

## Yom Kippur 5771 – Maintaining Faith in a Broken World

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*On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many will pass on and how many will be created? Who will live and who will die? Who at their end and who not at their end?*

These words from Unetaneh Tokef are among the most haunting of the High Holy Day liturgy. The notion that God is up in heaven reading from the book of our lives and deciding who among us will succeed and who will suffer is difficult to accept, especially when we've experienced tragedy.

When I was in college I met a woman named Wendy. (Actually Sharon knew Wendy because she babysat her children and she introduced me because Wendy needed help preparing for an exam.) About a year later, just before we left campus for winter break, Wendy was hospitalized with pneumonia; and during the vacation she suddenly died. Wendy was barely 40 years old, months from receiving her Master's Degree in nursing; she had been in good health; and she left behind a husband and two children under the age of 6. I remember before the next Rosh Hashanah how her husband struggled with the possibility of reciting these words, which seemed to give God credit for determining Wendy's awful fate.

Undoubtedly many of you have shared that experience of life taking a sudden, sharp turn and changing forever. Certainly as a community we were all challenged this past year by the illness and death of Cantor Togut, which brought into question every assumption we might have had about the justice or certainty of the world.

These experiences bring to mind the poignant teaching of Rabbi Eliezer in the Talmud who said: "שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך", Repent one day before your death." Upon hearing this, his students asked, "How can we possibly know when we will die?" to which Rabbi Eliezer answered, "All the more reason to repent today; every day should be spent in the mode of repentance." On Yom Kippur, particularly in these moments before Yizkor, we are keenly aware of our fragility, of our vulnerability, and our lack of control.

This morning I want to look a little closer at the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. I want to invite you to turn now to p. 615 and to search with me for Jewish responses to this most pressing challenge: Why is life like this and how can we affirm faith amidst so much unexplainable tragedy? I want to use the prayer to try to embrace the uncertainty we face, to partner with God in continuing the process of creating a better world, and ultimately to emerge from a state of brokenness to one of wholeness. And for those who want to go deeper, I want to recommend a fabulous new collection of essays called *Who By Fire, Who By Water*, edited by Rabbi Larry Hoffman.

If we look at the first paragraph on p. 615, we see a statement about the uncertainty of life. I'm not sure I believe that God is actively making these decisions right now; too many experiences contradict that view for me. But I do see here a more general statement about the fragility of life. There are people who will experience many blessings this coming year; and there are also people who will experience the worst kinds of tragedy. And much as we might like to deny it, the fact is that these matters are beyond our control. We have little choice but to embrace the uncertainty.

In her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Dr. Rachel Naomi Reman quotes a patient whose physician had recently shared with him that he had only three months to live. "He seemed sorry to be telling me this," the man reported, "But he seemed pleased that he had the information to give me, almost as pleased as if he had told me that he had the right drug to eradicate my cancer. He told me of my death with an air of authority as if it were he who had decided when it would be. As if when he could not control my cancer he could at least control the time of my death." The experience of this patient underscores the extent to which people naturally want to be in control. Doctors are trained to control diseases and, subconsciously at least, this physician did not take well to the notion that there were forces far more powerful than he. And so he presented himself as though he were in control of the situation, if not the illness.

Think of what we do to feign control. Last Saturday we marked the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, which fundamentally changed the way we travel or organize a big event. Think also of the healthcare dollars that are spent on tests many doctors would consider unnecessary. I don't want to suggest that security measures or preventative medicine is a bad idea. We know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. But some things may just be an effort to mask how vulnerable we really are. With all we can do, we cannot lose sight of the basic fact that many things are beyond our control. We will always live in a world of uncertainty.

One of the aesthetic features of Yom Kippur is that we wear white. White is said to be the color of purity; the white *kittel* is said to invoke the garments of the angels whom we mimic on this day. But white is also the color of death shrouds. And in many ways this day, when we do not eat or drink or attend to other physical needs, is a rehearsal for death. This reminds us how vulnerable we are and how quickly life can change.

King David was by far the most accomplished of our biblical heroes. By the beginning of the book of Kings, however, King David is nearing the end of his life. The book begins, “והמלך דוד זקן בא בימים”, King David was now old, advanced in years.” An attendant was hired to keep him warm in his bed. By chapter 2 we read, “ויקרבו ימי דוד למות”, David’s days were nearing towards death.” Rabbi David Wolpe points out that when the leader is old, he is still referred to as King David; but when he is dying, he is referred to simply as David, a change that underscores the fact that nobody can hide from death. Regardless of our accomplishments or our titles or our financial means, we are all equal when it comes to death. On Yom Kippur we are reminded just how much is beyond our control.

