
First, scrolls: “The days of our lives are like scrolls; write on them only what you want to be remembered.” This statement could be hung on a banner over the entire High Holy Day season. It is attributed to the 11th century rabbi, Bachya ibn Pakuda, who urges us to be mindful of how we live. You set the bar quite high, Bachya! Write on them only what you want to be remembered. What a tantalizing aspiration. I picture a scroll of clean paper with wide margins, crisp edges. Open, free, white spaces. No cross-outs, no extraneous doodles, no mistakes. A recording of days well-planned, difficult conversations seamlessly executed, heartfelt acts of goodness, and time meaningfully allocated. What if we really could record on our lives’ scrolls only that which we want to remember? We could preserve a perfect record of the people we wish we could be every day, a tidy summary of the human experience.

But, of course, it isn’t always so. Sometimes, our lives more closely resemble clocks. I’m sure that many of us listened this past year to the viral podcast from Serial and This American Life, called S-Town. The very first episode opens like this:

“When an antique clock breaks, a clock that's been telling time for two hundred or three hundred years, fixing it can be a real puzzle. ...There can be hundreds of tiny, individual pieces, each of which needs to interact with the others precisely. To make the job even trickier, you often can't tell what's been done to a clock over hundreds of years. Maybe there's damage that was never fixed, or fixed badly. ...A clock that old doesn't come with a manual. So instead the few people left in the world that know how to do this kind of thing rely on what are often called 'witness marks' to guide their way. A witness mark can be a small dent, a hole that once held a screw. These are actual impressions and outlines and discolorations, left inside the clock, of pieces that might've once been there.
They're clues to what was in the clock maker's mind when he first created the thing. ...[and they] might not even mean what you think they mean.”

Our lives are scrolls. Our lives are clocks. I don’t know about you, but I was mesmerized when I first heard this description of “witness marks.” Having never knowingly seen one on a clock myself, my mind’s eye constructs dents, dings, and other endearing imperfections that appear like a patina on old timepieces. Rather than mar the beauty that was once intended, they show us that this old clock has seen things. Witness marks are clues to time that has passed-- the clock has marked the time, and been marked by it.

So, too, are we. Did you know that our tradition teaches that visible signs of old age were given to our ancestors as a gift? Once upon a time, elders resembled their young counterparts: smooth skin, clear eyes, straight spines. But there was no outward sign for our older ancestors to signal to passers-by the experiences they accumulated over many years, or the wisdom they consolidated from them. (Breishit Rabbah) No one knew to respect the elders even more, because they earned it. And so God granted older people special traits to distinguish them: gray hair and wrinkles to serve as human witness marks that tell a person’s story.

Scrolls, and clocks. When we set out to record our lives and strive to preserve the best of who we are, we cultivate stories and inscribe them neatly. We reflect on our experiences, and organize them into a compelling plot line. We try to follow Bachya ibn Pakuda’s advice and record only what we want to remember. No more, no less.

But our lives, as we live them, repeatedly remind us that we are clocks. Our witness marks are unavoidable and we cannot cover them up or hide them away. Even the marks we can successfully dye, straighten, replace, repair, or surgically restore do not erase the emotional and spiritual truth that we have lived. It is an unavoidable part of being human: we live, and we bear witness.
Mosheh Rabbeinu, our great teacher, Moses, bore witness. Our redeemer, receiver of revelation, son of Egypt with a speech impediment, the volatile, tired, brilliant father of our nation, was full of witness marks. Could we imagine that smashing God’s commandments did not leave its mark, on Moses’ psyche, if not his body? Or what of the repeated wounds of seeing his people to freedom and then losing patience with their complaints, over and over again? The triumph of establishing an independent nation, and the devastation of not joining them at their final destination. Would Moses write on his scroll his triumphs or his failures? What would he have wanted to remember?

