

## **Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die: Perspectives of Unetaneh Tokef**

**Kol Nidre 5776 / September 22, 2015**

On September 11, 2001, I was a fourth-year cantorial student, living on Long Island, New York, attending Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. It was a Tuesday morning. I came out of the subway with my beloved teacher, Joyce Rozensweig, with whom I had a 9:00 class, as well as a couple other students. Unusual, really. I never saw anyone I knew on the subway. Snaking across Broadway was a curious trail of pale gray smoke. It struck me as odd... Upon entering the lobby of the College-Institute, the news came. A plane had struck the World Trade Center. Standing on the corner of West Fourth and Mercer Streets we saw the gaping hole from which bellowed flames of orange and thick, black smoke. You know the rest of what happened that day. Those events will forever be seared upon our minds and hearts.

Unlike many other congregations, my student pulpit, Temple Emanuel of New Hyde Park, was quite fortunate. We had only one congregant who worked in the Towers, and he just happened to stop for coffee that day, never making it into the building before tragedy struck. The next evening my congregation held a memorial service for the souls that had been lost. I created new words for the memorial prayer, El Malei Rachamim. Rosh Hashanah began just five evenings later. My most vivid memory of the High Holy Days that year was the chanting of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer that Rosh Hashanah morning. It was one of the most difficult things I have had to do as a cantor, next to chanting El Malei Rachamim at Yizkor the year my mother died. The Unetaneh Tokef is a long liturgical poem that begins, “Let us declare the sacred power of this day. It is awesome and full of dread.” It continues “On Rosh Hashanah it is written ... On Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die?... Who by fire and who by water?” Though I’d read and chanted each line multiple times before, that year (and each year

hence) the litany of all the ways human beings may meet their demise went on and on, seemingly forever, and I thought I would never get through it. The images of that Tuesday morning, that crystal clear, stark, blue Tuesday morning bombarded my psyche. Tears flowed, and my voice broke in sobs. Was that act, that day, sealed the previous Yom Kippur? Was the monumental loss of life all part of the Divine plan? How could that be? Is it true that God, Avinu Malkeinu, our father, our sovereign, our parent, our shepherd, is seated on the throne of heaven with levers and pulleys and buttons, clicking a mouse to ordain the fate of each and every soul? We read the words: “True, in that you judge, you reprove, you intimately know, you write, you seal, you inscribe, you count, you remember all that is forgotten.” Are we really sheep who pass under the shepherd’s staff with no control over our lives? This poem, this prayer, centuries old... Did it hold secrets of life and death I only came to fathom at that moment on the morning of September 18, 2001? I still struggle with this prayer. I have struggled with the idea of skipping it all together, yet there is that part of me that honors our traditions and respects the fact that as B’nei Yisrael, as the Children of Israel, it is our destiny to wrestle with God and to grapple with our liturgical texts. And so tomorrow morning, as we did on Rosh Hashanah morning, we will chant and recite the Unetaneh Tokef. We will sing *“B’Rosh Hashanah yikateivun, uv’Yom Tzom Kippur, uv’Yom Tzom Kippur yeikateimun.”* On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

So how can we reconcile ourselves to this prayer? Do we accept it? Do we reject it? Refuse to pray its words? Just say the syllables and move on? Though that would be the easy way, I don’t think it’s the right way. For some reason, all of the tragic events of this past year that human being has inflicted upon fellow human being has awakened me to the real essence of this prayer. The beauty of the Hebrew language is its ability to manifest its meaning in multiple layers – nuance upon nuance, and as Reform Jews we are tasked with the mission to build upon and create a Judaism that is modern, relevant,

and meaningful. As Jews it is also our task to confront what is difficult in the world and strive to eradicate the injustices and evils that abound. Therefore, I opine that this prayer is not about God ordaining what will happen and to whom. I believe this prayer is designed to awaken us to what CAN happen and to help us develop strength through our vulnerability. The Earth is not Utopia, and its people are not perfect – FAR from it – and we must be reminded of the dangers that face those who share our planet with us and share our common human destiny. As the prophet Malachi wrote: “Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?”

