

What A Difference A Year Makes

Rosh Hashana 2011
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What words could ever surpass the powerful Unetaneh Tokef, the prayer recited during Musaf, which captures the essence of this day. It proclaims the sanctity and nature of this Yom HaDin, Day of Judgment declaring that, "On Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is decreed, 'who shall live, and who shall die; who by fire and who by water...'" It ranks among the most stirring and poignant prayers ever written. It is more than a prayer. I consider it to be a provocative form of poetic prose that gives me pause every time I read or hear it.

Many of us struggle to understand the premise embedded within it. Some seek to understand what it is supposed to mean and grapple with the text. Others are intimidated by it and find the imagery or theology so awesome as to reject it outright, without dealing with the broader perspective or its underlying concepts. One thing you cannot do is deny its significance or ignore it.

Its origin is equally mysterious and cloaked in drama. Legend attributes the prayer to Rabbi Amnon who lived in Mainz in the 1200's and was constantly pressured by the Archbishop to accept Jesus and convert to Christianity. He resisted numerous entreaties to do so, but in a moment of weakness, or more likely, to get a respite from the persistent pleas, he agreed to think about it for three days. He immediately regretted that he had even given the perception that he had entertained the thought, instead of rejecting it outright. He agonized over the possibility that any of his fellow Jews would believe that he had a scintilla of doubt about his faith. When the three days passed he refused to respond to the summons of the archbishop. Just before Rosh Hashana, against his will he was forcibly brought before the Church authorities, where he declared that not only did he refuse to convert, but that he regretted that he had even given the appearance of considering the option. I will spare you the gruesome details of what happened next, other than to say that Rabbi Amnon was brutally tortured and his body mutilated. At home, in excruciating pain and dying of his wounds the rabbi begged his disciples to carry him into the synagogue, for he could no longer walk because of what had been done to him. He wanted to publicly sanctify God's Holy Name in the presence of the entire congregation. He came and recited the prayer which he had composed, dying as he uttered the final words with his last breath. According to the story as it has been passed down, three days later he appeared to Rabbi Kalonymus in a dream and repeated it, asking that this prayer be recited each year, on the Days of Awe, as it has been ever since.

The prayer is always deeply moving, for it conveys the theme and expresses the mood of the holiday, a time of reckoning, of our need to come face to face with the reality of our own mortality. There are times when the words take on special meaning. Last year was certainly one of those times.

It is hard to believe that a year ago I stood before you with such anxiety, worries, concern,... and a lot less hair. It was for me, and as many of you have told me, for many of you as well, probably the most emotionally charged High Holidays. The intensity of the feeling was especially pronounced and heightened because it was a shared, communal experience. I will always be eternally grateful for the love, support, and kindness extended to my family and me.

I don't think I can top last year, nor for that matter, would I want to. (And yes, this summer was a lot better than last summer.)

So many in the congregation, including young people, have asked me how I processed what transpired. I have been asked what Judaism has to say about all of this; what I learned and discerned, and how my faith helped me, or if it was challenged.

Whereas last Rosh Hashana I stood at the precipice of the unknown and spoke of coping with uncertainty, as well as hopes and fears, this year, I want to share with you the insights gained having gone through the experience. In so doing I am always cautious when I speak personally because I hope you realize it is never my intent for it to be about me, but rather what lessons and insights I, as your rabbi and teacher can share with you that may be helpful and applicable. After all, each person brings with them to synagogue their own dreams and disappointments, their unique joys and sorrows, their particular yearnings and the situations they are dealing with. As always, I am conscious of this and think in terms of the universal implications that may be of interest and beneficial, and of how the wisdom of Judaism can be a helpful beacon and tool to help us face what life has in store for us.

Whenever people confront a life-challenging situation they instinctively wonder and ask, why me? It is a natural question. Given the randomness of the universe, we want to understand if there is any logic, pattern or reason why things happen.

But I must tell you I am often uncomfortable with two aspects of the underlying assumption. First, the notion that people assume that they are good, and secondly that they do not deserve to have anything bad occur to them since they are good people.

Don't get me wrong. It's not that we aren't inherently good. Judaism posits that, but our tradition also wisely counsels that we should have a bit of humility in this regard. We are all basically good, but that should not lead to complacency. We can always improve and be better. The Talmud says that at this time of year, when we are judged, as well as at any given moment, we should consider ourselves as having committed an equal number of mitzvot and averot. By assuming that our good and bad deeds are in equilibrium, we do not become complacent, nor do we feel overwhelmed. The real intent of this approach is to motivate us to do the right thing the next time we are presented with a choice. There are few who are all good, or all bad. Most of us are in the middle. This may be one reason why, as I said last year I never asked the "why me" question.

