

# David Heller's Book of Life

By Michael Ginsberg

Ms. Lefkowitz, our fourth grade religious school teacher, said today that God is finishing the Book of Life for next year.

I'm dead.

God "inspects your record" during the week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Ms. Lefkowitz explained. Then, on Yom Kippur, "God decides whose names to inscribe in the Book of Life for next year."

She stopped there.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'What do you mean?'" she said.

*"It means you're gonna die,"* Sheldon Feinman laughed, in a weird sort of vampire cackle.

Ms. Lefkowitz looked at her watch and announced, "Class dismissed."

On the way home, I told my sister, Sarah, what had happened in class.

"Yup, you're going to die," she said.

"You think God knows everything I've done?"

"God knows," Sarah said, in her best 16-year-old, know-it-all voice. "And if God doesn't know yet, I'll make sure God finds out."

I tried to forget what Ms. Lefkowitz and Sarah had said, but it all came back in a dream I had that night. I imagined a giant, bony hand, with lots of white hair, turning the pages of a dusty old book, and running a wrinkled finger down the names: Hallahan, Halloway, Hannon, Heinz, Heller. Heller, Abigail; Heller, Bruce; Heller, David. The hand stopped, and my name vanished under an industrial sized eraser. Gone.

"Yup, that's how it works," Sarah said at breakfast the next morning.

At dinner, I asked my father what *he* knew about the Book of Life. Sarah laughed.

"I don't know," my father answered. "I *do* know "The Book of Love."

"What's 'The Book of Love'?"

*"Oh, I wonder, wonder, who b'doo'oo who: Who wrote the book of love?"* It's an old rock-and-roll song. You want me to go on?"

"No thanks, Dad. But you've been an enormous help."

I had an enormous problem. I had two weeks to keep God from zapping me straight to that place that makes up the first syllable of my last name. I didn't want to attract suspicion by asking for help at the library, so I went on-line at our home computer. I found quite a lot about ways to save myself, and I hatched a plan.

I called my friend, Max Fisher, to tell him what I had to do to make it into the Big Book. He didn't exactly sound interested – "I have to go clean the litter box," he said – but I went ahead with my list, courtesy of Judeopedia:

1. wear white clothing;
2. sacrifice a ram;
3. eat only one meal a day (that's what Jews do in India);
4. purify my thoughts (whatever *that meant*);
5. swing a chicken over my head, slaughter it, and give it to a poor family;
6. kill a ram;
7. forgive those who've hurt me;
8. ask forgiveness from anyone I've hurt;
9. ask forgiveness from everyone else – in case I missed someone;
10. become an all-around better person;
11. hire a good lawyer to argue that I've become an all-around better person;
12. and tip big, which I added on my own.

"Is that it?" Max said. "You think God will put your name in the Book of Life if you torture a chicken, kill a ram and hire a lawyer? I think God will put you in the Book of Idiots. What does a chicken, a lawyer and a ram have to do with saving your skin?"

I explained to my cynical friend. First, the chicken: "It's called 'Kapparrah.' You take a chicken, swing it over your head three times, and slaughter it. Your sins and punishment switch over to the chicken."

Next, the ram. "Remember how Abraham was going to sacrifice his son, Isaac, because God asked him to? Well, God was impressed when Abraham sacrificed a ram instead. I figure I can impress God, too."

Finally, the lawyer: "There's this legend about a 'Heavenly Court,' where it's decided who lives and who dies. Two angels, dressed in white, act as lawyers. Sanegor, the good angel, defends people. Kategor, the evil angel, prosecutes. Kategor is really Satan."

Max laughed.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "First we frame an innocent chicken. Then we kill an innocent ram. Ooh, ooh, I get it. We need the *lawyer* when we go to *trial* for framing the chicken and murdering the ram.

"If I were you, David, I'd go with the insanity plea. I'll testify."

Max said he heard his mother tell his father that I suffered from Attention Surplus Disorder. I looked it up but couldn't find anything. So I just forgave Max and started working on my plan. I decided to drop the one-meal-a-day diet, since I *did* like to eat chicken.

I also ditched the swinging chicken, since I *did* like to eat chicken.

White clothing was next. My research said white "symbolizes purity and hearkens back to the biblical High Priest who dressed in white linen on Yom Kippur." It also said white represents

death in Judaism and, by wearing white “we are reminded of our mortality, motivating us to repent further.”

I didn’t have any white clothing. I thought about telling my parents we had to get all-white school uniforms, but that would be lying, and it didn’t seem a good time to lie. So, I took the money I saved from raking leaves, and a few leftover pennies, and I bought a couple of white shirts and one white pair of pants at a used clothing store. Nothing fit, but I didn’t think God cared much about tailoring. (Which reminds me of a joke I read about Jesus and Goldberg, the tailor, but that’s another story.)

I wore my whites to school the next day. And I forgave all over the place. When Susan Streiter laughed at my clothing, I forgave her. When Mr. Klepner, our language arts teacher, said my essay about the history of pop tarts was “not your best work,” I forgave him. When I lost the election for class president to Kathryn Morris, I forgave the class. Mr. Klepner said it was the shortest concession speech he’d ever heard.

But I was most impressive when Brian Kellogg tripped me during kickball. I was laying on my back in the playground, and Brian was standing over me, with a dumb smile. An oversized mouth breather, Brian was about to rearrange my body parts when I said, “I forgive you.”

With the whole class in a circle, Brian waved his fist and growled, “Forgive this.”

