

The Books That Bind Us

I can read in red.
I can read in blue.
I can read in pickle color too.

I can read in bed.
And in purple.
And in brown.

I can read in a circle and upside down!

You can read about anchors.
And all about ants.
You can read about ankles!
And crocodile pants!

You can read about hoses...
and how to smell roses...
and what you should do about owls on noses!

Young Cat!
If you keep your eyes open enough,
oh, the stuff you will learn!
The most wonderful stuff!

You can learn about ice.
You can learn about mice.

You can learn about the price of ice.

You can learn about sad...
and glad...
and mad!

There are so many things you can learn about.

But...

you'll miss the best things if you keep your eyes shut.¹

¹ Dr. Seuss, *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* (New York: Random House, 1978).

What I just read to you is the Book of Life.

Okay, maybe not *the* Book of Life – but certainly a book of life.

At least, it has been one of mine.

Dr. Seuss shaped my early childhood – really, how I learned to read. But those stories kept showing up. In tenth grade, I appeared in *Seussical* as both Vlad Vladikoff, the black-bottomed eagle, and Max, the Grinch’s one-antlered dog. Apparently, I had range.

From learning to read Seuss to memorizing lines drawn from his world, these books became part of my own story – a Book of Life for me and, no doubt, many others. Their lessons had moved beyond their bound pages.

A word about the title: *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut*. When Seuss urges us to keep our eyes open, I understand that metaphorically. Of course, looking at pages is not the only way to read: people of different abilities and preferences read – fully read – through Braille, audiobooks, and screen readers. By “eyes open,” I understand that to mean *attention* open – *curiosity* open – a willingness to sustain an encounter with something beyond ourselves.

So if Seuss is a book of life, what does Jewish tradition mean when it speaks, especially during this season, of *the* Book of Life?

Well, like most answers in Judaism, it’s complicated. This idea of a *Book of Life* starts well before our version of Rosh Hashanah. After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses tells G-d that if Israel cannot be forgiven, “erase me from the book You have written.”² Psalm 69 speaks of a *sefer chayyim*³, a Book of Life; and Malachi, of a *sefer zikaron*⁴, a Book of Remembrance. These texts, and others, connect divine *books* with life, deliverance, judgment, and remembrance, but give us no helpful “Book of Life” or terms and conditions or a how-to manual for understanding how this thing is supposed to work.

So the early rabbis took a stab at pulling these disparate threads into our holiest days. The Talmud pictures three books opened on Rosh HaShanah: one for the clearly righteous, one for the clearly wicked, and one for everybody in between⁵ – which is to say, presumably, most of us. That third book remains open throughout the *Yamim Noraim*, the ten Days of Awe, as we do *teshuva* and “finish up our annual stories,” until Yom Kippur, when it is shut and sealed. That is why, between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we say, “*G’mar chatimah tovah*” – “May there be a good final sealing.”

² Exodus 32:32-33

³ Psalms 69:29

⁴ Malachi 3:16

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b

The *Unetaneh Tokef*⁶, one of our central High Holy Day prayers we heard a bit ago, preserves another version of the image: וְתִזְכֹּר כָּל הַנִּשְׁכָּחוֹת, וְתִפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזִּכְרוֹנוֹת. וּמֵאֵלֵינוּ יִקְרָא, וְחוֹתָם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ (V'tizkor kol ha-nishkachot, v'tiftach et sefer ha-zichronot. U-me'eilav yikarei, v'chotam yad kol adam bo), "You remember all that has been forgotten. You open the Book of Remembrances. It reads itself, and each person's signature is in it." Every human being's signature – a lasting mark, perhaps, I'll suggest: the imprint of our actions – speaks for itself in this season of reflection and correction.

When it comes to the Book of Life, tradition really just gives us these snapshots: life, judgment, remembrance, inscription. This year, I've turned it over and over *and have come to imagine two versions of this book* that I want to share with you. One of them belongs to G-d, and the other belongs to us.

The earthly Book of Life – the copy that is ours, not G-d's (we each get a copy; we are partners in this whole thing, after all) – is not a single book. I imagine it as *humanity's vast collection*: Torah and Talmud, novels and memoirs, histories and discoveries, poetry, fantasy, and children's books – *all the knowledge, questions, stories, and imagined worlds preserved and passed from one life to another*, from one generation to another.

The heavenly Book is more elusive. I understand it less as a literal volume and more as Divine remembrance; some metaphorical cosmic journaling that asserts that every life is significant – we're all written in it, and too, that our choices leave a trace, and even what human beings overlook is not forgotten by G-d.