As in the prophet’s day, evil still abounds in our world, and in these days and times we are assaulted daily with the images and sounds of baseless hatred, shootings, bombings, anger, screaming, bigotry, and war. The alphabet of woe, the catalogue of sins that we recite in the *Al Cheit*, seems to be the way of the world. And the Unetaneh Tokef’s questions: “Who shall rest and who shall wander, who shall be at peace and who tormented, who shall be humbled and who exalted?” sounds like the Nightly News. Who will it be today? Which refugees will be beaten? Who of them will wander with no place to go? Which millionaire will be yelling and bragging tonight? And who will curl up in a cardboard box on the sidewalk?

I think the key to understanding the Unetaneh Tokef is a line near the beginning and a line near the end. In the opening paragraph we read about the Book of Remembrance which "reads itself," as each of us has signed it with our deeds. God opens the Book, but we're the ones who write it. WE are the ones who write it! And near the end: *Ut'shuvah, ut'fillah, utz'dakah ma-a-vi-rin et roa ha-g'zeirah*. With repentance – the sincere desire to turn ourselves around, with prayer – the holy work of communing with a force larger than ourselves, and with righteous giving – the good works of our hands, we have the power to “avert the severe degree.” WE can affect change ourselves!

So we know that bad things are going to happen. Whether we pray the Unetaneh Tokef prayer or not, there will still be earthquakes, and fire, and flooding. There will still be stonings and stabbings. There will still be rich and poor, the wandering and the at-peace. But the change comes in how we respond to it. Rather than ask, “Why do these horrible things happen?” the question we should ask is, “How am I going to respond?” Shall I be bitter and angry? Shall I rant on facebook or tweet something? Shall I wallow in self-pity and despair? Or shall I choose life? In Parashat Nitzavim that we read a couple of weeks ago and that we will read again tomorrow morning, Moses enjoins the Israelites: “This day, I call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, so that you and your descendants will live.” We choose life by responding with action. We choose life by helping others in need, we choose life by being a comforting friend, we choose life by donating to worthy causes, we choose life by volunteering. We choose life by being literate, by listening to both sides of an issue, and by voting for the candidate that best expresses our values and hopes. We choose life by involving ourselves in our congregation and its activities and its people. We choose life by demonstrating interest in the land of Israel and its people. We choose life by building up the weak, helping the poor and the stranger among us. So many ways to choose life... to avert the severe decree.

So now back to the words of the Unetaneh Tokef. If experiencing the prayer is still difficult for you like it has been for me, if the imagery is hard to relate to, or if the words just don't seem relevant, try just immersing yourself in the poetry of it. You don't have to ponder the meaning or analyze it. Just wonder at the rhythm of it... its alliteration...its symbolism. And as the words flow over you, take some time to consider YOUR Book of Remembrance. What did you write in YOUR book last year? What might you choose to write differently in the coming year?

Maybe the imagery of death can mean something different, too, sort of like the “Death” tarot card means that something is going to end, perhaps leading to a new beginning. Maybe it’s a metaphor for changing or transforming – like a butterfly. How do you see change happening in your life this year? Will change come like a trembling quake or will it be a tremor, hardly noticed? Will change sweep through your life like fire or pour down like peaceful waters? Will worry cut at your heart like a sword? Or will the beast of power consume your being? Will your choices make you feel as if you are dead, or will they enliven your spirit? How will you bring *t’shuvah*, *t’fillah*, and *tz’dakah* into your life during this year?

Last of all, and above all, let us remember that during these Ten Days of Repentance, these Days of Awe, the most important thing is to work towards making ourselves better and to be cleansed of all the gunk that clogs our spirit and prevents us from rising to our higher selves. We don’t have to dwell on our faults or be consumed by the thought of the gates closing without us. Let’s just peel away those layers, look honestly at where we are, and plan on where we want and need to be. Our slate is clean. Let our prayers and their words help us to approach God, to understand God, and to try to be better for doing so. Let’s approach the Unetaneh Tokef as our opportunity to appear before that part of God that remembers who we are and all that we’ve forgotten so that we can write in our Book with the words that help us become who we are meant to be.

*Kein y’hi ratzon.* May it come to be. And let us say: Amein