Then Floyd Finocchio, who is even bigger than Brian, stepped between us and told Brian he would rearrange *his* body parts if he didn’t leave me alone. (I won’t repeat the exact words; that would be a sin.)

I thanked Floyd.

“Hey, it was nothing,” he said. “You helped me with my math last week. And I thought that thing about forgiving was pretty cool. Sorry your chef’s costume got ruined. Better find a good tailor.”

(So Goldberg the tailor makes robes for Jesus, who decides at the end that they should go into business together as “Lord and Tailor.”)

Forgive me.

Next on my list: *asking* forgiveness. That would be tougher than forgiving, because I’d have to *admit* I had done something wrong. I test-marketed it on Max, with this e-mail message in computer lab: “I repent of the wrong I have done thee. I lied three years ago, when I swore that the invitation I had sent thee to my birthday party must have gotten lost in the mail. I really didn’t invite thee.”

Max e-mailed me back: “And I forgiveth thee for the wrong that thou hast committed against me. P.S. Art thou nuts?”

Well, it was a start. Then, when I got home, I asked Sarah to forgive me for raiding my own penny collection to buy comic books and framing her in the great penny-collection heist. She was slightly less forgiving than Max. Her words were: “I know God will forgive me when I kill you.” (Those weren’t her exact words. Repeating them would be a sin, I’m sure.)

Eli was next, and I asked for his forgiveness for spreading Sarah's hair remover on his three-hair goatee while he was sleeping. (I did think five dollars was a bit steep as a gesture of repentance, but I forgave him.)

Then came sacrifice. I couldn't find a ram; I thought about sacrificing Sarah, but you're supposed to sacrifice something you value. I came up with *Haman*, the Purim evil action figure.

Instead of burning *Haman* in our backyard, I gift-wrapped him, took him to the children's hospital and asked the volunteer at the information booth if she would give it to one of the sick children. She got teary-eyed and told me what a "wonderful human being" I was.

On the way out of the hospital, I ran into Rebecca King, a chubby, freckly girl in my class. Rebecca was wearing a pink-striped uniform. She said she volunteered at the hospital one day a week, delivering packages and flowers to patients. I told her I thought that was a nice thing to do and that maybe I'd try it, too. Then I said, "Rebecca, you look pretty in that uniform." She giggled, thanked me and said she liked my uniform, too.

On the way home, I stopped at Max's house. I told him about Rebecca volunteering. "That's because she's got no friends, she has nothing else to do, and she was probably at the hospital anyway, getting her 'ugly' treatments," Max said. I told him I thought he was cruel. "Sorry," he said. "Forgive me."

I didn't want to lose points for associating with an insensitive lout, so I went home. I hadn't stepped more than five feet into the house, when my mother charged at me, wrapped her arms around me and gave me a slurpy kiss on the cheek.

"What was that for?" I asked, wiping my face.

"Rebecca King's mother just called. Rebecca called *her* from the hospital and told her what you said to her. She said it made her feel *so good*. That was a sweet thing you did, a real mitzvah."

For the first time since I started my rehabilitation, I began to think I might have a chance. I figured my odds improved a couple of days later, when I got this letter in the mail:

*Dear David, I'm the kid who got Haman. I'm 6 and I've been in the hospital for three months. My family lives a long way from here, so I'm alone a lot. Haman is keeping me company and protecting me. Thanks.*

I still didn't know if I was safe. So I decided to ask Rabbi Stein to recommend a lawyer, the last item on my list. Dad said half the members of our congregation were lawyers, so I figured Rabbi would know who was good.

"David, what can I do for you?" Rabbi asked, leaning back in his chair and locking his fingers together on his belly.

"Can you recommend a good lawyer?" I asked.

"For who?"

“For me.”

“David,” he said, leaning forward, like he’d just woken up. “What have you done this time?”

I told him everything. I explained my fear of being erased out of existence. I gave him the highlights and low points of the past year, skipping repeat offenses. He scratched his head, adjusted his yarmulke, rubbed his chin and drummed the desk with his fingers.

“David,” he finally said, “I think I can save you some money. I’ll be your public defender.”

“What’s a public defender?”

“That’s a lawyer who defends people in court for free, when they can’t afford to hire one. I’ll do that for you. First, tell me some of the good things you did this year.”

I told him, but I said I was worried because I started doing them late in the year, and some of it was only to save my skin.

“How did it feel to do those good deeds?”

“I liked it. I think I’m going to try to keep it up. If I get the chance, that is.”

Rabbi said he thought I’d learned a lot during the past year. “And that’s important. The kind of person you are *becoming* is more important than the kind of person you’ve *been*. Now, I think you’ve always been basically a good person, but it sounds like you’re getting even better. You’ve made some mistakes, but we all do. I’m proud of you, and I think God will be proud of you.”

I needed a better answer: “Does that mean I’ll be in the Book of Life for next year? Am I going to live?”

Rabbi looked serious. “David,” he said, “I can’t speak for God. But I know God loves you and wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to you. I think you can relax.”

It sounded like that was the best answer I was going to get, especially since I wasn’t paying. So I thanked Rabbi and told him I felt a lot better – which was true. As I was reaching for the door, though, I had one more question.

“Rabbi, do you think there really is a Book of Life?”

“I don’t know, David,” he answered. Then he smiled. “But, I do know about the ‘Book of Love.’”

Before I could say anything, he started: “‘*Oh, I wonder, wonder, who b’doo’oo who: Who wrote the book of love?*’”

He sounded awful. But I forgave him.