The way I see it, these are two versions of the same book. *Reading* the earthly version can help shape the person whose signature appears in the heavenly one. For example, when a book brings us inside another person's life, it can help us recognize the image of G-d in someone we might otherwise never have known. That means even reading a so-called "secular" book can itself become a holy act.

Now, I know: I've taken an ancient High Holy Day image and I have gone to town declaring that the Book of Life is every shelf in every library. You may be wondering if this rabbi is getting carried away with metaphor.

No.

If the heavenly Book holds the record of human lives, then humanity's accumulated library is its earthly counterpart. It contains the *d'varim* – the words, the matters, the

⁶ *Unetaneh Tokef*, Rosh Hashanah liturgy; translation adapted by the author. See ["Unetaneh Tokef 1," Sefaria](#)

things, the “wonderful stuff,” as Seuss puts it – of human life. And it has not only recorded life as we know it; it has helped make life – the way we live it – possible.

The journalist James Marriott argues that “the invention of writing is probably the greatest intellectual revolution in the history of our species.”⁷ *Writing* allowed ideas to outlive their speakers: histories could now endure, discoveries could accumulate, and each generation could begin *beyond where the previous one began*.

Across this earthly Book of Life, the dead can *still speak*. A centuries-old discovery can spark another; one person’s private experience can reach someone they will never meet.

And Maryanne Wolf, a scholar of reading and the brain, teaches us something remarkable: that reading actually *changes* our brains. We did not evolve to read, and we are not born with a predetermined reading circuit. *We actually build that circuit* as we learn, and we continue shaping it through the *ways we read*⁸. Deep reading – a “slow, immersive engagement with text”⁹ – brings new information into dialogue with our *existing* knowledge, our capacity for inference and critical analysis, and our ability to enter another person’s perspective and feelings.

Perhaps that is part of why we call ourselves the People of the Book. Torah stands at the center of Jewish life, but Torah – I think – is not meant to be the endpoint of our reading. In fact – and I believe this sincerely – Torah prepares us to encounter other stories, experiences, and ideas. Those encounters change us, and then, through our cycles of ritual reading, we return to Torah as more experienced, more complicated readers, ready to find something there that we could not have found before. And the cycle continues: from Torah to the world and back again.

But Wolf’s point comes with a warning: the reading circuit is plastic, meaning it is shaped by how we use it. The capacities involved in deep reading can be cultivated – but when they go unused, they can weaken. And if those capacities weaken, we feel the effects far beyond our reading lives – in our attention, our judgment, and our empathy. All empirically proven.

The earthly Book of Life can fill our stores, libraries, homes, and offices and still remain unopened – not that I’m thinking of the unread stacks tucked into every corner of my office!

⁷ James Marriott, interview by Asma Khalid and Tristan Redman, “The Death of Reading,” *The Global Story*, BBC World Service, December 2, 2025, 9:15.

⁸ Maryanne Wolf, interview by Ezra Klein, “Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Maryanne Wolf,” *The Ezra Klein Show*, *The New York Times*, November 22, 2022.

⁹ Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai, “The Importance of Deep Reading,” *Educational Leadership* 66, no. 6 (March 2009): 32–37.

So what happens, on a wider scale, when we stop opening this earthly Book of Life – and begin to lose the habits of attention that books both require and teach? We are beginning to find out.

One example. A major study published last year examined twenty years of data from more than 236,000 Americans. In 2004, 28 percent of those fifteen and older read for pleasure on an average day. By 2023, it was just 16 percent – fewer than one in six. And that included books, e-books, audiobooks, newspapers, and magazines.¹⁰

And let me be very clear, lest we get ahead of ourselves – this is not a young-person problem. The decline began long before smartphones and social media, as radio and television began to compete for our attention. The smartphone gathered nearly every earlier rival – and many new ones – into a single object we carry everywhere.

But we don't really need these statistics, right? We know there's a problem. We *want* to read more, right?. We *mean* to read more. We place the book beside the bed, maybe even open it...and then reach for the phone. Even when it doesn't buzz for our attention, we check just one thing, then another. Twenty minutes later (if we're lucky it's only been twenty minutes), we're scrolling through reels – many of which are quite literally *not real* – while the book remains open to the same page.

Seuss warned us, “You'll miss the best things if you keep your eyes shut.” Our eyes are fixed on a glowing screen, but our attention is elsewhere – closed to the sacred act of reading. I *know* how much easier it is to reach for the phone than the book.

