

## Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 2020/5781

### Rabbi Edward Elkin

One of the most well-known prayers in our machzor is the piyut known as Unetaneh Tokef, which will be chanted soon by Rabbi Weiss as part of the musaf service. Its powerful and fearsome articulation of our as-yet unknown fate in the new year has both moved and frightened Jews for centuries, and was even captured in contemporary musical form by Leonard Cohen in his famous song “Who by Fire?” The original piyut makes the following claim: בראש השנה יכתבון וביום צום כיפור יחתמון On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the Fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed...how many will pass on and how many will be born, who will live and who will die, who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end, who will perish by fire and who by water, who by earthquake and who by plague. Who will be at peace and who will be troubled, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be brought low and who will be raised up.” The prayer drives home our vulnerability and our mortality, listing alternative possible fates which are being determined right now, being sealed today, on Yom Kippur, based on God’s judgement of our actions until this point. But then the poet makes an extraordinary move. Instead of leaving it there, he completely subverts the point he has just made when he says ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה. It’s as if, as much as he wants to stress the significance of Yom Kippur, as much as he wants to say “this is it, today, this is our *last chance* to repent” -- at the last moment he just can’t live with the implications of that message and he pulls back. Teshuvah (repentance), tefillah (prayer) and tzedakah can change everything. So actually, nothing is determined today after all. Our actions in the coming year -- the authenticity of our repentance, the sincerity of our tefillah, the seriousness of our commitment to justice in our personal interactions and in society at large – all these will shape our fate in the new year.

I’m drawn to reflect on this dialectic about determinism at the heart of the Unetaneh Tokef this Yom Kippur because the world-shaking events of 5780 have driven home for us more than ever the indeterminacy of our fate. Who, on earth at least, could have predicted on Yom Kippur last year that we would go through what we have experienced since then? Maybe a few public health professionals warned that the Big One could come at any time in the form of a worldwide pandemic, but even they didn’t know when. And as for most of the rest of us, to the extent that we thought about plagues at all, we assumed that they were a thing of the past, something for historians to study, or at least something that

applies only in other parts of the world, surely not ours. Who could have predicted this life-altering, world-altering event would be our fate in 5780?

Now most of us rightly put a great deal of faith in the ability of science to guide us in our decision-making, but scientists will be the first ones to admit that their powers of prediction are limited. If certain conditions obtain, the chances that X will happen are Y percent. That's not exactly the oracle at Delphi. Throughout the history of the human race, we have desperately tried to predict the future, an enterprise we call "divination" because it is assumed to be inspired by God. Predictive tools have included the disposition of stars in the sky, decks of cards, dice, a pile of sticks, a bowl of oily water, crystal balls, the liver of some poor sheep. With these materials, battles could be planned, plagues anticipated, bad marriages avoided. Today, instead of sheep liver we have big data and statistical modelling<sup>1</sup> which are used by natural scientists, social scientists, political scientists to do their work. But as the Unetaneh Tokef avers, even with all this information, at the end of the day, we just don't know what's going to happen.

One area where one often hears people in our community, and outside it, proclaiming great confidence that they know what the future will bring has to do with our beloved State of Israel. These are some things you hear people say: If Israel allows the creation of a Palestinian state, it'll never survive. If Israel doesn't allow a 2-state solution, it'll never survive. There will never be peace in the Middle East. The Palestinians will never negotiate. Israel will never dismantle more settlements. The Iran nuclear deal means the end of Israel. The cancellation of the Iran nuclear deal means the end of Israel. Regarding the Mideast conflict, predictions fly fast and furious. In one sense, I envy people who feel so sure they know what will happen. But at the end of the day, as I believe the pandemic has proven, our reality is that change is unimaginable before it happens, and absolutely inevitable after it happens.<sup>2</sup> I took a shul trip to Israel and the West Bank just before the pandemic. We saw lots of concerning things but also met lots of really inspiring and hopeful people. Which future will prevail? It's up to Israelis and Palestinians to make that future.

The main teaching of the Unetaneh Tokef, as I see it, is that there is no inevitable future out there waiting for us to discover it. Teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah can change our fate; decisions that we will make about how we are going to live our lives this year can change our fate. How many people will fall ill with corona virus

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Lilla, No One Knows What's Going to Happen, NYT May 22, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Tal Becker.

is not predestined. It depends on how people behave, who and how much we test, how we treat those who fall ill, and how lucky we are in developing a vaccine, other variables. Whether there will be peace or conflict in the Middle East is not predestined either. Nothing is easier than succumbing to the pessimistic conventional wisdom that an agreement with the Palestinians will never come to pass. I confess that right now it looks extremely unlikely, despite the deal with the Emirates and Bahrain. I'm not a pollyanna. But as we've seen, change is unimaginable before it happens, and absolutely inevitable in hindsight. Just ask the Soviet Union.

I'm a big fan of science fiction and I especially love story lines about travel to the future. But the future doesn't actually exist. It will only exist after we have created it, through the decisions that we make. It's only natural to wonder what will happen to us. But that's not really the important question because it is unanswerable. We should ask only what we *want* to happen in the future, and how we can contribute to making what we want, come to pass, how we can load the dice in favour of the outcome we desire.

Of course, we have to do our best to make educated guesses about the future. Our leaders have to make crucial, life and death decisions based on their best guesses as to the consequences of those decisions. We can't be paralyzed by our ignorance about the future. The advice of experts is crucial. But some Yom Kippur humility is in order. Radical uncertainty is our existential reality –in regard to the future course of the pandemic, and its aftermath, in regard to peace in the Middle East, in regard to elections south of the border, in regard to the future of the Jewish people, in regard to race relations, in regard to the course of climate change, in regard to the rise of China, and -- in regard to the most fateful questions which occupy us about our own personal lives in the coming year: who shall live and who shall die, what will happen if I take this job, make this investment, undertake this program of study, marry this person, etc. We gather as much information as we can, and then, with something considerably less than 100% certainty about the consequences, we decide. That's scary, but that's where faith can help us make the leap, and derive comfort and support from God and community no matter what happens.

Remember, on Yom Kippur we affirm – ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה. Nothing is actually sealed; nothing is pre-determined. That's scary, but also incredibly empowering. We can shape the future by the actions we take today. Prayer matters. Repentance matters. The practice of justice matters. Reducing

our carbon footprint matters. Taking actions to bring about racial healing matters. The only alternative is self-defeating apathy. The prophet Jonah, whose story is traditionally read on Yom Kippur, is apathetic. He goes to Nineveh after his little detour and proclaims the word of God: עוד ארבעים יום ונינוה נהפכת. In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed. Period. No hemming or hawing, no conditional language. This destruction is going to happen. Only we know that it didn't happen. Why not? Because the Ninevites repented, which is exactly what God wanted them to do. Jonah himself hated that. He knew that even God's statements about the future didn't necessarily come to pass, and he worried that would make him look like a false prophet. But we know that it actually made him the most successful prophet of them all.

The philosopher Mark Lilla has observed that we human beings want to feel that we are on a power walk into the future, when in fact we are always just tapping our canes on the pavement in the fog. He writes, "We must accept what we are, in any case, condemned to do in life: tap and step, tap and step, tap and step..." Faith doesn't change that reality. But it does mean that as we're tapping and stepping, we know we're not alone.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.