

Theology : After the Hurricanes

Kol Nidre 2017 5778

It wouldn't surprise many of you if I mentioned that the prayer I get the most amount of complaints about is the U'netaneh Tokef. It highlights some of the troubling theology that is connected with the Days of Awe found in the Mahzor, the High Holy Day prayer book. But it also challenges us. This year who would not be touched by the questions, "Who by fire and who by water?... Who by earthquake and who by storm?"

Sometimes it amazes me that while this prayer bothers many almost no one reacts to the difficult message that is contained in the Kol Nidrei. This is a legal formula, not actually a prayer, that declares that any unfulfilled vows or promises one makes should be nullified. Throughout history there have actually been rabbis who sought to eliminate this prayer from the service. There has been a progression in Reform Mahzorim going from total absence, to the two words Kol Nidrei on the page without any other words, to the past two books that

contain a more complete text. Wrestling with the appropriateness of Kol Nidrei was not only a phenomenon for Reform circles but was discussed by Orthodox rabbis at various times.

Eventually the desire of the people overcame the objections of the rabbis and this prayer/formula and its music is one of the most beloved of all liturgical pieces. The rabbis have realized they had to keep it in the prayer book. Many of you are here tonight because of that prayer alone.

One might imagine that the U'netaneh Tokef, with the questions of "Who shall live?" and "Who shall die?" might be a prayer that many people would desire to remove from our prayers. It is prayer that is based on the theology that is also expressed in the book of Deuteronomy, דברים. While this is not Judaism's only theology, it is one that sees the world in terms of good behavior being rewarded and negative behavior causing punishment.

In Deuteronomy it goes so far as to say that if you follow God's commandments it will affect the course of nature; the rains will come in their season and the grain, wine and animal stock will all be plentiful. Reform Judaism's difficulty or actual rejection of that theology led to the removal of the second paragraph of the Shema/v'ahavta that is present in Conservative and Orthodox siddurim.

Because there are poetic interpretations to get around this theological way of thinking that 2nd paragraph was inserted in the Mishkan series, in some services as an alternative. There has also been some interpretive translations of U'netaneh Tokef, to try and soften or change the traditional theology. Most of us simply can't accept that we live if we are good people but will die if the reverse is true or that acts of repentance, tzedakah and prayer can reverse our ultimate demise.

One might think that we should not be reinterpreting and changing the theological positions of the earlier rabbis. That simply isn't the case. Even in the Talmud the rabbis acknowledged that there

was a progression and development in interpretation throughout history. In fact there are various parts of the Bible that argue different theologies. The end of the Book of Job takes a different approach than Deuteronomy. His suffering is not caused by his behavior, but we humans are limited to understand what if any are the causes.

Two renditions of a story in the Babylonian Talmud demonstrate different reasons why a righteous person might suffer. They tell of Moses, when he was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah asking God why there were little crownlike decorations on many of the letters in the Torah.

(BTW if you have not seen these "tagim," crowns, when you get an opportunity on Simchat Torah to see the Torah parchment You'll be able to see them on the letters)

God explained that in later generations, about 1300 years after Moses, there will be a great teacher who will interpret numerous laws

from these decorative crowns. Moses wants God to show him this person.

God miraculously, in a Star Trek manner, transports Moses to the back row of Rabbi Akiva's class. When the students inquire of Akiva how he knew what he was teaching, his response was that this was the teaching given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Moses is comforted in this revelation and questions why God gave the Torah through him and not through Rabbi Akiva. God's response is that this is what God decided and Moses was told to be quiet.

I have always understood this story to indicate a development in understanding Torah. New interpretations were ascribed to later teachers. There was not to be a fixed in stone only one way of looking at the teaching of the Torah.

An example of how even the theological development occurred can be seen in the continuation of this talmudic passage and its parallel in

another talmudic section. It comes from an attempt to understand the brutality in the death of Rabbi Akiva.

In Berachot 61b, the execution of Rabbi Akiva by the Romans is described. He is one of the 10 martyred rabbis who are remembered in the section of Yom Kippur liturgy known as the Martyrology or אלה אזכרה, "These I Remember". The description of his death is that the Romans are raking his flesh with iron combs. He is reciting the Shema prolonging the final "Ehad," One. He tells his students that now he understands the meaning of "with all your soul." At the point of his death not only does Moses see this but the ministering angels viewing the tragic end of this great rabbi ask God, "This is Torah (referring to Akiva) and this is its reward?" They can't understand why this great rabbi has to suffer this tortuous end to his life. God's response is that Akiva has merited Eternal Life.