Well, we actually have an answer. A portion in Talmud speculates cleverly at which parts of our Scripture were written by which of our patriarchs. It suggests that certain sections of Torah were in fact composed by Moses himself: “Moses wrote his own book, and the portion of Balaam, and Job.” (Bava Batra 14b)

According to this interpretation, Moses wrote the tragic tale of Job, the man of perfect faith who was tortured and nearly destroyed when Satan challenged God to test God’s most loyal servant. It’s a tale of tragedy and suffering, and also of troubling theology and the reward of the most pious.

This Talmud passage suggests that Moses also wrote the section of Torah we read in the summer, telling the story of the nervous king of the Moabites, Balak, who hired a wizard to curse the Israelites and thereby protect his people from their threat. Balaam had not failed before, but he runs into difficulty in completing this particular task, as he learns that he cannot curse that which God has blessed. And when Balaam, weary and resigned, opens his mouth to curse the Israelites as he was hired to do, a beautiful blessing in triplicate tumbles out instead, proclaiming the beauty of the Israelite camp.

Finally, Moses wrote “his own book.” What exactly does that mean? This might refer to the Torah itself, known as the Five Books of Moses. But one of those five in particular speaks to Moses’ character more than the rest:
Deuteronomy. In this book, Moses, recounts the journey he has shared with his people. The way he tells it is itself a glimpse into Moses’ innermost thoughts: the emphasis, details, and plot appear slightly altered in the way that only a retelling of one’s own past can be. Moses writes of his memories, the experience of winding through the wilderness, the actions he took, the words he spoke, and the person he became. Deuteronomy is Moses’ book.

Our lives, like Moses’, are complicated. Can we truly write scrolls that contain only what we want to be remembered? If we are most honest with ourselves, we might find that we live—we record—more than we think. Our lives are a far cry from the pristine piece of paper I described earlier, with the impeccable handwriting, perfect spelling, and neat margins. Moses’ scroll contains the stories of Job, and Balaam, and his own book. Another way of summarizing what Moses himself recorded in Torah is: Moses wrote the tale of suffering to redemption, of curses to blessing, and the complex balance of both.

In other words, he wrote it all. We write it all! Not only successes, not only mistakes. We live and learn in the gray space in between. And even if we tried to groom our lives into perfect scrolls, our lives’ clocks would tell a different story—a fuller story, full of witness marks we’ve earned throughout our days. A scroll, a clock, and with all the details of a complex life well lived, we are left with a full and heavy book. Just like Moses.

The camera is always rolling. And that might be a very good thing. The message of this season tells us to move forward into the new year as our best selves. That does not necessitate purging completely all of the mishaps from our scrolls. If Moses’ book records some of the hardest chapters in our people’s history, then surely ours can contain our embarrassing moments, our awkward imperfections, even our gravest mistakes.

Take yourselves on a mental journey right now, and review what you’ve been writing in your own books. Have you been compulsively editing out the typos and dull, repetitive portions? Is there anything you can learn from the sad
chapters, the pages full of pain, once you decide to stop trying to hide them from view? Maybe you are not happy with where you are now in your life-writing process. That’s understandable. Witness marks do not always feel like our friends.

And if we expand this exercise for a moment now and imagine what is being recorded in our country’s book, it is hard to force ourselves even to keep reading. It feels like we are now in the part of the story where all of the plotlines converge in a tangle of despair that seems almost impossible to overcome. But it can be okay to be here, for now. There are many blank pages yet to be filled in.

I can’t imagine Moses was very cheerful when he was writing Job, either. But he was telling us, in doing so, that there are times when we are all Job. At any given moment, any given Yom Kippur, we cannot expect to find our lives looking the way we wish they could be. But that fact is far from failure; it is human. If we are lucky, the Job chapters will be followed by Balaam moments, when we are able to gain a new perspective and find blessing in unexpected places: even the ordinariness of the ups and downs of our lives. We, as Jews, are reminded that our books are long, and we are our own authors.

We are scrolls. We are clocks. We are writing our own books. May we find solace in the fullness and complexity of the stories we are writing, knowing that by sitting here right now together, our books are not yet finished.