And yet, even as the poet scares us with that reality, he concludes the paragraph by offering something we can do to make it a little better:

ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה  
Repentance, prayer and deeds of kindness can remove the severity of the decree.

The words are deliberate. It doesn’t say that repentance, prayer, and deeds can annul the decree. We know that even the righteous suffer. But our deeds can impact the severity of the decree. Our deeds are important, as we are God’s partners. In spite of our lack of ultimate control, we are powerful forces in the continuing process of creation and repairing a broken world. Going back to the beginning of the prayer on p. 613, God records and seals and counts and measures and remembers; but we have a role as well. At the end of the paragraph we read “והותם יד כל אדם בו”, The signature of each human being is in the book for each of us has impacted the world with our deeds.”

The Kabbalists speak of the doctrine of *shevirat hakelim*, the broken vessels. When God wanted to create the world, God had to voluntarily restrict Himself in a process called *tzimtzum*. God contracted Himself to make room for the world and in the process the vessels of holy light were shattered. When

God created the world, it became the task of human beings to repair those vessels through a process of *tikkun*, literally repair. We speak often of the concept of *tikkun olam*, of repairing the world through deeds of kindness. For the Kabbalists, the concept was even broader. Any time a Jew does a *mitzvah* – whether it is an act of kindness or a ritual act – when we act in a certain way, we add a layer of repair to the universe.

In his book *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, Professor Jon Levinson adds a biblical basis to the idea of continuous Creation. We know the story of Creation, how God spoke in a very orderly fashion and the world came into being – first the light and then the water and then the dry land, and God saw that it was all good. But this is not the only creation story in the Bible. Isaiah and the book of Job describe a much more difficult process in which God had to fight back active evil forces in the primordial world in order to overlay our world of order. The problem, says Levinson, is that sometimes those powerful forces still seep back in. But when we support medical research to fight disease, when we reach out to assist a friend or loved one or a family who has been stricken with illness or loss, when we make serious strides to fight poverty and hunger, we are actually helping God to push those forces back. We are needed to push back the “world as it is” in order to make room for the “world as it should be.”

Professor Michael Fishbane describes what he calls a “covenant theology.” The idea is that our responsibilities in the world are too important to be set aside even by senseless tragedies. In his book, *Sacred Attunement*, he asks the following questions:

- Does the fact that one observes “all the oppression” on the earth negate the command “do not oppress the stranger?”
- If one sees all “the extortion of justice and right,” does that subvert the command to “establish judges and overseers ... who will judge the people with a righteous justice”?
- If one notes that “former things” are “forgotten”, does this cancel the command to “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” and therefore should treat the stranger and poor with kindness?
- And does the fact that a person dies like an animal negate the command to “choose life”?

The answer, of course, to all of these questions is a resounding “no”. Judaism’s response to uncertainty and our lack of control over so many things is as heroic as it is adamant. We have an obligation to exercise the powers we do have (not necessarily to overturn, but) to mitigate the severity of the senseless decree.

And now I want to look at the very last paragraph of the *piyut*, which offers insight as to just how powerful we are to overcome the brokenness:

“Our origin is dust and our end is dust. At the hazard of our life we earn our bread.”

And then there is a series of 8 metaphors: “We are like a fragile vessel, like the grass that withers, the flower that fades, the shadow that passes, the cloud that vanishes, the wind that blows, the dust that floats, the dream that flies away.”

These metaphors are rooted in the Bible and, as Rabbi Gordon Tucker points out, seven of them are taken in context from Isaiah, Psalms, and Job, marking the immense differences between human beings and God. The exception is the first metaphor, “חרס הנשבר,” translated here as “a fragile vessel,” but more literally a “broken shard.”

The closest reference we have to a broken shard in the Bible is a law in Leviticus, which states that if an earthenware vessel becomes impure, the only way to purify it is to break it. We usually think of breaking something as ruining it. If you know the rules of *kashrut*, you know that while silverware and glass can be *kashered*, china is problematic because it would have to be broken. But the Torah and the Rabbis didn’t think of brokenness that way. When they talk about purifying a vessel by breaking it, they mean that the vessel is broken and then pieced back together and reused. The author of our prayer undoubtedly knew this law; and he knew also that human beings are vessels formed out of the earth. We are the broken shards. We are like those shattered vessels. Shattered, but not powerless. We have the ability to piece ourselves back together in order to do our jobs and make a difference in the world.

