

Of Fate and Furies: Kol Nidre 5778 (Version II)

During the year 2005-2006, the year that Hurricane Katrina devastated much of the Gulf Coast region of our country, I was working as the student rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in Biloxi, Mississippi, flying down from rabbinical school in New York once a month to spend Shabbat with the small community. On my very first visit after the storm, a congregant of mine— a gentleman who worked in state government and consequently had special access to enter restricted areas – drove me down Highway One, a beachfront road which parallels the Mississippi River, in order to witness the area in which so much of Katrina’s damage had been wrought.

There are many images that stand out in my mind from that excursion – the forlorn driveways leading to houses that were no more, the surf-side tourist shop whose walls had been completely ripped off and yet whose shelves of t-shirts remained pristinely stacked with nary an item out of place, the surreal juxtaposition of a picture perfect sunny day at the beach against what looked like the ruins of Armageddon. But perhaps my strongest memory of that drive in Mississippi all those many years ago was of the sheer randomness of it all – how on the very same block or within the very same neighborhood, some properties would be completely decimated while others looked virtually unscathed. The storm waters hit this side of the street but not that; the winds tore the roof off of his home but not hers right next to it; falling debris charted an unpredictable course crushing certain structures and leaving others untouched. With storms, as with so many other things, there is much left to luck, to chance, to the indiscriminate vagaries of fate. Despite our best efforts to exert control, much of life is governed by randomness.

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the Fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed!” These words of the *Un’taneh Tokef*, one of the most iconic pieces of the High Holiday liturgy, are also amongst the most difficult for many of us to eke out, both the vivid language and the stark theology of the prayer deeply unsettling. “Who will live and who will die? Who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end.” While the prayer seems to suggest that these eventualities will be meted out in accordance with principles of fairness and justice, we all know that this is far from the case with good and decent people often caused to suffer terribly while evil-doers appear to prosper. *Mi bamayim* – who by the flood waters of Harvey and Irma and *mi baraash* – who by the Mexican earthquake? *Mi yanua*- who will suffer from painful illness? *Mi yityasar* – who will be tormented when an evening at a club or an Ariane Grande concert or walking the Champs Elysee turns into a nightmare of terror? While we might wish that our world worked according to Divine notions of reward and punishment – that return, prayer, and giving could assure us only good things in the year 5778 just begun – we realize that this is most often not the case. Despite our best efforts to exert control, much of life is governed by randomness.

Over the past many years, I have, at times, heard religious leaders attempt to explain terrible events in our world by pointing to behaviors that may have caused them. After Hurricane Katrina, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a former chief rabbi in Israel and long-time spiritual leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, was quoted as saying that the storm was punishment for President Bush’s then support of the Gaza withdrawal and for the lack of Torah study taking place on the Gulf Coast. Attending a talk in New York in late September of 2001, I heard Rebbetzin Esther Jungries, a popular Manhattan lecturer and spiritual guru, give a similar rationalization for September 11th, pointing at the large number of New York Jews who don’t light Shabbat candles or have *mezuzot* on their front doors. To me, this just cannot be true. The God in which I believe would never take so many innocent lives for such relatively minor lapses and indiscretions.

Rather, I believe that our world simply exists with a certain amount of chance, luck, and chaos built into its very fabric which randomly becomes unleashed at times with some of us becoming recipients of good and blessing while others, regrettably, struggle. Usually, over the course of a lifetime, each of us will have moments of both of these outcomes, although it is also true that certain people end up with tremendous gifts and opportunities while for others things are far harder. Despite our best efforts to exert control, much of life is governed by randomness. Indeed, although the name Yom haKippurim is related to the Hebrew word *capara* – meaning atonement – some understand it also as meaning *k'purim* - like “Purim” – the holiday of lots that we celebrate in the spring. Yom Kippur is a day to seek forgiveness for our misdeeds but it is also a day on which we recognize that our lives are regulated not only by our own efforts but also by circumstances outside of our control. Our task is to do the very best we can with whatever it is that life hands to us.

When the editors of *Machzor Lev Shalem*, the new High Holiday prayer-book that we at BHBE have been using for some years now, came to translating the *Un'taneh Tokef*, they made a very deliberate decision. The Hebrew of this piece reads *u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah maavirin et roa hagezera* which might literally be rendered as “Repentance, prayer, and righteous giving can avert the severity of the decree.” The theology, as we’ve mentioned, seems to suggest that these spiritual tools work by Divine fiat; if only we’re but good enough, God will change the circumstances of our fate.

Lev Shalem, however, translates these words differently, as it states: “*Teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah* have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.” These words suggest what I believe to be true – our future may be arbitrary and unknowable, but the way in which we grapple with that future is entirely within our own hands. *Teshuvah* – the way in which we draw upon inner resources, *tefillah* –

the extent to which we reach out to God and community, *tzedakah* – whether we transcend our own experience and seek to serve others as well – all these things can lessen the pain of whatever difficulties may ultimately lie before us. It is this, most certainly, which can be transformative!

