

READING THE BOOK OF RECORDS

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וְתִפְתָּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזִּכְרוֹנוֹת. וּמֵאֲלֵיו יִקְרָא.
וְחוֹתָם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ.

You will open the Book of Records, and
it will be read by itself, and the seal of
every person is on it.

THE *PIYYUT UNETANEH TOKEF* refers to “the Book of Records” (*sefer ha-zikhronot*) which “reads itself” before God and has “the seal of every person in it.” What is this book, and what does it teach us about the way we should live our lives?

The idea for the Book of Records derives from a tradition of Rabbi, the towering leader of his generation of sages toward the end of the tannaitic period, preserved in the last line of a very rich *mishnah* in Pirkei Avot.

משנה אבות ב:א

... וכל מעשיך בספר נכתבים.

Mishnah Avot 2:1

... and all of your deeds in a book are
written.

Rabbi’s book is not merely a list of names, like the Book of Life and the Book of Death, but rather, contains a chronicle of all of your deeds.¹ Rabbi’s book seems very similar to the book in the *piyyut*, the Book of Records that is opened and read before God, like a text-to-speech app.

What exactly does this vivid image accomplish for us? The fuller context of Rabbi’s *mishnah* tells us: it is supposed to affect our actions. Here is the entire *mishnah* (according to an early manuscript):

ר' אומ'

אי זו היא דרך ישרה שיבור לו האדם

כל שהיא תפארת לעושה

תפארת לו מן האדם

והווי זהיר במצוה קלה כמצוה חמורה

שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצוות

והווי מחשב הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה

ושכר עבירה כנגד הפסדה

השתכל בשלשה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי

עבירה

דע מה למעלה ממך

עין רואה

ואוזן שומעת

וכל מעשיך בספר נכתבים

Rabbi says:

What is the straight path that a person
should choose?

Anything that is beauty to the one who does
it is beauty for them from other people.

And be as careful with a lenient mitzvah as
with a stringent mitzvah,

¹ The earlier roots of Rabbi’s book appear to be found in R. Akiva’s tradition—recorded later in Avot (3:16)—that our various debts are recorded by God’s agents in a *pinax* (Greek for “writing or drawing tablet”). But a *pinax* is a relatively small ledger, well-suited for keeping basic financial information (as in R. Akiva’s metaphor) or other short lists (like a catalog of authors or a list of works by one author). A *sefer* (a scroll or book) is a more official and expansive document that could be used for long-term accounting, histories, journals, or sacred works.

*because you do not know the gift of the reward
of mitzvot.*

*And be evaluating the loss of a mitzvah
against its reward,
and the reward of a sin against its loss,*

*Look at three things and you will not come
into the power of sin.*

Know what is above you:

an eye seeing

and an ear hearing

and all your deeds in a book are written.

All three descriptions of the straight path emphasize that human beings are limited in both our knowledge and our power. We do not know the details of how we will be punished or rewarded for our actions. Similarly, we walk the straight and sinless path by remembering what is above us, that all of our actions are noticed and recorded, that there is a greater power beyond ourselves. We imagine that we are evaluating what is good or bad for us based on our own cost-benefit analysis, but in truth we cannot correctly predict what will be the effects of our actions. Only God truly knows what is good.

Even the first part of Rabbi's advice, which focuses on our actions in relation to other human beings, makes a version of this same point. We might think that our own internal sense of what is right and wrong should be the final arbiter in deciding our actions. But this is just pride. In fact, when we make choices we need to consider both how it seems to us and how it will seem to others. Certainly our own inner life provides an important voice to us, but it does not define what is good, but is in a complex negotiation between us, others, and God.

The Mishnah in Sotah concisely attributes to Rabbi exactly the qualities that he was trying to inculcate in his advice in Avot:²

משנה סוטה ט:טו

משפּות רבּי, בְּטִלָּה עֲנִיָּה וְיִרְאַת חֵטָא.

Mishnah Sotah 9:15

*When Rabbi died, humility and fear of sin
ceased.*

Rabbi's tradition in Avot is deeply related to the two qualities he was most known for: humility and fear of sin. We see this humility both in narratives about Rabbi³ and in his interactions in halakhic conversations. The very first time sequentially that Rabbi is mentioned in the Mishnah,⁴ he disagrees with an anonymous, majority opinion, after which he says:

משנה כלאים ב:יא

וְרוֹאֶה אֲנִי אֶת דְּבָרֵיהֶן מִדְּבָרִי:

Mishnah Kilayim 2:11

*But I agree with your words more than my
own.*

In other words, the very first thing Rabbi does in the Mishnah is to propose his own view, and then immediately concede to his opponents. "I originally thought that this was right," says Rabbi, "but I was open to the majority wisdom and, having thought about it, came to the decision that I was wrong, that my own agency and decision-making would have led me to the wrong outcome if it were not for the input of others." This is Rabbi living out his advice in Avot: not only do you need to think that something is the right decision, but it needs to be recognizable as such also by others.

Fear, or avoidance, of sin—Rabbi's other distinguishing quality—follows naturally from humility. If we approach every decision thinking about how others will judge our actions, or how God will write about them in the Book of Records, then we limit our actions within the bounds of what is good and right. Consequently, we will be less likely to make mistakes and sin. If we do not assume that we have all the answers or all the information, but that we are missing a perspective that we might uncover through further reflection or consultation with others, we will end up coming closer to the truth. Thus we seek and follow the straight path.

The next time you have to make a difficult decision, imagine hearing the account of your chosen path read

2 Originally, Rabbi's death in this *mishnah* concluded all of Massekhet Sotah.

3 See for example Yerushalmi Beitza 5:2; 63a (Rabbi concedes to R. Meir's negative reaction to his son's wedding). One central story about Rabbi in Yerushalmi Kilayim 9:4; 32b (also found in Yerushalmi Ketubot 12:3; 35a and Bereishit Rabbah 33:3) relies on Rabbi's humility as the story's premise and tests its limits.

4 In the printed edition this is R. Meir, but in medieval manuscripts, which preserve a more authentic reading, this is Rabbi.

aloud from the Book of Records. Would you feel proud? Embarrassed? Puzzled? Did you take into account as many perspectives as possible in order to reach the best available outcome? Would someone else reading your account agree that you had tried your best?

This is the exercise that Rabbi wants us to do, and the attitude that the image of the Book of Records helps us to cultivate.

This year, may we all be known—like Rabbi—for our humility and fear of sin. ♦