



SERMON YOM KIPPUR: GOD'S ALGORITHM

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Monday 28 September 2020
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 As a maths teacher, my wife spent a large portion of lockdown grading her students in the absence of GCSEs and A-levels. She and her colleagues had to rank them all, from best to worst, no joint places; and then work out a teacher-assigned grade for each pupil.
- 2 On Yom Kippur, tradition tells us that God seals the Book of Life, that great book whose contents determine our destiny. Our entire character – all our past deeds, all our future potential, the rights and wrongs of everything we've ever done – gets summed up with a short note, written in the Divine hand, in this book.
- 3 These two processes – teacher-assigned A-level grades, and God's sealing of the Book of Life – have something in common. They're both incredibly reductive. They both require a very broad-brush judgement call, and then distil a huge amount of the human experience into an extremely narrow category. A grade for students; a verdict for Jews.
- 4 Anyone studying maths will have had good days and bad days, areas of special expertise and areas in which they're less confident. Yet in the end it all has to boil down to one category. And so too for humans: some people are truly evil, but most of us fall somewhere on a spectrum, yet the Book of Life assigns to each of us a single outcome of a Divine balancing exercise.
- 5 Rosh Hashanah, the ten days of repentance, and Yom Kippur, are all opportunities for prayer which the Jewish calendar affords us before the



Book of Life is sealed. But what about those who were waiting for exam results? What value does prayer hold for them?

- 6 The Wednesday night before results day, what would be the point of praying? It can't change the outcome.¹ The algorithm had already been chosen and its output had already been recorded. The grades were ready to go live the following morning. Prayer, however heartfelt, was not going to bring about some supernatural change to the database, swapping a B for a C or an A for a B.
- 7 And yet it would have been far from valueless.² It couldn't change the outcome but it could change the student's reaction. It could help prepare them for a difficult day. It could help them calmly to evaluate their options. It could help them forgive the system which so badly let them down. It could help them forgive themselves if they felt they'd let themselves down. Prayer can make a difference, even if that difference isn't to settled reality.
- 8 How about earlier in the process? Would praying have made a bigger difference a few months earlier, when Manuella was deciding on her pupils' grades? In a practical sense, probably not. The evidence base on which teachers took their decisions already existed. The algorithm may not have been finalised yet, but prayers are directed to God, not to the Department for Education, and it seems unlikely that they could have much influence in that direction. Then again, prayer could still offer the same benefits as before. Helping someone to cope. Helping someone to carry on.
- 9 Even at the very beginning of Year 13, before school closures were even on the horizon, prayer would have been a double-edged sword. It couldn't help students become good at maths if they simply lacked aptitude; it couldn't help compensate for time wasted in the past or for lack of effort



put in in previous years. Yet it could focus the mind, strengthen determination, set a marker to break with the past and begin a new and better chapter.

- 10 Religion, prayer; these things are not magic. They cannot achieve the supernatural. And yet, like magic, they can achieve a range of different things in a range of different circumstances. Religion and prayer aren't necessary; people can achieve these effects with other tools from meditation to yoga to simple determination. But it's one tool that has served the Jewish people well.
- 11 As morally-imperfect people living in a world full of temptation, we are given chance after chance after chance to do the right thing. The 9th-century work Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer suggests³ that everyone has to pass four doors before committing evil, and at each door they are confronted by seven angels urging them to turn back. At the third door, the angels say to the human, "Why would you choose to be erased from the Book of Life? Is it not better for you to be inscribed in it than erased from it? Hear us, and turn back!"
- 12 Whether we believe in a Book of Life or not, whether we see it as reductive or not, Yom Kippur is yet another door where we are given a chance to turn back. This day, to focus our minds on how we are, is the biggest opportunity of all.
- 13 We'll all get graded one day, quite possibly by a very unfair algorithm. Yom Kippur calls on us to use all the influence we can to improve the evidence base on which we will be written up in the Book of Life. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.



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¹ Only a government U-turn could achieve that...

² To be fair, m.Berachot 9:3 says that it is very much valueless.

³ Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 15