

High Holy Days 5781/2020
Yom Kippur Morning Sermon
Cantor Harriet Dunkerley
Temple B'nai Chaim

Choose Life

I don't exactly remember how old I was when I attended my first grown up Yom Kippur service. It was probably around the time of my Bat Mitzvah when I decided I would follow my father's lead by fasting and sitting patiently through the endless drone of liturgy and music sung by a faceless choir hidden somewhere above us in the choir loft. At some point during the morning service as I was counting how many more pages we had left (there were a lot as I recall), the organ shook the sanctuary and the low voices in the choir bellowed out the first words of what I would for years refer to as the, "bugga bugga prayer," the Un'taneh Tokef. The experience simultaneously grabbed my attention and terrified me. I frantically turned back the pages to find the text so I could understand what was happening. As I read the translation in the machzor – the older one with the very gendered and traditional "I – Thou" language, searching for some words of comfort – something to focus on to assuage my sudden fear, I became instead, more and more upset. Here was a prayer laying out a cold reality: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.... Who will live and who will die." What?! My mind raced back to what had happened between Rosh Hashanah and that morning. What had I done? Had I behaved? Did I help around the house? Was I kind? Had I fought with my brother? Was I bratty toward my sister? Had I lied? Did I take God's name in vain? What would be my fate?

The rest of the service was a blur. As we were walking out, my nerves felt brittle and my throat was a piece of parchment paper. I was so relieved as we approached the water fountain and I took a long drink. My father, horrified looked at me and said, "Harriet, you're fasting! What are you doing?" To which I responded, "What do you mean, I just needed some water!" He then explained that on Yom Kippur, not even water was permitted. I was immediately struck by a renewed panic. I had taken water! In the synagogue on Yom Kippur! My fate would surely be sealed and not for the good. I had really messed up at the last minute here and it was too late to do anything about it... I was a very literal kid.

A rabbinic colleague of mine is fond of saying that one of the best things about being a Reform Jew is our liturgy matches our values. The Reform movement has spent nearly two centuries editing, deleting, and adding to our prayers so that they more closely align with our beliefs. We have removed parts of our liturgy that refer to non-Jews in derogatory ways, that focus on angels and martyrs, are overtly sexist or say that other religions are idolaters. Our new siddurim and machzors contain gender neutral language, and theologically, we've offered creative translations of prayers, even changing Hebrew that went too deeply into the concept of reward and punishment in an effort to make our collective vows a bit less troubling.

With one notable exception – a prayer that we have kept in its entirety even in our newest machzor, Mishkan HaNefesh, from which we are praying this morning – the Unetaneh Tokef. Yes, the “bugga bugga prayer,” is recited the morning of Rosh HaShanah and again on Yom Kippur several times. I’m sure you know it, even if you think you don’t.

(Sing the beginning of Un’taneh Tokef.) It’s even more daunting with a large unseen choir belting it out!

It’s so widely known that Jewish singer songwriter Leonard Cohen composed his own version of it. You might recognize it:

And who by fire, who by water
Who in the sunshine, who in the night time
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial
Who in your merry, merry month of May
Who by very slow decay
And who shall I say is calling?

And who in her lonely slip, who by barbiturate
Who in these realms of love, who by something blunt
Who by avalanche, who by powder
Who for his greed, who for his hunger
And who shall I say is calling?

Here’s the original:

*We shall ascribe holiness to this day (rosh Hashanah/yom kippur).
For it is awesome and terrible.
Your kingship is exalted upon it.
For all the hosts of heaven are brought for judgment.
They shall not be guiltless in Your eyes
And all creatures shall parade before You as a troop.
As a shepherd herds his flock,
Causing his sheep to pass beneath his staff,
So do You cause to pass, count, and record,
Visiting the souls of all living,
Decreeing the length of their days,
Inscribing their judgment.
On Rosh Hashanah it is written,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die,
Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,*

*Who shall perish by water and who by fire,
...Who by famine and who by thirst,
Who by earthquake and who by plague,
...Who shall have rest and who shall wander,
Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued,
Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented,
Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low,
Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished?
But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree*

With all the modifications Reform Jews have made to our liturgy, why have we kept this stark decree of a prayer intact? As clergy, and particularly as a Cantor, I find it year after year almost impossible to sing through to the end. Particularly this year. This year while rehearsing the music for HHD, I was unable to get through Un'taneh Tokef on my first attempt. This year it cut deeply into my being – in the midst of all that is happening in our world right now, the prayer reads as a disarmingly honest, even vulnerable metaphor of the fear that we have been living with since March. I even considered options for leaving it out of our services. It seemed almost too much to put before our congregation this year. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced the question of our mortality and vulnerability as human beings in a way most of us could not have imagined and brought us face to face with a sense of arbitrariness of destiny. Before Covid, awareness of our mortality often occurred only in passing. But this year, these past 6 months particularly, has been completely different. The randomness with which the Covid-19 virus has attacked our society has forced the question of our own susceptibility to the randomness of life and death in a way that we haven't collectively experienced. At once the answer to who by fire, who by water, who by plague, is clear. The who is all of us or any of us, and the truly important question is, what will we have done with our lives until that day?

