

The Meaning of Un'taneh Tokef
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Ever since I went to study in England during my junior year of college, one of my great passions, is travel. For travel is a channel for exploring new cultures, learning new histories, appreciating new customs, meeting new people, and marveling at hitherto unseen wonders. It is also a means for developing a respect for other nations and traditions and, spiritually, for experiencing an awe and radical amazement that otherwise might go unrealized. And so I make it my business to explore new lands when I am able and to visit a new country year. This year I visited Guatemala. Last year, I traveled to India. The year before was Vietnam and the year before that was New Zealand. Each experience in different ways nourished my soul - and the memories still do.

Now, for when I go away nowadays, I always make sure to purchase travel insurance in case of an emergency like illness or bone fracture, or a major delay or disruption. It covers things like emergency evacuation and medical care.

As it happened, some time ago, before the summer vacation travel season, I received a most unusual letter of solicitation.

The headline:

“This Summer, Protect Your Family with the Only Insurance Guaranteed by [King David] Over 3,000 Years Ago”

The letter:

Dear Traveler:

Imagine being able to purchase insurance that could actually prevent accidents; saving you and your family from potential tragedy.

Recently we received a remarkable letter from one of our members, illustrating the live-saving power of Shemirah Bidrachim [“Traveler’s Protection”]¹: ‘I just wanted to let you know how much I benefited from your Shemirah Bidrachim insurance policy. After activating the policy last Tammuz, I went on vacation and found myself in a terrible accident. The accident involved the vehicle turning over directly over my body. Bechasdei Hashem [Thank God], I survived with only minor injuries, despite what everybody thought would happen. I can only attribute this to the wonderful merit I must’ve had through the children praying on my behalf through Shemirah Bidrachim. Thank you is not enough!!

¹ The translation is theirs.

Please reactivate my policy for this coming year.”

The solicitation continued:

During the coming summer travel season, more people than ever will be traveling by car, plane and other means to fun-filled destinations across the globe. How can you possibly ensure the safety of your family?

* * *

The Shemirah Bidrachim [Traveler’s Protection] Insurance Program
For just pennies a day, you will receive the ultimate protection from harm while driving, flying, sailing, or even just walking. Ordinary insurance provides financial reimbursement in case of an accident, but Shemirah Bidrachim can prevent the accident from happening in the first place. Thousands of people have already done just that.

How does the Shemirah Bidrachim Insurance Program work?

Individuals who wish to have added protection from danger while traveling simply sign up for an insurance policy using the enclosed Instant Activation Card. Close to two thousand children in our Yeshiva will recite daily [Psalms] and additional special [prayers] of protection for you. The purity and innocence of their [Jewish souls] infuse their piercing [prayers] with the power to protect. The summer travel season is just days away! Because of the urgency, I’ve arranged for your policy to be set up immediately. For just \$39 you are covered while traveling for the entire summer. Isn’t your piece of mind worth it?

My friends, you can’t make this stuff up!

If you’re like me, you find this letter at once absurd *and* funny. Absurd because it suggests Divine Providence is for sale and that we can purchase it with Visa, Mastercard or Discover. And funny because it’s so absurd and foreign to our experience.

Yet here’s the problem. The High Holy Day liturgy before us contains some of that that very same outlook and theology: the idea that God on high decrees who shall live and who shall die. This very morning, in fact, we declared:

Un’taneh Tokef Kedushat hayom: Let us acknowledge the power of this day’s holiness, for it is full of awe and dread . . .

Truly You are judge...

And prosecutor and litigant and witness, and author and sealer and recorder and recounter.

And you will remember everything that has been forgotten and you will open the book of memories

And it will be read from: Everyone’s signature is in it

And You will decide the end of all creatures and write down their sentence.

On Rosh Hashanah they will be written down, and on Yom Kippur they will be sealed:

How many will pass on and how many will be created, who will live and who will die . . . Who by fire and who by water, who by warfare and who by wildlife, who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangling and who by stoning.²

To which you might as well add: “Who in rollovers and who in helicopter crashes, who in hotel fires and who in boating accidents. Who in Hurricane Maria and who in a Mexican earthquake?”

Moreover, the poem seems to take such a fateful and deterministic view of the future that it addresses not just who shall live, but how they they’ll live:

Who will rest and who will wander, who will be tranquil and who will be troubled, who will be calm and who will be tormented, who will be exalted and who humbled, who will be rich and who will be poor?³

You might be surprised to hear a rabbi admit it, but I am admitting it anyway. This is one text with which I disagree. In fact, some of the words make me wince. I simply do not accept that God is some kind of Executioner on High, directing the course of life and death like a policeman directs traffic. That I may be scheduled for a heart attack in December and you may be scheduled for a car accident in June (unless, of course, you’ve bought insurance from Shemirah Bidrachim).

