

# Parsha Ponders

Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva | September 20, 2023 | 4 Tishrei 5784

*Written for life vs. the good life*<sup>1</sup>

זכרנו לחיים מלך חפץ בחיים וכתבנו בספר החיים למענך אלקים חיים: מי כמוך אב הרחמים זוכר יצוריו  
לחיים ברחמים

Remember us for **life**, the King Who desires life, and write us in the book of life, for Your sake, the living  
G-d. Who is like You, Father of Mercy, who remembers His creations for **life**, with mercy

וּכְתוּב לַחַיִּים טוֹבִים כָּל בְּנֵי בְרִיתְךָ: בְּסֵפֶר חַיִּים בְּרַכָּה וְשָׁלוֹם וּפְרִנְסָה טוֹבָה נִזְכָּר וְנִכְתָּב לְפָנֶיךָ אֲנַחְנוּ וְכָל עַמְךָ  
בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל לַחַיִּים טוֹבִים וְשָׁלוֹם

Write all of those in Your covenant for a **good life**. Let us be remembered and written before You in the  
book of life, blessing, peace, and a good livelihood. Us, and all of Your nation of the house of Israel, for a  
**good life** and for peace<sup>2</sup>

The days of Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are known as *Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva*, the Ten days of Repentance. As the name sounds, it's a time of introspection and prayer. Insertions are added to the daily prayer services, and they certainly match the theme of these days. We are constantly praying for life, as the famous prayer says: "Inscribe us in the book of life". However, a careful analysis of some of these insertions will show a discrepancy. In the first half of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, also known as the *Amidah* prayers, we have a couple of insertions asking for **life**. However, in the second half of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, our request changes to a **good life**. Why is there this change? Are we asking for two different things?

A famous teaching of our Sages<sup>3</sup> is that on Rosh Hashanah, there are three books open: One for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for those in between. The completely righteous are immediately written and sealed for life. The completely wicked are immediately written and sealed for death. Those in between hang in the balance from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they're written for life. If not, they are written for death.

There are a few glaring problems with this teaching. First, it tells us that the completely righteous are written for another year of life. Well, we know many righteous people who don't live after Rosh Hashanah. As well, the completely wicked are said to be written for death, yet we see many of them prosper and live. Finally, this teaching tells us that for these two extremes, everything is decided on Rosh Hashanah. It sounds like those who are righteous have more merits, and those who are wicked have more sins. That means "those in between" are those who are fifty-fifty. Only for them is *Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva* relevant. It's hard to believe that most people fall exactly in the middle. So that means for most people, *Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva* serves no purpose? It can't be.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a *devar Torah* heard from [Rav Dovid Schoonmaker](#), Rosh Yeshiva of Shapell's/Darché Noam

<sup>2</sup> Geonic insertions to the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayers for the *Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva*. See [Machzor Vitri](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Rosh Hashanah](#) 16b

These are problems that the commentaries struggle with<sup>4</sup>. To answer these questions and more, the Vilna Gaon<sup>5</sup> has a different approach to the standard reading of this teaching. When discussing being written for life or death, the intent isn't on this world. It's on the next world. Every Rosh Hashanah, it is decided who is worthy of meriting the next world, and who is not. The righteous and the wicked are decided right away, whereas those in between have until Yom Kippur. However, simultaneous to this judgement, is a judgement that is the same for everyone. How a person's life will play out the following year, from their income to if they will live, is written on Rosh Hashanah. However, it is not sealed until Yom Kippur.

It comes out then that *Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva* is relevant for everyone. This time period is when our fate for the rest of the year is sealed. The Sages' teaching that everything was decided on Rosh Hashanah is referring to the next world. All that remains to be explained is why does that particular ruling need to be decided every Rosh Hashanah? Why isn't a one time ruling enough? Some explain<sup>6</sup> that our fate for the upcoming year is in fact determined by our fate in the World to Come. It can be that someone who is sealed for life in the World to Come will have less blessing in this world, so as to maximize their reward in the next world. The reverse is also true, that someone sealed for death in the next world might be ruled to have more blessing in this world, to minimize their reward in the next world.

The Vilna Gaon concludes that these two judgements, one for this world and one for the next world, are alluded to in our prayers during *Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva*. In the first half of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, we simply pray for **life**. This is referring to the ultimate life, which is life in the World to Come. This was already decided for the righteous and wicked on Rosh Hashanah, and hangs in the balance for those in between until Yom Kippur. The second half of the *Shemoneh Esrei* we pray for a **good life**, and this is a reference to life in this world. The fate of everyone's upcoming year is written on Rosh Hashanah, but only sealed on Yom Kippur. We all pray then that the life that this year will provide will, G-d willing, be a good one.

*Gemar Chasimah Tovah*. May we all be inscribed in the book of life!

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ramban in Toras HaAdam Sha'ar HaGemul, Tosafos Rid ad. locl, and Ran ad. loc. (page 3b in pagination of the Rif) s.v. צדיקים גמורים, who say that the "righteous" and "wicked" of this teaching are referring to those who were determined to live or die. I.e., you could have a wicked person be judged for life, for whatever reason, and they are referred to here as "righteous". The opposite is also true.

<sup>5</sup> Biur HaGra to Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 582:9. He rules like Tosafos ad. loc. s.v. ונחתמיך, and says this is the intent of the Rema, who says to wish people on Rosh Hashanah that they be "written for life" but not "sealed for life". He also elaborates more in Likkutei HaGra p. 350, aided with the explanation of Be'er Yitzchak by Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver, grand-student of the Vilna Gaon. His goal is to resolve many sources which seem to be indicating that everyone is written on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur, such as Rosh Hashanah 16a, whereas our teaching sounds like the righteous and wicked are sealed on Rosh Hashanah and those in between aren't even written until Yom Kippur. See also Rav Dovid Cohen's article in Yeshurun XIX p. 632f

<sup>6</sup> Tosafos HaRosh to Rosh Hashanah 16b