An Introduction to Unetaneh Tokef
and a dedication to Black Lives Matter

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Rosh Hashanah Second Day 5781

We are about to say the words of the well-known piyut- liturgical poem- Unetaneh Tokef.

This piyut is framed by two statements of belief:

Berosh Hashana Yikatevun Uveyom Tzom Kipur Yechatemun”
“On Rosh Hashanah it will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed”

and

Uteshuvah utefillah utzedakah ma’avirin et ro’a hagezera
“repentance, prayer, and tzedakah - justice can avert the severity of the decree”

This poem includes in it a series of questions regarding the fate of each of us in the coming year?

Who will live, Who will die?

Whose death will be timely and who will die young, or too early?

Who by fire, who by drowning?

Who by hunger, who by plague?
Who will be rich and who will be poor.

The list feels particularly close to home in this year of fires in the West, of hurricanes in the South, of world-wide plague, and of human-made injustice.

This theology, this piyut, that seems to say that at the end of these Days of Awe our fate will become sealed - is a hard one to grasp at any time, but especially this year. How can these terrors have been sealed into our fate? Afterall, did we not pray, and fast, and celebrate last year and still these fates have occurred?

The Netivot Shalom, a contemporary Hassidic Master, teaches us, in the name of Rabbi Ya’akov Yoseph of Polnoah, a different understanding of the idea that God writes our names in the books of our fate. He says, “each of us write ourselves into whichever book we want.” The idea that WE have the choice to inscribe ourselves is quite different from the traditional idea that God chooses for us.

Rabbi Ya’akov Yoseph of Polnoah is saying that our fate, our destiny, is in our own hands; we choose how to live our lives. This sounds like a pretty obvious statement: each of us makes the decision about how to live our life. But at the same time, this is a thought that is radically different from the traditional way that many people relate to the High Holidays. Instead of praying that God will inscribe us in the Book of Life, we pray and do spiritual work so that we can write ourselves in the Book of Life and make the right choices.

The final line of the Unetane Tokef prayer, says:
"Tishuva- repentance/ return;
Tfilah- prayer
and Tzedakah - justice
can avert the severity of the decree.

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1 Rabbi Shalom Noah Barzovsky of Slonim, 1911-2000
2 student of the Baal Shem Tov

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Even when we pray, and fast, and celebrate, terrors occur. So what can we do? What tools can avert the severity of the decree? We all, every one of us, have three powerful tools: Tshuva, Tfilah, Tzedakah. And we can choose to use these tools, and we can choose to write ourselves into a book of our own design, a book of a meaningful life.

*Tshuva* is the knowledge that change is possible, that there is no such a thing as, “it is what it is.” Tshuva is the knowledge and the belief that we can change and that others can change, that we actually have that power.

Let us remember that our power will be key this November.

Voting, especially this year is an act of tshuva - of change. Let's make that a priority on the work ahead.

Let us remember that our power will be key this November.

*Tfilah*: Prayer, is a practice that allows each one of us to connect with one’s self and with the Divine. Prayer allows us to be able to know that we are not alone.

“Prayer is the worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of devotion”, says Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel³, a practice that gives us hope, that helps us to let go, that lets us cry and laugh, dance, jump and sit silently.

It is a practice that connects us with our innermost self and with our community and allows us to articulate the fears and the joys of our soul.

*Tzedakah*: a word hard to translate into English, from the root tz. d. k.- justice, which implies that the help we give to others is a matter of justice, it is what we must do, it is

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³ A. J. Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, page 111.
our duty, our responsibility. Tzedakah is what reminds us to be human in a world that has lost its humanity.

_Uteshuvah utefillah utzedakah ma’avirin et ro’a bagezera_
“repentance, prayer, and tzedakah - justice can avert the severity of the decree.

In a year that our eyes are more open to the injustices of racism in our country I want us to recognize the names of men and women of color who died, who were killed for being human of colors.

To cry out our commitment to their lives and to fight racism in all its forms.

I share with you an unetaneh tokef in their name:

Who shall die while jogging (#AhmaudArbery)
Who shall die while relaxing in the comfort of their home (#BothamJean #AtatianaJefferson)
Who shall die while seeking help after a car crash (#JonathanFerrell #RenishaMcBride).
Who shall die while holding a cellphone (#StephonClark).
Who shall die while decorating for a party (#ClaudeReese).
Who shall die while leaving a party (#JordanEdwards #SeanBell)
Who shall die while enjoying music (#JordanDavis).
Who shall die while selling music…trying to make a way outta no way (#AltonSterling).

Who shall die while sleeping (#AiyanaJones)
Who shall die while worshipping the Lord (#Charleston9).
Who shall die for a traffic violation (#SandraBland).
Who shall die while coming from the store (#MikeBrown and #TrayvonMartin).
Who shall die while playing cops and robbers (#TamirRice).

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Who shall die while lawfully carrying a weapon (#PhilandoCastile, #FreddieGray).
Who shall die while on the shoulder of the road with car problems (#CoreyJones #TerrenceCrutcher).

Who shall die in the first hours of the new year (#OscarGrant)
Who shall die while shopping at Walmart (#JohnCrawford).
Who shall die while cashing a check in peace (#YvonneSmallwood).
Who shall die while reading a book in their own car (#KeithScott).
Who shall die while taking a walk with their stepfather (#CliffordGlover).
Who shall die while reaching for their wallet (#AmadouDiallo).
Who shall die while running away (#WalterScott).
Who shall die while asking a cop a question (#RandyEvans).
Who shall die while begging for their life, their breath (#EricGarner #GeorgeFloyd).

Who shall die by the effects of supremacy, greed, and apathy
…who by beast, indeed⁴

⁴ Unetaneh Tokef for Black Lives- Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman
https://www.lilith.org/blog/2020/06/unetaneh-tokef-for-black-lives/?fbclid=IwAR3NAIcJiwr8SNUQJ_90fPzbnJD4wkytHQgmPfd3dYdZtKFs1Al0InGGUNo

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