For those who came tonight hoping to hear a bit about our congregation, particularly as we celebrate this year the 60th anniversary of its founding, I would say that what is true for individuals is true for organizations as well. The decades long success of Beth Hillel Bnai Emunah is, in part, the product of tremendous human effort – visionary leaders who imagined it into being, dedicated laity and professionals who have given extraordinary gifts of time, energy, and money to keep it vibrant and strong, individuals who have chosen to make their Jewish home here thus creating the rich sense of community that exists today. BHBE is the place where we've celebrated and mourned together, where we've watched one another's children grow up, where we've learned new things and deepened our sense of Jewish identity, where our love for Israel has been acted out, where we've mobilized together for justice, where we've experienced a deep and gratifying sense of belonging and home. While some things are so very different than they were sixty years ago, the enduring commitments – to tradition, to community, to passing Judaism on to the next generation – have remained. *Ad meah v'esrim*, we say in Hebrew – until 120, the length of years considered the ideal human lifespan. God willing, we'll be here another 60 years from now still providing rich and meaningful Jewish experiences to our children's children's children!

In a world marked by randomness, synagogues are also places to find support, strength, and shelter amidst life's unpredictability. Our daily minyan carries mourners through difficult moments of loss, and

the Sisterhood kugels that arrive in time for shiva let families know that they are not alone in the depths of their grief. Our Chesed Committee provides rides, visits, and food to those recovering from illness; our Inclusion Committee creates an environment where everyone in our congregation should feel welcome; our Emergency Fund gives financial assistance to help individuals through the lean periods. Our Garden of H.O.P.E is responsible for delivering hundreds of pounds of food to those in need while our upcoming mission to Houston will offer some small amount of relief to those struggling so mightily in Texas. Most importantly, the sense of care and support that many of us have experienced firsthand from this community during a difficult time - the cards and phone-calls and visits, the Shabbat dinner invitations and warm hugs, the outpouring of visitors at the shiva home, the donations made and kind words shared, the friends who step in to do for us when we can't do for ourselves – all of these provide strength to move forward, even amidst the randomness of living. We lean on God and one another.

Along with being places of refuge for life's randomness, however, synagogues are also governed by some of the same forces of volatility that govern so much of life. There are recessions that come just as a community is starting to plan for a capital campaign. There are roof leaks and HVAC fails, clergy who come and go leaving behind a deep sense of loss, dear friends who move or pass away, making the synagogue feel just a bit different than it did before. There are good hires and bad hires, shifting demographics as housing prices fluctuate and neighborhoods change, economic trends that impact remissions, new patterns of affiliation and engagement, and so very much more. While synagogues are often maintained through talent and effort, they also are very much affected by circumstances outside of active control.

Yet if the triumvirate of return, prayer, and giving has the power to transform our individual destinies, then this is all the more so true when it comes to our collective destiny as a congregation. *U'teshuvah* –

the way in which we continually return to our core principles and values, the sacred reasons for which this community exists; *u'tefillah* – the way we connect to one another and to the Divine through prayer, study, and acts of service; *u'tzedakah* – the financial resources that we are able to marshal together – all these things will ensure that Beth Hillel Bnai Emunah will continue rising to the challenges of the day, doing the very best we can with what societal trends and realities hand over to us. These are the things that will allow BHBE to thrive for the next 60 years and beyond!

In closing this evening, I want to share two brief stories from my time in Biloxi so many years ago. The first is of my former congregant, a man we will call Daniel, who was evacuated right before the storm, finding himself in Atlanta one Shabbat morning with nothing but the clothes on his back – a t-shirt, shorts, and running sneakers. Desperate to attend services, Daniel tried to borrow clothes from his host who, being much larger than Daniel, was really not an appropriate match. Sensing Daniel's discomfort at attending synagogue dressed so casually, however, his host took immediate action. He went upstairs, replaced his own tie and jacket with a pair of shorts and running shoes, and thus accompanied Daniel to shul.

The second story is about the young people of Congregation Beth Israel, the students in the synagogue's religious school. Soon after Katrina hit, a little boy in South Florida collected 70 10-dollar gift cards for the children of the community, and being that there were only 10 students in the congregation at the time, the school principal asked the young people how they thought the cards should be distributed. Not one of the students suggested what might seem like the obvious solution – dividing the 70 cards by 10 so that each child received \$70. Rather, each child had a different idea as for to whom the extra

cards should be given – a classmate who had lost his home, a friend who was having a particularly hard time, a little girl down the street. Our task, indeed, is to do the very best with what life hands to us.

U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roa hazezerah – The circumstances of life may be outside of our control but how we choose to grapple with these circumstances is very much up to us.

Wishing you *G'mar Tov* – to be sealed for good in the year to come!

Shana Tova!