We begin these 10 Awe-some days (or Days of Awe)- the Yamim Noraim-between Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur with a celebration of the Universe and of humanity.

We will go back to the beginning of time to remember our origins; we will recall the nobility of humanity in covenantal relationship; and we will project a future of change and redemption. Malkhuyot-zicronot-shofrot

A highlight of this time of reflection and preparation for Yom Kippur is the liturgical piece we are about to read- unetaneh tokef

This highly stylized poem that has become a central highlight of our liturgy. Every year I seem to understand it in a different way and I hope that this is the same for you. It is this power of continuous reinterpretation of our tradition that allows us to be here today in this particular configuration.

The original context of this text is clouded in myth. It emerges out of the horrific encounter of Jews and Christians in the mediaeval period when, in the wake of the Crusades, Ashkenazi Jews practiced martyrdom as a reaction to attempts at forced conversion. This, too, was the reaction of many Sephardic Jews at the start of Inquisition in 1391 –but there, a phenomenon of what they thought was provisional conversion to Catholicism, became the route for many Spanish Jews in save their lives. Those who had not been martyred or converted were expelled, along with our Muslim compatriots, in 1492.

The myth surrounding the origins of unetaneh tokef (which means “powerfully given over” or “powerfully asserted”) is that it originated with an unknown Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. This name may have been is derived of the word, emunah, faith, thus the Faithful One of Mainz The account is brought to us in a 12th century Sefer Or Zaru’a (The Light that is Sown for the Righteous)written by Rabbi Isaac of Vienna.
Rabbi Amnon was a leader in the Mainz community. In the time of forced conversion, perhaps during one of the Crusades, the ruling Bishop of the town of Mainz, demanded that he convert to Christianity. The pressure mounts and in order to delay Rabbi Amnon says that he would need three days to consider it. After saying this R. Amnon is plagued by his utterance, how could he have even said that he would consider it? After the third day he is brought before the bishop and R. Amnon beseeches him to understand that he had sinned by his saying that he would even consider conversion and as a punishment asks that his tongue that had uttered the words be cut out. Instead, the sadistic bishop commands that his legs be severed for his refusal to appear before him and that if he then refuses to take on the faith in Christ he will be continue to be tortured with his digits, hands and arms also severed if he remains in his refusal. He refuses and the inhumane torture ensues. As he is about to expire he makes a last request to be brought to synagogue on Rosh haShana. The bishop agrees thinking that by seeing the torture administered to R. Amnon would serve as warning to those Jews who would refuse to convert. R. Amnon’s torso is placed near the reader’s table and he recites the poem that we will now chant. As he concludes his soul leaves his body.

The drama continues and three days after R. Amnon’s death the martyr appears in a dream to Rabbi Kalonymus ben Meshullam, a leading scholar, and he is taught this poem and R. Amnon asks him to disseminate it widely through the Jewish community as a memorial to him. And so he did and so we are here telling the story.

There may be no historical basis for this myth- scholars have shown that at this particular period of time Jews were not persecuted by the Church hierarchy but rather by temporal authorities. That notwithstanding –there is no obvious mention of martyrdom in our poem, not even obliquely. On the contrary we, as a modern Jewish community are reviled by the very thought of martyrdom. Particularly, after the Shoah, we have come to reject traditional Rabbinic theology that our punishments as a people are a result of some negative deeds within our ranks. Rather than choosing to die in order to sanctify our tradition –kiddush haShem -we respond to those who wish to destroy us by embracing life. In an act
of kiddush haHayyim – the sanctification of Life, we live our lives as Jews to the fullest. In many ways the establishment of the State of Israel and the Jewish return to history from powerlessness to power has hastened this theological process.

The setting of unetaneh tokef is the heavenly court with God as judge, prosecutor, witness and jury. This scene then shifts and God is acknowledged as a shepherd caring for his flock. This familiar mixture of loving-kindness and judgment – khesed and gevurah - represented by the way – in our magnificent quilts to my left and right – is the underpinning of our entire High Holiday ritual.