The understanding is that the reward for good and righteous people even if they die or suffer is received in the World to Come, the

afterlife. In our day few of us in progressive religious communities are comforted after a death by saying the deceased's reward is found in the afterlife, Olam HaBa. We seek other places for consolation.

In the second Talmudic passage in Menachot 29b that describes Akiva's death a different message is presented from the passage in Berachot. Moses, who miraculously visited Akiva's classroom also views his brutal death. Here Moses, and not the angels, question God.

"Master of the Universe, this is the Torah and this is the reward?" He is unable to see the justice in this brutal death where Akiva's flesh is raked with iron combs. This time God answers, "Quiet, this is what I have decided." Moses repeats his question a number of times but God does not answer. This seems to indicate that there is no explanation for such suffering.

These talmudic answers to the question of why the good suffer expresses two different theological answers. The first teaches that the reward or the justice is received in Olam HaBa, the world to come.

The second example expresses no reward. Its claim is that there is no explanation or answer to the righteous people who suffer. An answer about afterlife provides no comfort. In some sense the suffering is beyond human comprehension.

Let me emphatically suggest that the answer is not to understand what causes human suffering or great tragedies. Rather, it is how we respond to tragedies and catastrophes that give us our answers. Our question of faith is not to ask why things happen but rather to ask what should we do when they happen.

It is not that Teshuvah - Repentance, Tzedakah - Acts of Righteousness, and Tefilah - Prayer, have power over what has already happened. Rather they are ways to respond in the face of the tragedy or suffering.

This past month people have been seeking theological reasons for the suffering caused by hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural

disasters. Hurricane Harvey, Irma, Jose, and Maria - 3 Earthquakes in Mexico - Fires in Northwest US

Some people remember that after Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina some abhorrent statements made by so-called religious leaders. that these storms were blamed on certain immoral (in their point of view) behaviors. Absurd! One might say the immorality of the governmental failure to be prepared was a partial cause of the extent of the damage. But most of us do not attribute the reason for the storms themselves to human behavior.

Without answers some might be led to a rejection of the existence of God or the need for religion. I find that we can find God and religion in our response to natural or human tragedies. How we act, how we love, how we rebuild, and how we respond is the way to God and this is guided by teachings in most religions.

Our question should not be why did this happen. Rather, we must focus on what we need to do? What is next?

Perhaps there are no answers to the why.

As we observe Yom Kippur, hopefully our self-reflection will not only be directed to ourselves but also to a sense of justice and compassion leading us to care for others not only through words but through action. As so many continue to suffer in crisis situations it is our religious duty, our response to God's call to assist as best we can. There are important issues of injustice and the freedom of peaceful protest but millions are effected by floods, power outages in stifling heat, destroyed homes, lack of basic necessities like food, water, and medicine. That is an immediate need and our fast on this day should echo Isaiah's call for justice and compassion, ending oppression and tending to those in need in order to give meaning to or prayers and fasts.

As the following song composed by Rabbi Noam Katz says, we must look to the rainbow after the flood and sweep up the debris when our faith is tested. That is why we are here.

AFTER THE FLOOD

Music and Words by Noam Katz; Hebrew text: Psalm 23

Before the rains came when my son had no name

He just danced in the pool of our dreams
We were two on dry land, digging toes in white sand

We were righteous and good, so it seemed
But life has a habit of knocking you down

No matter how upright it's easy to drown
As the clouds came on thick and the outlook looked grim

I heard my own voice yearning deep from within...

Adonai ro'i (2x)

Adonai ro'i

Lo ech-sar

Before we could move, paralyzed by the proof That our world had been drenched to the bone

We met face to face, You were our saving grace And a glimmer of Your mercy was shown

But life has a habit of washing away
The bricks that you build and the plans that you made
So we rock back and forth in this cradle of time
And though the words may be ancient, the voice it is mine...

Chorus

After the flood, tears turn dry earth to mud
And we sweep up the scattered debris
Do we show our love most if we hold our dove close? Or at some point do you set that bird free?

But life has a habit of testing your faith
Your branches may bend but it's seldom they break Now we look to the skies and we search for a trace
To find that You're bending an arc in its place...

Chorus

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"Unidos": A Hurricane Relief Fund for Hurricane Maria Victims in Puerto Rico
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