Another reason I did not spend much energy pondering "why me" could be because I was afraid of what the answer might be.

That may be because I often think of the joke about a poor old woman crying her heart out in the back pew of a church, night and day. She cries out to God and bemoans her circumstances, citing a litany of tragedies that have befallen her. Seeking sympathy, or at least some understanding of her suffering, every day she asks the same question. Looking up at heaven, she explains that she is a good woman and surely does not deserve a life filled with so much pain. As is her custom, she concludes, "Why me, God? Why me?" This goes on for an extended period of time. Finally, one day, a miracle occurs. The heavens open up, and right after she calls out and asks, "why me?" a voice comes out from above. She is elated. It appears that she is finally going to get her answer. First there is great silence, and then the heavenly voice proclaims loud and clear, "Because you tick me off." So perhaps I did not want to ponder why me, because I was afraid of the answer. But in all seriousness, even if we received an answer, would it really help?

I have never thought that being a rabbi shelters or protects me from harm. I did not choose to be a rabbi to earn brownie points, or to avoid pain or anguish. Had I wanted to choose an easier, more blissful path, I would have become a shul president.

I subscribe to the notion and suggest that we should strive to do the right thing because it is its own reward. While there very well may be a reward in the next world, *olam haba*, doing good and being good is not like having an insurance policy to protect us so that bad things will not happen to us. Were that the case we would be acting not out of faith, not out of conviction when performing a mitzvah, but in pursuit of selfish ulterior motives.

One of the points of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer is to recognize that there are three factors that go into why things occur in our world. Some things that happen in life may be preprogrammed and may perhaps even be inevitable. Genes, birth order, where and how we grow up, financial circumstances, as well as a number of other factors over which we have no control play a role in the direction and path our life will take. Then there is the realm of those things which are just random. For no apparent reason a person may make a wrong turn that can wind up costing or saving his life. The two realms may converge. Natural disasters, for example are the products of laws of physics and nature. How they wreak their havoc, its impact on victims and affected areas is, however, random.

While we have virtually no control over these first two dimensions, there is a third dimension -- those things in the world which are determined by the choices we make. This is the part of life over which we can exert control and where the choices we make can play a determining role in the outcome of various situations. I believe Rabbi Amnon's prayer teaches that some elements of life are beyond rational understanding, and are in the first two categories, while some are within our grasp. Life is the intersection of all three dimensions.

One of my goals on the High Holidays is to convey the concept that Judaism teaches that even though our ability to decisively determine the outcome of events is not absolute, there are things we can affect and influence. Even though the percentage of what we can control may be small, it is significant and potent. We have a say in the direction of our lives, especially in terms of the moral and ethical choices we make. This is why it is so important to study Judaism. It provides the tools that allow us to make proper and good decisions in those areas where we do exert control. For ultimately, these decisions have an impact on us, on those around us, as well as on the kind of world in which we live.

I still believe what I said last year, about the importance of appreciating life. We must live in the moment, but not for the moment. I heard from some people who did things they might not have otherwise done, or that they had put off for awhile, as a result of hearing my message last year. Yes, it is true that we never know when our time will be up. This is what I think about every Rosh Hashanah when we recite the powerful Unetaneh Tokef. The book of life is open. We do not know who shall live and who shall die, nor can we know how or when our earthly days will come to an end. All we can be certain of is our mortality. The High Holidays remind us of that so that we will fill our days with meaning and purpose. It is perhaps not coincidental that the cycle of Torah readings at this time of year, from Deuteronomy tells us, "I set before you this day, the blessing and the curse. *Uvecharta behayim: Therefore choose life!*"

At the risk of disappointing you, I must tell you that I did not have any major earth shattering revelations about the meaning of life. After all, it is not as if I suddenly discovered religion! What I did, however,

find was that my religious faith helped me get through some tough times and to cope with what was going on.

I agree with those who say that religion should not be a crutch, and believe that the greatest of Jewish philosophers and thinkers would not want us to relate in this manner to our faith. Religion, especially ours, is not some kind of primitive hocus pocus or superstition. It is not a matter of reciting some incantations, and then healing magically occurs. Nor should it be a substitute for good medical care. One of the things I love about Judaism is that although it is such an ancient religion it is so intellectually sophisticated, with a rational and reasonable approach, and embracing modernity.