Maybe “addiction” is the right word and maybe it isn't. But many of us know what it is to *want* to choose differently and discover that *wanting* is not enough. And I'm not blaming us – (that will come next week!) Many of these apps are *designed* to interrupt and captivate us. Social media companies pay massive amounts of money for that most sacred commodity: *your attention*.

Just two and a half weeks ago, Meta reached an approximately eighteen-billion-dollar settlement with a bipartisan coalition representing nearly every state. The lawsuit accused Meta of designing its platforms to hook young people. Meta admitted no wrongdoing, but agreed to protections for users under eighteen, including a parent-controlled two-hour daily limit.¹¹

¹⁰ Jessica K. Bone, Feifei Bu, Jill Sonke, and Daisy Fancourt, “The Decline in Reading for Pleasure over 20 Years of the American Time Use Survey,” *iScience* 28, no. 9 (2025): 113288, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2025.113288>

¹¹ Barbara Ortutay, Kelvin Chan, and Kaitlyn Huamani, “Meta Reaches Landmark \$18 Billion Settlement with States in Trial over Teen Social Media Addiction,” *Associated Press*, August 26, 2026.

That is a big deal: it puts some responsibility on the designer, not only the user. Yet the protections cover mainly minors, depend upon enforcement, and leave the attention-capturing business model intact.

I am not up here today to hate on the internet or denounce new technology through a lens of nostalgia for the purely virtuous book. The book itself was once a radical new technology. Our earliest surviving biblical texts are scrolls, and the Torah we still make and read today is created by stitching panels of animal parchment around wooden rollers. It is a lot less convenient than a book, but we have decided there is value in its forced slowness and sequential structure.

Then came the codex – the ancestor of the modern book – separate leaves gathered and bound along one edge. It held more text and let readers move easily between passages. Jews adopted it, *but* we did not discard the scroll. We studied from bound books while continuing to read Torah ritually from a *sefer Torah*, from a scroll.

Today, Sefaria extends that access again. It lets us carry a *beit midrash* in our *pockets*: Torah, Talmud, Midrash, centuries of commentary and translation, linked together wherever there's internet! That is a gift – a miracle! – and one we should embrace. But just as we preserved the scroll after adopting the codex, we must ask what would be lost if books disappeared from our practice: habits of attention and imagination, and the sacred joy of disappearing into a story larger than ourselves. To keep books alive as the world changes, we must intentionally build practices around reading them – or else I fear it may not happen.

You know, you gotta be careful what you wish for. We like to say that Torah is timeless and infinite. *This* is what our ancestors meant by “endless scrolling!” At least the Torah version wasn't quite so mindless. And in the spirit of grounding ourselves in old media – of using it to remember who we are and where we come from – let us turn to the Torah passage we just heard chanted.

This famous selection is called the Akeidah – or “The Binding” – and it concerns the emotionally charged and quite horrific scene of Abraham tying down his beloved son Isaac in anticipation of human sacrifice. Thank G-d, Abraham did not follow through.

This year, I found myself getting caught up on the story's title. We do not call it “the almost-sacrifice.” We have chosen the binding as its defining moment. Why? I wonder if it is because that was the greatest inflection point. For Isaac and Abraham, the binding was the moment separating “before” from “after.” A choice was made, an action done that could not be undone. Isaac made it out alive, but neither of them could forget the fear of being sacrificed – or of preparing to make the sacrifice.

The text never records Isaac and Abraham speaking to one another again after that story¹². And just a few verses later, Sarah (Isaac's mom, Abraham's wife) dies – a death the rabbis connect to the misery of what had just happened¹³. The *binding* set consequences in motion long after the ropes themselves were removed.

When we bind something together, we set in motion a narrative, for better or for worse. No matter what happened next, Isaac had been bound to an altar. He became – in his own mind, and in all of ours – forever *entangled* with sacrifice, fear, pain, obedience, and ignorance, however else we might interpret the story.

The way I am reading the Akeidah this year, with extra emphasis on the nature of “binding,” is teaching me the awesome power of bound ideas – and the human ability to alter history and collective imagination through what we choose to bind together. We see this in the Akeidah itself being bound into Torah. We have chosen to revisit this difficult story every year during our holiest season, binding it still *further* to our collective tradition.

And let me remind you – in case it wasn't clear what I was getting at – that books are bound! Their spines hold pages together, joining ideas that teach, inspire, and captivate.

