

Unetaneh Tokef:

The Spiritual Challenge of This Moment

It hasn't been the easiest thing, to come up with words that match the enormity of what we have experienced this week. Sometimes it has felt that silence, or tears, or shouts of pain, are the only appropriate response. And I imagine many of us feel overwhelmed with words and images—from the TV, the radio, the newspaper.

The words I'd like to share with you today come from the High Holyday liturgy itself, a prayer that is unique to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, called *Unetaneh Tokef*.

On the surface it's a difficult prayer, one which I know has turned off any number of Jews to synagogue worship. It seems to reflect a theology that is difficult if not impossible for most modern Jews to believe, a prayer addressed to a kind of "Santa Claus" god who records our deeds, sees who is naughty and who's nice, and then inscribes us for good or bad in the year to come.

But in fact I think that this prayer is more complicated than that. In language that might sound a bit foreign to our ears, *Unetaneh Tokef* attempts to get at a fundamental spiritual and existential truth that speaks to us every year, but perhaps this year with even more urgency.

It begins with a direct address to God, who is imagined as sitting on a throne: "*v'yikon b'chesed kisecha*" - a throne that is "established in love, in compassion," "*v'teshev alav b'emet*"—"and you sit upon it in truth." The Power which we are called to experience on this holy day is a power that somehow encompasses both Truth, *emet*, and Love, *chesed*. The next section reads: "True, in that you judge, you reprove, you intimately know, you write, you seal, you inscribe, you count, you remember all that is forgotten." I personally do not hold an image of God that encompasses these kinds of human actions, but the effect of this liturgy for me is the sense that my actions have effect, that somewhere they are "written," that quite literally, who I am and what I do "counts" in some profound way. This is made most clear in the final line of this section. We read: *v'chotem yad kol adam bo*: literally, "the signature of every person is in it."

God, according to the prayer, may be the One who remembers and transcribes, but I am the author of my actions, and on some level I am held accountable for those actions.

But there is a tension that is addressed in the next segment of the prayer. How much *is* in fact within our

control? How much do we actually write, and how much is written for us?

In this second section, the imagery shifts, from God as Judge on a throne, to the image of God as shepherd:

“And all who come into the world pass before you like sheep for the shepherd” – this image seems to be based on a passage from the prophet Ezekiel (34:12), where God speaks of the people of Israel as a flock that has lost its shepherd, so that God must now seek them out, and care for them. Echoing the language of Ezekiel, the prayer goes on:

K'vakarat ro'eh edro, ma'avir tzono tachat shivto, ken ta'avir v'tispor v'timneh v'tifkod nefesh kol chai... “Like a shepherd who seeks out his flock, passing the herd under his staff, so do you make pass by, and number, and take account of, and take notice of the spirit of every living being”—not a judging image of God here, but rather a loving one, the metaphor of a shepherd who knows intimately his or her flock, watching over each creature. But we also see here the power of the shepherd to decide the fate of the flock: “You decide for each creature its cycles of life, and you write down its destined decree.”

And here begins the famous litany which seems to speak so powerfully of predestination: “On Rosh Hashana it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: how many shall pass on, and how many shall thrive; who will live, and who will die, whose death is timely, and whose is not...”

Are these fates connected to our actions, to the statement in the beginning of the prayer that our deeds are in some way counted or recorded? Do we have any control at all over our fate, or are we truly as helpless as sheep?

The prayer itself raises this tension, as it goes on:

U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et ro'ah ha'gezerah: But teshuvah (turning), and tefillah (prayer), and tzedakah (acts of righteousness), transform or mitigate the harshness, the difficulty, of the decree.

This section seems to say at first, “we are sheep, we have no control, our destiny is sealed,” and then these next lines speak directly to our own actions, our own ability to change the destiny that’s been decreed. Which is the true statement?

Let's look at the final section of the prayer, and then reflect on what all of this might mean for us.

“A human being's origin is in dust, and her end is dust; with her life she earns her bread. Like pottery, we break; like grass, we wither; like a flower, we fade; we are like a passing shadow, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, like scattered dust, like a dream that flies away.”