Rachel Naomi Reman tells a story about a boy, David, who was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes two weeks after his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. The diagnosis broke him. He became angry and refused to follow his diet or take his insulin. But one night David had a dream, which changed his life. In his dream he found

himself alone in a room facing a stone statue of the buddha. David wasn't a Buddhist, but the image of the buddha is ubiquitous in California where he lived. In any case, David reported that this statue had a very peaceful face, which had a calming effect on him. Seemingly out of nowhere, a dagger was thrown suddenly and landed squarely in the buddha's heart. David had an overwhelming feeling of betrayal, a sense of "why is life like this?" as he saw this peaceful statue struggle.

But then the statue began to grow; slowly at first, so it was not entirely clear what was happening. But this was the buddha's response to the knife. The dagger didn't disappear; but the statue grew and the dagger gradually became a tiny speck on the chest of this enormous being. When David awoke and processed the dream, he came to have a different attitude towards his disease. He didn't feel quite as broken or unable to go on. The dream somehow gave David permission to live. The mark of his disease would never disappear, but eventually he would come to be defined by other things as well.

About nine years ago my grandmother suffered a stroke that changed her life forever. I remember the call from my grandfather. "Mama has had a little stroke," he said, "But she is doing okay." As the hours wore on, we learned that the stroke was more serious than initially thought. My grandmother – who was in her mid-70s and very active and full of life – no longer had control over the entire right side of her body; she was confined to a wheelchair; and she couldn't speak in any meaningful way. For my grandfather who always believed that people should never suffer, this was almost like a death sentence. He thought about sending her to a home and never seeing her again because she was changed. But in the end he decided to do more. He had a hospital bed brought into his dining room and he amazed the family by his commitment to making sure my grandmother was well fed, her hair was combed and her nails were done and her clothes were washed, and he adjusted his schedule to make life livable. Make no mistake; this was extremely difficult and at times it was a real burden and a source of intense depression for my grandfather. But the point is that in his state of brokenness my grandfather managed to do something that neither we nor he ever thought he could do. And his heroic efforts became a silver lining to a tragic circumstance.

One of the traditions of mourning is that we tear our garments. Today most people tear the black ribbon, but traditionally this was done with our clothes. In olden times people didn't just buy new clothes or even change them as often as we do, so at the end of the *shiva* period, according to Jewish law, the mourner sewed his garment back together so he could return to work. The stitches were

supposed to be rough so it would be obvious to anyone who saw this person that he was in mourning. And then after *shloshim*, the 30-day mourning period, the stitches were made more permanent. Even then, you can imagine that the garment no longer looked like new. It was damaged goods, permanently altered, just like the person who wore them. But like the broken shards, the garment was still useful and it enabled the mourner to return to his responsibilities and making an impact on the world.

Like the psalmist teaches, “לב נשבר ונדכה אלהים לא תבזה, A heart broken and crushed is never despised by God.” The 2<sup>nd</sup> century sage Rabbi Alexandri taught that this is the difference between God and human beings. “A typical person would consider it an embarrassment to use a broken tool. But God’s work is always done with broken implements.” Sometimes God’s best work is done from that state of brokenness.

Think of the way that this community came together in its brokenness for Cantor Togut. The rides, the visits, the food, the notes of support. These things did not change the tragedy of the situation. The fundamental fact remained that certain things were beyond anyone’s control. But your work and the work of others like you helped to mitigate the severity of the suffering. The broken shards were able to accomplish quite a bit of God’s work.

Viktor Frankl was a neurologist and psychotherapist in Vienna before he was deported with his wife and parents to Theresienstadt and eventually to Auschwitz and Dachau. His wife, mother and father all perished during the Holocaust. But Frankl managed to survive, chiefly by his stubborn determination to live in a spiritual domain that “the SS could not destroy” and to find meaning even in the most absurd and painful situations. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he wrote, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing – the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way.”

Frankl’s approach sums up well the conclusion we must draw from Unetaneh Tokef. Though we are not able to affect every situation, we are free to choose our attitude and our response to life’s challenges.

It is as the Zohar, the foundational work for Jewish mysticism, taught – that the Torah had to be given in the dark wilderness, “for there is no light except that which emerges from darkness. And there

is no worship of God except within darkness, and there is no good except that which emerges from evil; and this is the perfected worship of God.”

In this moment before Yizkor, as we remember loved ones who suffered or we recall moments when our lives were torn apart and we came to realize just how much uncertainty the future holds, let us resolve to rise out of our darkened, broken state and to make a difference in the world. Through our prayers, our repentance, and our acts of *tzedakkah*, may we all become God’s partners in removing the severity of the decree, that the year 5771 may be a year of blessing for each of us, our community, and our world. G’mar Hatimah Tovah, May we all be inscribed and sealed for good in the Book of Life. Amen.