And I suspect I’m not alone. As one of my colleagues put it, the *Un’taneh Tokef* poem—it’s a worldview, not a prayer, mind you—is the “elephant in the sanctuary.” It “strains the credulity of the overwhelming majority of our congregants.”⁴

If that’s the case, then why bother with *Un’taneh Tokef* at all? Moreover, why feature it so prominently on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Should we do so for the sake of “tradition”? If so, it’s a relatively recent one, born in the Middle Ages, and an Ashkenazic one at that. Sephardic Jews for the most part never adopted it, and those who did relegated it to the attic of the afternoon Musaf service.

Should we retain *Un’taneh Tokef* on account of the arresting, clarion-like music to which it is sung?

Certainly it is beautiful. And powerful. But couldn’t we simply keep the music and forget the words? Why say these words that seem so raw and coarse and unreal?⁵

² Translation by Dr. Joel M. Hoffman in *Who by Fire, Who by Water*, Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., Jewish Lights, pp. 29-30.

³ *Id.*, pp. 30-31.

⁴ Tony Bayfield, “The Exodus and the Elephant,” in *id.*, pp. 52-53.

⁵ See Andrew Goldstein, “Awe-full Thoughts on Words a Melody Cannot Save,” in *id.*, p. 58, quoting Chaim Stern, editor of *Gates of Repentance* that *Un’taneh Tokef* “has a nice tune and people like to hear it sung.”

This morning, I want to share with you three reasons I've discovered for why this text still matters to us.

First, *Un'taneh Tokef* reminds us that we are vulnerable. No matter how you understand God—as a prosecutor, defender and judge, as Creator, as a force for goodness, as an idea, as that mysterious spirit that lifts you up when had all but given up hope—no matter your understanding of God, *Un'taneh Tokef* tells us in the rawest fashion that we are mortal; that all that we cherish can disappear in an instant.

A phone call that your elderly mother has broken her hip.
A message that the doctor would like you to come in to discuss your test results.
A sudden, sharp pain over your sternum.
A series of throbbing headaches.
A plane crash.
An earthquake.
A hurricane.

“Life changes fast. Life changes in an instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends,” Joan Didion wrote after her husband died suddenly one night at dinner.⁶

Un'taneh Tokef reminds us that, however invincible we feel most days of the year, during these Days of Awe - these Yamim Noraim - we are beings of flesh and blood. Each of us is mortal. Each of us is vulnerable. Each one of us is an earthen vessel which one day will fracture. *Un'taneh Tokef* reminds us of that fragility - and it does something more besides. The second thing *Un'taneh Tokef* does is to remind us that we are accountable. Actions have consequences. However much we hope that our mistakes go unnoticed, or are already forgotten, truly they're all part of our permanent records. We have to live with them forever.

Yom Kippur calls us to account for them. Of what deeds are we proud? Of what are we ashamed, or embarrassed, or fearful of being discovered? As between God and man, the Day of Atonement atones. But, the Talmud teaches, as between one man and another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.

My dear friend, Rabbi Mari Chernow, reminded me of a Midrash which teaches that the Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau are exhausted. It's a surprising teaching since Jacob's twin brother in our tradition is the paradigm for wickedness. Esau's anger and thirst for vengeance drove his brother Jacob to Haran and kept him there for 20 years. His descendants, the Edomites and the Romans, caused Jacob's descendants—our ancestors—incalculable pain, indescribable suffering.

And yet, though much of the tradition celebrates and sometimes justifies Jacob and his deceptions, all but ignoring Esau's pain, the Midrash here does not. It holds Jacob culpable.

⁶ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Vintage, 2007) (quoted in Sharon Brous, “At the Edge of the Abyss” in *Who by Fire, Who by Water*, Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights), p. 142.

Self-absorbed and narcissistic, he lied, cheated, and abandoned his brother. He humiliated him. He caused him grievous pain, unceasing tears. And so Jacob's failure to conciliate Esau—and our failure to reconcile with Esau's descendants, says the Midrash—perpetuates the breach, the sorrow, the disquiet, the alienation. It delays the coming of the Messiah, which is our tradition metaphor for the progress of humanity. And, conversely, our reconciling with those from whom we are estranged, brings us closer to the repair and redemption and perfection of the world.