This passage is the existential heart of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer. It poetically affirms the ephemeral nature of our lives as human beings. The simple reality stated here is that our lives on this planet are limited. It is in the nature of this world that all living things come into being and then pass away. We are no different. This basic truth is unconnected to who we are, or to what we do with our lives. It simply is.

But the prayer does not end there. After this affirmation of the temporary nature of our own being, the liturgy declares: *V'atah hu melech el chai v'kayam*: But You are the Ultimate God, living and enduring.

Over against all of this impermanence, the constantly changing nature of all created things, is one true, Eternal Something: *El chai v'kayam*, the enduring power of Life itself. Of this Power we read, “There is no limit to your years, no end to your days, no measure to that which contains your Presence, no way to comprehend your name, your essence.”

This Power stands in contrast to us, and yet we are intimately connected to It. In the final words of the prayer: *u'shmenu karata vishmecha*: “our name You have called in Your name.” Our “names,” our essences, are somehow intimately related—both the name of ephemeral human life, and the name of Godly eternity.

So. What is the *Unetaneh Tokef* all about?

I would suggest that this prayer is not a statement of theology. It is a liturgical poem. It's a poet's attempt to capture a complicated truth about our existence.

We stand here, on Rosh Hashanah, aware of our mortality, our vulnerability, the extent to which events in life are beyond our control. For some of us, this is an awareness which we have carried with us for months or years before this moment, an awareness borne of our own encounters with illness and death, or perhaps an awareness we have gained through spiritual practice. For others of us, this is an awareness which has driven its truth into our hearts through the searing images of the TV in this past week, in the horrible news we have heard concerning friends, loved ones, acquaintances. It is from this awareness that

Unetaneh Tokef speaks to us.

And along with this awareness, the prayer affirms that over against our own experience of vulnerability, there is something abiding, something eternal, something that serves to connect us in space as well as time.

U'shmenu karata vishmecha: “our name You have called in Your name.” We are in relationship, we are in partnership with this eternal Something, with the Godliness of the universe. The prayer speaks of a God who determines the life of each being, but also of a God who awaits each person in forgiveness. I would translate this into a less supernatural theology in this way: There is a Reality that includes events which are beyond our control, and a Reality that contains within it the possibility of transformation brought about by our actions. Both things are true; both are aspects of one Reality. Another way to say this, is that there is much that is beyond our control, but there is also an arena in which we do have power.

This possibility, this partnership, presents itself to us in this moment as a spiritual challenge.

We are standing at what feels like the edge of a crater. We can see, quite clearly, the limits of our human existence, the reality of our vulnerability and mortality. There is a certain assumption of “safety” that we need in order to function in our everyday lives, but in our deeper moments of truth, or in moments of crisis, whether personal or communal, we become aware of this reality. This is the truth of “like grass we wither, like flowers we fade, we are like scattered dust, like a dream that flies away.” This awareness can be frightening, but it can also be liberating. I would suggest that this understanding, although we may achieve it in painful and difficult ways, is the most important awareness we can have. It is our opening to living the fullest life possible in the days given to us. It is the ground of compassion, of being able to connect to others. It is, in a way that is at first hard to grasp, a true source of peace, of a sense of wholeness.

In this awareness there is enormous potential for transformation. In this moment, in this place, we are given a way out of fear.

How, then do we meet this spiritual challenge? By what means?

The Unetaneh Tokef prayer suggests three specific paths: *Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*.

Teshuvah: *Teshuvah* can be understood in a number of ways. Traditionally, it means “turning” or

“returning” to God, to the Godly path. It can also be understood as “return” to our own truest selves. In the morning blessings we say, *Elonai neshama sh’natah bi tehorah hi*—my God, the soul you have placed in me is pure. In our essence, as human beings, we are pure. In the course of living our lives we can wander from that point of purity, we can take paths that diminish ourselves or that cause us to diminish others. *Teshuvah* is the opportunity to return, to remember

and reclaim that point of goodness within. Rabbi Richard Hirsh translates *Teshuvah* as “Direction.” He writes, “Teshuvah, or turning-to-God/liness, is the process of deciding the direction of our lives” (*Kol Haneshamah Machzor* p. 352). *Teshuvah* is about our actions, our willingness to make changes that will allow us to lead lives that express the Godly essence of our being.