Our High Holiday ritual is a poetic rendering of our hope and desire to, as it were, move God from the throne of judgment to the throne of compassion. Preceding this supposition is the complex notion that deeply rooted notion in our ritual that God is only God because we choose to enthrone God every year- in our act of coronation we accept the Divine rule. As our text reads:

*Let us acknowledge the power of this day’s holiness for it is full of awe and dread and on it, this day, your kingdom will be exalted and your throne will be established in love.*

It is also of note that the courtroom motif and well as the shepherd’s counting is for all creatures on earth. The word Israel or Jew never appears. This is a true universalistic setting for the questions that will ensue.

Our awe is in the face of the universe we encounter and its laws- laws of nature that are limiting- these limitations are what reinforce the seat of judgment- gevurah -boundary and din-law. We are all sentenced, creatures large and small to din – the laws of nature. They can’t be altered, nor should they be, by forces of compassion and mercy.

As I mentioned in the Koleinu you all received a few weeks ago – on RH we celebrate the Creation and the Creative process within us that emulates the Creator. These creative forces work within the framework of universal laws.
On Yom Kippur, however, we use that creative energy to re-create ourselves—
to refashion out of the stuff of our very being a new creature—a new path, a new and refreshing view of the world and to all we hold dear to us, a new way of looking at the world. I’ll be talking more about this tomorrow in connection with our reading the story of the Binding of Isaac.

So, again, the first paragraph poses a juxtaposition of a supreme judge ensconced on thrones of judgment and love—and the caring shepherd who counts and cares for each of his sheep—each member of the flock—each member of the community.

The shepherd is embodied in our tradition by Moses, the faithful shepherd. *haRo’eh hane-eman*, but Moses is also the *mekhokek*- the lawgiver. Rabbinic tradition, however, emphasizes that Moses was chosen to lead the Children of Israel because of his shepherding skills. After he fled Egypt as, according to the tradition, a 40 year old, he spent 40 years as a shepherd to his father-in-law Jethro’s flocks. As Moses approached eighty he is chosen for the mission of leading God’s flock to the Promised Land.

The Rabbis note that Moses was chosen because of a specific incident. He, like the heavenly shepherd in our poem, was counting his sheep and entering them into his ledger. One day a little lamb strayed from the flock and rather than checking it off as a loss—thinking that it was already devoured by some predator, he begins to search for her. He eventually finds the lamb in a ravine and lifts it up on his shoulders to return it to her mother and the flock.

It is for this, tradition says, that Moses merited the encounter with God at the Burning Bush and the commission to redeem, bring them the Torah and be their faithful shepherd.

Our poem now continues this image of our being inscribed and sealed in a ledger and we are introduced to the stirring, yet disturbing recitation of a litany of juxtapositions which are on the surface essentially true.
As much as it pains us, this coming year will see both birth and death, conflict and harmony.

But as I said earlier we no longer can accept that these states of being both positive and negative are a result of obedience or disobedience. Many are afflicted with diseases that are not a result of their own negligence. They are not being judged and those who will somehow excel this year have not done it by themselves. Both our mourning and rejoicing are complicated and they involve more than our being judged from above.

Our list of woes and winnings described succinctly in this poem portray - a verity we all face –that we are not in control and that in order to overcome the edict that all of us will die –we must choose how to live.

So how can we understand all this? I reviewed the many different ways modern Jews try to understand this. One cogent interpretation that I have found was suggested by Rabbi Ed Feinstein, the senior rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California.

In an essay entitled “The Answer is “Me!” he suggests that rather than reading our text in the plural “they” –yeke'teyvun vetekhateymun, we read it in a way that does not deflect these proclaiming truths is to read questions in the “I” form.

Rabbi Feinstein says:

I sat in shul for years reading these words before I realized the answer. The answer to all of these questions [Who will live and who will die?] who at their end and who not at their end. Who by fire and who by water...]

The answer to each of our questions is “Me”.

Who will live and who will die? I will

Who at their end and who not at their end?? Me Like every human being, when I die, it will be at the right time and it will also be too soon.
Fire water, earthquake, plague? In my lifetime, I’ve been scorched and drowned, shaken and burdened, wandering and at rest, tranquil and troubled. That has been my life’s journey.

