batra 14b)

The writing of the Book of Job can be seen as a continuation of Moses' protest against God while at Mount Sinai. Or, better, it is the prelude to his final protest and appeal. For, had Moses solved anything by writing Job's text for him? Would Job have written the same text had he been strong enough or permitted to write it himself? Though he merited to have Moses as his biographer, yet, fundamentally, Job was condemned to cede his text, not only how it would be read, but, even how it was to be written, to others. Moses' stratagem is thus, in a crucial way, a failure. It is following this understanding that we hear Moses call out his radical demand.

Moses calls out to God that if it is punishment and destruction that God will insist upon, then, "God, You must erase me from Your Book." Moses cannot bear to be written in a book in which there is to be no forgiveness. Moses' demand is not for a correction or a revision of the text. It is for total erasure.

But this time, Moses can hope to win. For, by challenging God to erase him, Moses has challenged God to complete the destruction wrought by the waters of the Flood, the waters of Noah. But God has solemnly sworn not to do that. God, as it were, is forced to comply with Moses' request. By agreeing to forgive, God has avoided the erasure of Moses from His Book, and, in addition, has re-inscribed Noah in a new role of selfless intercessor. For God's reply to Moses is:

מי אשר חטא לי אמחנו מספרי: ועתה לך
נחה את-העם אל אשר-דברתי לך (שמות לב:לג-לד)

The one who has sinned against Me I shall erase from My Book. But now, go and lead the people to where it is that I have told you. (Ex. 32:33-34)

God says, “But now, go and lead – נחה – the people.” But now, go and – נחה – be a Noah – for the people.” Once again, as happened with Adam, a later descendant has altered the life-text of an ancestor. Adam’s descendants, by inscribing their signatures on their books, erase Adam’s sentence as “bringer of death.” Moses, by demanding his own erasure from God’s Book, has re-inscribed Noah as hero and leader.

By demanding his erasure from the text, Moses accomplishes something for his time and for the generations. The *midrash* tells us that the angels understood what was at stake.

[שמות רבה, כי תשא, מז:ט:] ד"א אמר משה לפני הקב"ה למה אתה כועס עליהם לא שעשו עבודת כוכבים לא צויתם אמר לו הקב"ה בדיבור שני לא אמרתי לא יהיה לך, אמר לפניו לא צוית אותם לי צוית שמא אמרת להם לא יהיה לכם לי צוית, אם עשיתי עבודת כוכבים מחני נא מספרך, כשראה הקב"ה שנתן נפשו עליהם אמר בשבילך אני נותן להם את התורה שנאמר כתב לך את הדברים האלה, ד"א כתב לך, התחילו מלאכי השרת אומרים לפני הקב"ה אתה נותן רשות למשה שיכתוב מה שהוא מבקש שיאמר לישראל אני נתתי לכם את התורה אני הוא שכתבתי ונתתי לכם, אמר להם הקב"ה ח"ו שמשה עושה את הדבר הזה ואפילו עושה נאמן הוא שנאמר לא כן עבדי משה בכל ביתי נאמן הוא. (במדבר יב:ו)

Moses said to the Holy Blessed One, “Why are You angry at them? If it is because they worshipped idols, You never commanded them about this.” Said the Holy Blessed One, “In the Second Commandment, didn’t I say, ‘You shall not have [any gods before Me]?’” He said to Him, “You did not command them. You commanded me. Did You say to them ‘None of you (pl.) shall have?’ It was only me You commanded. So if I have worshipped idols, ‘erase me from Your Book!’” When the Holy Blessed One saw that he had given his very soul up for their sake, He said, “For your sake I am giving the Torah to Israel,” as it is written, “Write, for you, these words.” (Ex. 34:27) Another thing: “Write for you,” – the ministering angels began saying to the Holy Blessed One, “You are giving permission to Moses to write whatever he wants. So that he will say to Israel, ‘I gave you the Torah. I am the one who wrote it and gave it to you.’” The Holy Blessed One said to them, “God forbid that Moses would do such a thing! But, even if he does, he is faithful, as it is said, ‘Not so My servant Moses; in all My House, he is the faithful one.’ (Num. 12:7)” (Genesis Rabah 47:9)

This is the expression, then, of the true extent of Divine forgiveness and trust. Because Moses had demanded to be erased from God’s Book, God grants him the power to write the book as he pleases, for God knows that Moses would never write a false word. Moses is faithful.