A fascinating story in the Talmud says that during the time of King Hezekiah people would turn to a Book of Healing to be cured of their ailments. They did it so frequently that the sages hid the book and forbade its use. They took this action because the people were putting too much faith in it and becoming dependent on shamans and seeking superficial superstitious treatment rather than turning to doctors for medical care. We recognize that one who heals is God's partner, which is why we are commanded to seek medical care and not to rely on miracles.

I found prayer to be extremely comforting and powerful. In my personal, private prayers I asked for manifestation of God's mercy and compassion, for health and life. I prayed to be healed so that I would be able to continue to serve God and the Jewish people. I asked for a reprieve for me and for others who were sick, and for the welfare of those who offer support for loved ones, for the caregivers who helped sustain me and others, who are agents of healing, God's messengers. I prayed to have the fortitude to cope with what I was dealing with. In retrospect, prayer was comforting, because I found that when I prayed, whether at a minyan in synagogue, or when I was by myself, I was not alone. This is what I thought of when reciting the immortal words bequeathed to us by the Psalmist, "I shall fear no harm, for You are with me." God accompanies us, even and especially at our darkest moments. It does not mean that He will necessarily intervene, but it gives us the reassurance that we confront life with the endless resource of Divine Love available to us, if we but access it.

One of my wife, Symcha's relatives who is very religious suggested an explanation similar to a passage found in the Midrash about our ancestor Ya'akov, Jacob: that God especially desires the prayers of the righteous. I would never put myself in that category, of being among the righteous, but the idea that God desires our prayers is an interesting one. While some might be repelled by this, it was meant to offer comfort. Another person said it allowed me to know how much people cared for me. There is an element of truth in that. While I felt the love and support from so many, I think I would have preferred a roast, or a couple of nice emails, and could have done without the chemo. Last year after my first treatment I travelled to Israel where I met so many people, even folks I did not know, who said they were praying for me. Each helped to lift the burden a bit. Small gestures of kindness do matter and are appreciated.

Not just people who don't know me, but even people who know me and who I thought didn't like me wished me well and expressed their concern and offered good wishes. As a result I came away more certain than ever of how important the love and care shown by friends, loved ones, and even acquaintances can be, for we draw strength from each other.

I also came to understand how important it is that we pay attention not only to the patient, but to the needs of the caregivers as well. They also experience stress and are pulled in many directions as they live the ups and downs of the loved one for whom they are caring, sometimes, even more so. The truth

is that we have it backwards. It is not that we do things because we love someone, or for those we love, but rather that when we do things for another human being is when our relationship deepens and we discover the meaning of love.

I come away feeling unchanged in my overall outlook on life. I loved life before, and still do. I still feel passionate about my commitment to Judaism and the relevance of our tradition, as it is a wellspring of strength. The first thing we are supposed to say upon waking up in the morning are the words from the siddur, "*Modeh Ani lefanecha Melech Hai vekayam shehehezarta bee neshmatee, behemlah, rabbah emunatecha*. I am grateful unto you O living and Eternal King for restoring my soul unto me in mercy. Great is your faithfulness." The Shulhan Aruch, the code of Jewish law says that we should rise up in the morning like a lion. I think it means we should be ready to face the challenge of a new day with fresh energy and vigor.

The question that each of us must confront and which the holidays help us to consider is what will be the nature of the life we live and of the choices we make. How will we use the hours in the days granted us in the coming year.

It is often said that we can only truly appreciate that which we have lost or been deprived of. So I want to tell you what I missed most. Some of you may have noticed that I concluded most benedictions last year with the hope that we each shall know God's greatest gifts, the gifts of health and life.

Believe it or not, I missed not being able to fast on Yom Kippur. Of course, I know that when health is an issue, there is no question what Judaism says. A religion such as Judaism that values life and that seeks to prolong and preserve life obviously dictates that such rules may and should be suspended when one's health is at stake.