The Akeidah sharpens the question raised by every binding: What are we binding together, and what are we, as people with agency, allowing ourselves to be bound to? At their best, books are extraordinary works of *binding*: an author brings *together* ideas, stories, and lives in an utterly unique way; when we read, we enter those connections and make new ones of our own.

We will all give our attention to something. The question is whether we choose what is worthy of it – or find ourselves bound, instead, *to an endless feed of nothingness*.

Let me be clear again: that isn't a prophecy. We aren't doomed. We are capable of making choices that bind our valuable and, dare I say, existentially finite attention to what we deem most worthy.

And Judaism gives us a rubric for holding ourselves to commitments that are difficult to keep: commandments – *mitzvot*. I'm not going to suggest that you follow any particular existing *mitzvah*. I'm going to suggest that you make up your own. Because an

¹² See Genesis 22:19, in which only Abraham is explicitly said to return from Moriah; the subsequent biblical narrative records no further direct speech between Abraham and Isaac. See also Kenneth Seeskin, “The Message of the Akedah?”, *TheTorah.com*, November 3, 2023, updated September 7, 2026.

¹³ Rashi on Genesis 23:2, s.v. וּלְבִנְתָּהּ, drawing upon the midrashic tradition that Sarah's death followed her learning of the Akeidah; cf. Genesis Rabbah 58:5.

intention, no matter how *sincere*, is not yet a *practice*; it needs a structure strong enough to hold it.

Inspired by the “dos” and “do nots” of our sacred text, what if you created a system of personal commandments to help you live according to your values? If you want to put down the phone and pick up more books, perhaps your “do nots” include “thou shalt not bring thy phone to the dinner table,” or “thou shalt not doomscroll through the news on Shabbat.”

That last one is something I have aimed with varying success to commit to for years. I created a Shabbat mode on my phone that, from sundown to sundown, Friday night to Saturday night, disables my social media and news apps for one 25-hour period every week. I love it. It is such a *refresh*.

Your “do” commandments (and I’m happy, by the way, to help any of you workshop them this year) might include setting aside time to read every day or every week; or perhaps “you shalt designate a cozy chair as a ‘reading-only, no-phone zone;” or, “Thou shalt finally join that book club thou hast been meaning to check out.” Just an idea.

“The more that you read, the more things you will know.
The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.

You might learn a way to earn a few dollars.
Or how to make doughnuts... or kangaroo collars.

If you read with your eyes shut you’re likely to find
that the place where you’re going is far, far behind.”

Rabbi Seuss strikes again.

This year, I want to read more than I did last year. My goal is at least thirteen books – one for each Hebrew month. It feels doable, but in practice, it ain’t easy. There’s limited time. I need your help. I’m asking you now, from this bima, for your help. Anyone who wants to join me: I would love nothing more than to be accountability buddies – maybe even read together.

And I’m going to give you all a gift. I made special Temple Beth Am bookmarks for you to take home today. They say, from Pirkei Avot, “הַפּוֹךְ בַּהּ וְהַפּוֹךְ בָּהּ, דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ” (*Hafokh bah va’hafokh bah, d’khola vah*) – “Turn it over and over, for everything is in it.” This refers, of course, to Torah. But I think it refers to the wider Book of Life – the collective

¹⁴ Pirkei Avot 5:22.

library of humanity – as well. Maybe it refers to our hearts, too. I hope you use these bookmarks in joy and good health as we turn pages together.

This year, we are bringing new energy to Temple Beth Am's reading initiatives. For years, our excellent lay-led book club has gathered here for deep and heartfelt discussions. Its leaders have poured themselves into building that community, and their efforts will continue with renewed support and wider walls.

Whether you are an experienced bookworm, someone who has fallen out of the habit, or someone who has never considered yourself much of a reader, you are invited. During 5787, we will choose one book for every Hebrew month – all thirteen of them this leap year. Some will be discussed through our ongoing lay-led book club; others will inspire larger conversations led by members of our professional team. More details are coming. For now, I am just excited to read in community – to learn together and dive into new perspectives and stories.

On Rosh HaShanah it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed. The earthly Book of Life – with its stories, discoveries, arguments, memories, and imagined worlds – propels us to further living. And today, the heavenly Book remains open. May what we read from the Book before us help shape the signature that speaks for us in the heavenly one. May this vast human library strengthen the depth, attentiveness, and moral imagination of our souls throughout the year to come. May we be inscribed for openness to ourselves, to one another, to Torah, and to life.

Shana tova.