When we think about the possibility of textual erasure, we must recall the prohibition against erasing the Divine Name. Moses may demand that his name be erased. But God has demanded that God’s Name not be erased. Yet, there is one exception to this rule. In the case of the jealous husband who becomes estranged from his wife, the Torah instructs us to write the Divine Name on parchment and then to erase it in the Temple waters. Our Sages explain:

גדול שלום שבין איש לאשתו שהרי אמרה תורה: שמו של הקב"ה שנכתב בקדושה ימחה על המים (חולין קמ"א ע"א)

Peace between life partners is so valuable! For the Torah says that [for its sake] the Name of the Holy Blessed One, written in holiness, shall be erased on the waters. (BT Hullin 121a)

Both Moses and God teach us that, for the sake of living and writing through forgiveness and peace, one must be willing to suffer erasure as well.

In this light we may appreciate the teaching of R. Mordekhai Yaffe concerning the formula for the *Amidah*’s concluding blessing as recited during the Days of Awe:

וחותם, בא"י עושה השלום' כי עושה' וכן, השלום' בגמטריא, ספריאל' לומר שביום הזה סופר וכותב השם ית' זכויותיהן של ישראל.

And one concludes [with the blessing] “You abound in blessings, Maker of the Peace.” Because [the word] “Maker [of] – עושה” as well as “the Peace – השלום” are numerically equivalent to “*Sofri-el* – My Scribe is God/*Sifri-el* – My Book is God”. That is to say that on this day the Blessed One accounts and inscribes the merits of Israel. Levush, §582

When God is the Maker of Peace, then God is ספריאל – My Scribe/My Book. So we pray to be written in the Book of Life, to be ever inscribed and yet open to erasure. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero explains what this book really is:

היינו הספר המתחדש ומסתפר ומאיר שנה זו מחדש (תפילה למשה עמ' תמח).

“In the Book of Life” – that is the book that renews itself and becomes a book all over again and illumines this year anew. (Tefillah Le-Moshe p. 448)

When we approach God on the Days of Awe, hoping for Divine forgiveness and love, we ask God to look into the Book of Remembrances – ספר הזכרונות – At that moment of appeal

for Divine forgiveness, what is it that God should remember? Perhaps we are asking God to return to that consequential moment of forgiveness petitioned for by Moses at Sinai:

And Moses returned to God and said, "Please, the people have sinned a great sin, for they made a golden divinity. And now, if You forgive their sin . . . , And if not, erase me from Your Book that You have written."

(Ex. 32:31-32)

If we attend carefully to Moses' words we will notice that there is a gap, an unwritten part of the verse. He admits that Israel has sinned. Then he argues, "And now, if You forgive their sin . . . ," but the continuation is missing. We want to hear – What, what will happen if God agrees to forgive Israel? But Moses does not presume to say what will happen. He does not presume to write in our Torah what will happen.

Perhaps this is because, if God will forgive Israel, then everything is possible. Everything is left wide open, like the blankness of a page before a writer begins writing on it. The verse reads, "And now, if You forgive their sin . . ." How might we fairly describe the next portion of the verse, the part that is not written, and yet is so present in our understanding and our desire? I suggest that we may say about the rest of the verse, the unwritten rest of the verse, so indeterminate and so full of potential – we may fairly say of it – *ממאלי יקרא* – it remains to be read of itself.

This, then, is what we pray for, not to suffer the inscription of our lives into a set text, to be either skillfully or wrongfully read, but to be written in the Book of Life, a Book of Remembrances, to be sure, but a book of writing, erasure and re-writing, an open book that will be free to read of itself.

This essay is a written version of an oral presentation given before the AJR community. The text attempts to preserve that oral quality.