



Signed, Sealed, Delivered Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne

Class of 2021

The perfect gift for an aficionado of the 19th century novel is a seal and sealing wax of one's own, as I learned when my parents bought this precise gift for me. I am not, by nature, the greatest of correspondents, but the prospect of being able to melt and seal my own letters provided some impetus to become better. And who would be a better recipient for such a letter than the people who had given me the gift in the first place? Moreover, it was Elul and although we have never - to my knowledge - actually sent Shana Tova cards to anyone, there was a first time for everything. I decided I was going to send my parents a card for the Yamim Noraim sealed with the new seal they had bought me. (If you know my family and see my parents on Rosh Hashana, you may learn a lot about me if you ask whether I actually followed through on this or not.) But before I could even start, I had to practice sealing the card. I took out a piece of paper, folded it over so it looked like an envelope, took a deep breath, and opened the sealing kit. I lit the wax taper, carefully dripped the wax onto the fold, and then pressed my seal into the soft wax, closing it for good. For the final touch, I wrote right under the seal *שנה טובה תכתב ותחתם*, May you be written and sealed for a good year.

The idea of *חתימה*, of being sealed for a good year, is one whose meaning is obvious, but whose practical aspects are almost entirely lost in our day and age. The phrase *גמר חתימה טובה*, the hope that a person's year and fate be sealed for the good, is a dead metaphor, one where the meaning is understood but the link to the behavior that inspired the metaphor has been severed. Ideally, a metaphor calls to mind both parts of the comparison at the same time; when Homer describes the "wine dark sea," the audience sees the image of the waves as heavy and opaque as good red wine. Once a metaphor is dead, however, it no longer calls to mind the second half of the comparison. When we talk about the hands of a clock, we do not have in mind the comparison to human hands pointing out information even though that is the goal of the metaphor. We understand that the hands are the part that show the time, but the specific experience of pointing fingers is lost. So too, when we say *גמר חתימה טובה*, we do not usually think about the act of sealing and what it means.

So what *is* the connotation behind being sealed for the book of life? What happens when a letter is sealed? In the story of Purim, the decrees sealed with the king's signet ring are inviolate and cannot be rescinded. So too, when our decrees are, so to speak, sealed with God's signet ring, they too cannot change. A letter that has been sealed cannot be tampered with without leaving evidence, and the seal itself is personal to the sealer. Sealing meant the words were safe or protected. It meant the letter was truly final. And the seal in the wax spoke to the authenticity of the sender. So in the process of imagining how to translate what happens on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur into language more accessible to humans, the metaphor of the king and his seal is extremely helpful. To wish for ourselves and our friends to be sealed in the book of life would have been to imagine our fates secured, solely in the hands of God, and unable to change. Once we are sealed for life, we are safe.

The downside of such a metaphor is, as I discovered as a young child, that most of us in the 21st century do not have these associations any more. When I was in elementary school, I remember my teachers explaining *בראש השנה יכתבון וביום צום כיפור יחתמו*, on Rosh Hashana it is written and on the fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed,

as follows: on Rosh Hashana our fates are written in pencil and on Yom Kippur they are written in pen. In the days when we were not allowed to use ink in the classroom lest we write down a mistake and be unable to correct it, writing with a pen was serious business. Nowadays, perhaps the most accessible metaphor is that the email of our fate is drafted on Rosh Hashana and sent on Yom Kippur. There is a significant transition that happens as the words move from amorphous ideas in our minds to typed characters on the screen, but that is far less momentous than the transition from unsent to sent. An email once sent cannot be unsent. Our fate is sealed, typos and all. The sent email is like the command in the Purim story once it was sealed by the ring of the king.

In fact, I think the association between sealing and monarchy - מלכות - is an integral part of the greeting. The very fact that the ritual is somewhat archaic and evokes the image of majesty and binding decrees is what gives it power. Perhaps even more so, in the era where the mail is primarily used for bills, advertisements, and birthday cards, the sealed decree stands out in our mind. It is meant to remind us of מלכנו, our Monarch, to whom we direct our prayers. To put it another way, חתימה implies a חותם, a sealer of our fate whose mark is on our lives.

And it also implies the other meaning of חותם, the seal or mark of some kind that proves authenticity and authority. In Masechet Yoma on 69b, we learn that חותמו של הקב"ה אמת, the seal of the Holy One, Blessed Be He, is Truth. So when our fates are signed and sealed, for the good as we hope, they are sealed with Truth. Perhaps it is the act of sealing itself that turns the possibility of our fate into reality. The seal is a decree that this will truly come to pass. On the other hand, אמת is a tricky word to translate and can also mean "true" in the sense of faithful. In that respect, when God seals the future, it is a promise to us that our repentance and our good deeds have been noticed. Elsewhere in the Gemara, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani says that God's seal is אמת because we are the people who keep the Torah from beginning to end, א תו. The seal implies a twofold truthfulness. The letters express our commitment to God, while the word they make up expresses God's commitment to us. So when we are signed and sealed for a good year, the seal marks the dual commitment between God and God's people to one another: you be true to me and I'll be true to you.

The Yamim Noraim are filled with metaphors; more so than any other time of year, we reach for comparisons around this time to try to understand what is happening. We relate to the world through metaphors and our experiences of these days of awe are shaped by the way we talk about them. There is something to be gained in translating these metaphors into contemporary terms, and much to be lost if we start wishing one another that we be drafted and sent for a good year instead of signed and sealed. My hope for all of us this year is that we notice just how much is contained in the words that we say and that we speak with intention and care so that we, like God who we strive to emulate, can be true in both deed and word.

Rabbanit Dr. Elizabeth Shayne came to Maharat after receiving her Ph.D from University of California, Santa Barbara, where she studied the past, present, and future of digital reading. Rabbanit Liz writes and teaches about everything from the hypertext history of the Talmud to the future of robots in halakha, while also innovating new ways to teach Torah online. She is a Wexner Graduate Fellow/Davidson Scholar, and interned at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob, and Sefaria. Rabbanit Liz plans to use her expertise to create more and better learning opportunities for all those who study and love Torah.