Most of us have faced unexpected moments that threw our lives into disarray; the trauma of a few minutes changing everything. A cancer diagnosis. A loved one on the other end of the phone saying, "there's been an accident." The words: "I want a divorce." A miscarriage. The sudden discovery that our spouse has been unfaithful. The suicide of a loved one. The loss of a job. We all have, to different degrees, stood on the precipice the Unetaneh Tokef refers to, staring into the unknown wondering, "how will I survive this?" And this year especially, "will it be me?" And if it is me – why?

This is an unanswerable question. Rather, as Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," the most important question we can ask after a tragedy is not why me, but what next? For this, the Unetaneh Tokef provides a possible answer: "But repentance, prayer and righteous acts avert the severe decree."

Our Sages for centuries used this line to justify a theology of reward and punishment – an 'if then theology' in which teshuva, prayer and generosity could perhaps change our fate. But I don't accept that. How can we on one page of our machzor extol the 13 attributes of God including, compassion, mercy, patience, forgiveness, graciousness, slowness to anger and

kindness, among others, while on the next tout a God who, yyyeeesss is all that, but only if you meet x, y, z criteria?

Except, what if it's really true, just not in the way it seems – not in the p'shat – the simple meaning. What if inner transformation – teshuva, prayer, and selfless giving do change our fate. Not in terms of changing when we die or if we will suffer, rather, the idea that engaging in these actions may change the quality of our life and our response to tragedy until our time in this body is done. We have been given free will and have the power to change. We can always be kinder, more generous, optimistic, and less judgmental. Our prayers can move us toward a state of higher gratitude, our kindness to others towards real transformation, and our giving without expectation of reward towards a greater sense of abundance in our own lives and in the world. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso says, "We may not be able to make our lives longer, but we can make them better, less bitter, more loving. We may find ourselves facing unintended circumstances, confronting situations not of our making. Those circumstances aren't inherently meaningful, but we can make them meaningful; we can give them purpose." Rabbi Jordie Gerson refers to this as "theology and anthropology – faith in action – faith enacted."

Perhaps this is what is meant when God charges us in last week's Torah portion, "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love Adonai your God, listen to God's voice and hold fast to God. For Adonai is your life and will give you many years in the land sworn by God to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Deut 30:19-20). This is God's covenant of love with Am Yisrael. One that must be entered into voluntarily. We must exercise our free will to choose life and in this case, choosing life means choosing God – choosing return and deeper meaning making – choosing to walk the path of teshuva, tefilah and tzedakah – opening of the heart, prayer and freely giving of oneself to the greater good of all.

A wonderful example of such choosing is found in Rabbi Dr. Aaron Panken, zichrono livracha, my teacher, mentor and friend who was taken from us far too soon, just 14 days prior to his 54th birthday, 2 days after handing me my Masters Degree in Sacred Music and the day before Ordination 2019. Rabbi Panken writes of the Unetaneh Tokef, a prayer with which he struggled repeatedly,

"Our actions – the teshuva – self transformation – tefilah – prayer – and tzedakah – giving that we do, help us live in such a way that when we must suffer life's darkest depredations, we will have ways of coping with them. Our actions do not change the outcome [of our lives] one iota, but they can alter our attitude, bolster our ability to withstand challenges, help us avoid unavoidable misfortunes, and see life's value among chaos....And teshuva – transformation – tefillah – prayer and tzedakah – giving – link our transient selves to what is eternal – God, and the kind of repaired world God compels us to create...[and] Therein lies the ultimate contrast; by reaching out to an eternal God, we who are temporary and vulnerable, can become a part of eternity; through our limited actions, we become limitless. Such is the beauty of the offering that comes in

the words of this prayer...In confronting our fears through the Unetaneh Tokef...we find hope.”

It wasn't until reading the complete text of this essay during my 3rd or 4th year of Cantorial School that I was finally able to reconcile my fear and dread of the Unetaneh Tokef and let go of my first remembered experience of it as the “bugga bugga prayer.” That letting go freed me to look anew at its text and explore the strange richness and dichotomy of this troubling prayer. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss his essay with Rabbi Panken and share with him my story.

Aaron was an incredibly generous and giving man who not only chose life, he embraced it. He became a part of eternity through his kindness, generosity of spirit and menschlikite – to me and my family and to so many others. He had a way about him of making you feel as though you were the most important person he could be talking to whenever he was with you. He left us two and a half years ago, yet he remains present and limitless for me, and so many others because of who he was until he was gone and the way he exemplified the very hope of the Unetaneh Tokef of which he wrote. “He lives on in the example he set – his fate, perhaps altered ever so slightly by the quality of the life he led while he had it, and the lives he taught us all to lead.”

Which leads me to think that Covid-19 and all its death is only the first part of the Unetaneh Tokef this year. Without doubt it is the who by fire, who by water – and of course, who by plague. But there is so much more to the prayer than its “litany of doom just as there is more to us than our deaths.” There is the part which says how we live and what we do today matters. And that by choosing life – with open hearted kindness, generous giving free from expectation, and honest prayer – we link ourselves to God – and all that is eternal and lasting.

G'mar chatima tova – may you be sealed for a good year in the book of life.