No one—not you, not me, not a king and not the president is above scrutiny. We are accountable to God and to each other. *Un'taneh Tokef* reminds us of that (no less than a special prosecutor might remind a president that he is accountable to the American people through our constitution and laws).

Which brings me to the third lesson of *Un'taneh Tokef*: It reminds us not only that we are vulnerable and accountable; it reminds us of is that we are powerful.

Powerful enough, through the choices we make, to write our own stories—even to write ourselves into the Book of Life.

The child who sees a classmate crying and goes over to comfort her - he is an author.

The teacher who goes out of his way to connect with a troubled teenager -- she is an author too.

The student who exercises the good judgement to call an Uber instead of driving home under the influence is an author.

The eyewitness who refuses to give a misleading statement is an author.

Each of them is an author.

And the same is true of the choices we make as a congregation and as a society. *Un'taneh Tokef* reminds us of our immense power to create and to destroy, to heal and to harm. In ways that we don't even fully understand, but are perhaps beginning to more each day, we citizens of the postindustrial age can cause floods, droughts, fires, despoliation - even earthquakes and hurricanes. And so too can we prevent them, just as we can feed the hungry, take on the AIDS pandemic, eradicate smallpox, and clean up our water, land and air.

We are, of course, all destined to die—and all of us are well aware of that common fate.

And still...still we have the power to write our own stories today and every day until we are called home. How will we spend each day? Shall we be truly alive or shall we merely exist? Shall we be giving or shall we be selfish?⁷

⁷ See Jack Riemer's alternative *Un'taneh Tokef* in the *Kol Haneshama Machzor*, pp. 345-46.

Un'taneh Tokef demands us to consider all of these questions, and to acknowledge that each of us is an author, and “each of us signs the book of our lives with our deeds.”⁸ Each of us is powerful.

And here let me add that, as citizens of United States of America, each of us sitting here this evening is invested with special power and responsibility, especially during this extraordinary and perilous time: a time when post-war alliances that have secured peace for over 70 years are under attack not only by the Russians (which we expect) but by our own Commander-in-Chief (which we certainly do not); a time when the rule of law is under merciless attack by those sworn to protect and defend it; a time when nuclear war has again become a fearfully real possibility; and a time when we can actually feel with our own skin the warming of the earth, even as our country last year was withdrawn from the Paris Climate Accord signed by 193 nations and the effects of manmade climate change are manifest in more places than they aren't - California with its wildfires, Puerto Rico and Texas with their hurricanes, the entire East Coast with its scorchingly hot summer that is chasing us into September. This new year is a worrisome time to be alive and we as citizens of this most powerful country have a special responsibility to exercise our power - and to demand accountability of our high officials.

All the more is this true for us Jews. We, who know history well, know that when dark forces engulf civilization, minorities such as ours, like Latinos and immigrants, are the first to be threatened. And so we must speak truth to power and defend our values with all of our hearts, souls and might.

And so *Un'taneh Tokef* is much, much more than just a musty old poem bound inside the folio of a majestic melody. It is a proclamation which demands that we see the essence of our human selves—vulnerable, accountable, and powerful--and capable of changing ourselves and the world itself.

And as for that troubling notion of God as Judge and Executioner on High, that part of the *Un'taneh Tokef* metaphor, I for one choose to ignore. For as the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin put it, “God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths.”⁹

And when those happen—by fire or water, by warfare or wildlife, by hunger or thirst, by earthquake or plague, by strangling or stoning, and yes, by car accidents and plane crashes--God's heart is the first of all our hearts to break.¹⁰

And so I have come to realize that there is more than one reading of the *Un'taneh Tokef* poem. And there is even more than one writing of it. The one I like best, a contemporary

⁸ David Stern, “Mortal Matters,” in *Who by Fire, Who by Water*, Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights), p. 174.

⁹ William Sloane Coffin, “Eulogy for Alex.”

¹⁰ See *id.*

one by Rabbi Joseph Meszler, goes as follows:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed:
That this year people will live and die,
some more gently than others
and nothing lives forever.
But amidst overwhelming forces
of nature and humankind,
we still write our own Book of Life,
and our actions are the words in it,
and the stages of our lives are the chapters,
and nothing goes unrecorded, ever.
Every deed counts.
Everything you do matters.
And we never know what act or word
will leave an impression or tip the scale.
So if not now, then when?
For the things that we can change, there is teshuva, realignment,
For the things we cannot change, there is tefillah, prayer,
For the help we can give, there is tzedakah, justice.
Together, let us write a beautiful Book of Life
for the Holy One to read.

Ken Yehi Ratzon - may it be so.