He continues:

Of course, I prefer to deflect this truth. I would much prefer to let the prayer talk about someone else, perhaps the fellow in the next row...[But] this is the central truth of the High Holy Days. This is what makes them Yamim Noraim, days of terror. We are vulnerable.....We invest ourselves in the life of others, we love them and need them, but we cannot protect them from the world and its accidents. (end quote)

One of the frustrating challenges that I face every year as I talk to you is whether our “I” remains hidden behind our beautiful rich tefilot, the marvelous enthusiastic participatory singing, the Torah service- the sounding of the shofar etc. Are we hiding behind all of this to protect us from the answer to this poem—“Me”. Is it enough to come together in celebration of our continuity as an ancient community using ancient poems and praises? Is it enough to satisfy our nostalgia— or can we penetrate this veil of ritual celebration that connects us to the past and the future with a resounding “NOW”? Can we strive to make a real difference in our individual lives? How many of us will leave today and make commitments to the three-fold trail laid out for us as a way to deal with the existential fate all of us share. Teshuvah, Tefila, Tzedakah.

How many of us will commit to teshuvah – recalibration of our lives and to establish new positive patterns in our lives? How many of us will make a commitment to broaden our sense of tefila and Torah, to open ourselves to learning a more sophisticated and inquisitive mature approach to our ancient texts and traditions? How many of us will make their connection to our Siddur in a new way- far from bar-bat mitzvah memories of yore? How many will continue their efforts of pursuing justice and the enhancement of the lives of those less fortunate? How many will continue to support our caring and compassionate community and its vibrancy, not only with treasure, but with their time and talents?
This brings us back to the legend of Rabbi Amnon. While we revile martyrdom as a Jewish value, we do, however, strongly abide with the concept of offering ourselves up for higher ideals.

Thankfully and hopefully we, as individuals and a people will never be subjugated to the terrors of the past, but the question still looms before us, what are we, what am I, willing to offer up to insure that we are true to our faith, our people and our values? Are their sacrifices I can make for further that self-realization and self-actualization as a Jewish human being? For some these will be small offerings for others more extensive ones.

For some it is simply rearranging our lives so we benefit from Shabbat in our community by dealing with the challenges of Saturday sports and classes. For others it will be more complicated- reintroducing home rituals consistently so our friends and children take seriously our desire to insure Jewish continuity seriously. As we all know this continuity will not be a result of occasional experiences, but through continued practice. We all know this from every other endeavor we undertake- from golf to playing the cello. Rabbi Amnon asks us: what are we prepared to do to help us overcome the existential edict that limits our stay on this earth?

What are we willing to sacrifice so that we and the generations that follow us are literate, sophisticated, engaged Jews; Jews who as individuals and as a people still have a great deal to contribute to human civilization. So have we done for millennia.

This is how we overcome the stark reality of our fleeting existence.

*Adam yesodo afar vesofo afar*

*Our origin is from the dust and our end i9s dust*

*We are like shattered pottery*
like withered grass and like a faded blossom

Like a passing shadow, a vanishing cloud

Like a dream that will fly away

But

Atah hu melech el khai vekayam

But we connect as an “I” and a “You” using Martin Buber’s formulation.

You are the organizing principle of reality’

You are the Eternal in which our frailty finds inspiration

You are our hope that we can transcend our fleeting lives and reach higher than we ever thought possible.

You are the source of being, life and joy.

We are all sustained by your glory as it manifests in the vast universe and the look of love on the faces of our family and friends.

May we inscribe and seal ourselves for a year of sweetness and satisfaction.

May we be able to face the trials and tribulations we will encounter with graciousness and courage!

May we forgive ourselves and those that we love!

Let us seal ourselves in a covenant with the Almighty.

Let us make peace with our planet and nurture it back to health.

Let this year be a year of endeavor and growth and most of all a year of love and understanding among all of the creatures in the Universe whose creation we celebrate today.

Let us say Amen