A Yiddish short story by David Frishman called, "Three Who Ate" is about a community afflicted with cholera. The people in the shtetl were dying and almost literally, dropping like flies throughout the summer. *When it came time for the high holidays the rabbi of the congregation had no choice but to order the people to eat and drink on the holy day of Yom Kippur. He stood before his congregation and expounded upon the verse "I give you the commandments this day, vehai behem, so that you will live by them."* The rabbi quoted the Talmudic interpretation of the Biblical passage that this means we are given the commandments so that we may live by them. They are not meant to be an obstacle to life, but are a means to an end, to a fulfilling life. When they threaten one's very existence, it is permissible to suspend them. But his beloved congregants refused to obey his command and continued to fast, even as the deaths continued to mount throughout the day.

Finally with tears in his eyes, seeing he had no choice but to demonstrate by his own actions, along with two other officials of the synagogue before the congregation on the Day of Atonement he followed his own advice and in the sight of all, said a blessing and ate food. As he did, he cried, "*Baruch shem kevodo*, Blessed be the name of the Lord."

I relate to the rabbi's misgivings and reluctance to violate a commandment. The Talmud decreed that all the mitzvot can be suspended to save life, except in three circumstances - being forced to murder another human being, to commit idolatry or any prohibited sexual offense. But we are too willing to abandon our ritual practices, not just in these instances. We rationalize our neglect with the self serving reassurance that "God will understand", when in reality, our choices reflect and say more about our priorities and values than anything else.

The traditions of our faith are the moorings which anchor us to our past and our future. They are what connect us to our fellow Jews and provide a framework for living. The mitzvot are how we live a Jewish life. It is part of what gives us our distinct identity. Without Jewish rituals and customs we are no different than anyone else. They are what has safeguarded and preserved us as a people, and kept us alive. I cannot imagine life without the framework provided by Shabbat, keeping kosher, observing the holidays, and all the other things which so enrich my life and make it meaningful, and which provide a way of sanctifying life. When I observe Jewish tradition I feel connected to God as well as to my people. I feel sorry for all those Jews whose lives are devoid of Jewish practice. As music is often referred to as the soundtrack of our lives, rituals are the soundtrack of our lives as well. We just need to learn the tunes so we can sing its melody.

Do you know what else comes to mind when I think about what I missed last year?

I missed terribly not being able to walk through the congregation behind the Torah. More than that, I missed not being able to hug or kiss, to shake your hands, to touch you. And so I thought a lot about the importance of human touch and contact, and how important it is. Perhaps this is why before creating Eve, God mused, "It is not good for the individual to be alone." Life is to be lived in the presence of and with others.

A story I have told before from the Talmud is of a rabbi who heals others by holding their hand. It is about Rabbi Yohanan who holds the hands of two of his colleagues who are sick on different occasions, and brings them healing. "Yehav lee yadecha: Give me your hand," he says. The story is not about a faith healer, but about the power of human touch, and of how much we need others. That is why when he falls ill and is asked why he cannot just heal himself, he demurs, "the prisoner cannot free himself." It means we need each other, and can only be liberated from our shackles by the touch of another human being.

Two social psychologists from the University of California-Berkeley, who are both avid basketball players, recently analyzed 90 hours of televised professional play. They looked at every team and every player in the league, and concluded that the teams that touch the most win the most. Professor Dacher Keltner, the author of "Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life," commented on the finding and said, "Touch instills trust. It contagiously spreads good will. It makes players play better on behalf of each other." Researchers say touch can trigger the release of oxytocin, a chemical that induces trust. It can also light up the brain's reward centers and lower the heart rate. (Although, if touched in certain areas, in a certain way, it could have the opposite result, and raise the heart rate.)

The study showed that individual players who touched the most performed the best. Bosh was the second touchiest player in the league, and a top performer, according to the findings. Keltner said, "I think it's just all about encouragement. You feel a little better when you make a good play and somebody pats you on the back and tells you, 'Good job.'" And it's not just basketball players who benefit from the human interaction, but all of us. And that is an appropriate thing to consider on the High Holidays. In the words of the old AT&T long distance commercial, "reach out and touch those you love."

So as I stand before you on this Rosh Hashana, I remind you, let us not take life for granted. Each day is a gift from God, as is the presence in our lives of loved ones. Last year I prayed with you the words of the Psalmist, "One thing I ask of the Lord, for this I yearn, to dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold His beauty, to pray in His sanctuary." What a difference a year makes! I stand

before you on this New Year, filled with gratitude and humility that I am here with you in the House of the Lord. May the new year be one of peace, happiness, and prosperity, and most of all, may it be one of health for each and every one of you, and all of your loved ones.

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