Teshuvah can also be translated as “answer” or “response.” I cannot control all of the events that shape my life, but as long as I am alive, I have some measure of control over my response to those events. I can shape my actions and intentions and the quality of my living.

In those moments when we peer over the edge of that crater, we are given the opportunity for *teshuvah*. What path have I been on, and is it the right path for me? What is the ultimate direction of my life? How can I be truest to myself, to the Godliness within me? To what should I be listening, and how can I wisely respond to that voice? *Teshuvah* is about trusting the Godliness in ourselves, about having faith in our own ability to respond.

Tefillah: Prayer. If *teshuvah* is about connecting to something deep within ourselves, then perhaps we can understand *tefillah* as connecting to something beyond ourselves. *Tefillah* contains the challenge to realize that we are not the beginning and the end, that there is some Power beyond ourselves that calls to us, that waits for us, that is there to hold and comfort us. Through *tefillah* we are encouraged to look deeply within ourselves, to reflect on that which holds ultimate meaning for us, and also to look beyond ourselves, to realize our place in the broader scheme of things.

We are also given this opportunity for connection in communal prayer, in gatherings such as this where, although we may stand alone in our private hopes and needs, we stand together in a community that gives praise, that seeks comfort, that joins voices in song and in silence. What I would call God or Godliness becomes quite palpable in moments such as these, when a group of individuals gather in order to reach beyond themselves, and, in a community of *tefillah*, to find themselves connected on many levels.

In moments of standing at the edge, at moments when we feel alone in the face of reality, we are given the gift and the challenge of *tefillah*. How am I connected not just to a Godliness within myself, but to that which lies outside of myself? How do I find the faith that there is something here that awaits me, to which I can open my heart and my soul? What are the values that to me are Ultimate, according to which I want to live my life? *Tefillah* is about trust in a Power that lies beyond my self, about a willingness to

suspend disbelief and let myself open to that which surrounds me.

Tzedakah: *Tzedakah* is most simply understood as giving financial support to those who are in need, but in this context it has a broader meaning. It speaks of how we connect to others, of our responsibilities to those around us. The laws of *tzedakah* mandate that I recognize that the bounty I enjoy is not entirely of my own making, and I am obligated to share what I have with those who are in need. I do this out of the recognition that I too might one day be in need, and will have to receive from the abundance of others. *Tzedakah* teaches us that no one is self-sufficient, that we are bound up in responsibility for one another.

When I come to the edge of the crater, when I realize my own vulnerability, when I experience suffering—in that moment I am connected in the most fundamental way to the rest of humanity. *Tzedakah* challenges me to open myself to the people around me, whether in my immediate community or on the other side of the globe. It challenges me to realize that what I think is “mine” is not entirely mine, that whatever I have been given is given on condition that I use it well. *Tzedakah* invites me to open my heart in generosity, and to experience my own well-being as bound up in the well-being of others.

So *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah* are ways in which we as individuals can respond to the spiritual challenge of this moment. Each of them calls for some form of connection—to the Godliness within ourselves and in the universe, to the people around us.

Just as the High Holydays present us as individuals with the opportunity for a different kind of awareness and the challenges that that awareness presents, this past week’s events have forced a new awareness on us as Americans that also presents a spiritual challenge.

We are vulnerable; this has been brought home to us in a painful way. There is so much to mourn, so much loss, I know it’s difficult to even comprehend.

Teshuvah and *tefillah*: where do we turn? Where is the Godliness in the violence of this past week? If the God of Unetaneh Tokef ordains who will live and who will die, how do we understand the suffering of thousands of innocent people?

I would answer this by saying that we can’t blame God for evil perpetrated by human beings. Jewish tradition understands God’s creation as fundamentally good, yet because of the existence of free will, there is always the potential for human evil. Ungodly acts can occur in a Godly universe. And this week’s events were most uncertainly ungodly.

Godliness lies in our potential to respond to these events in such a way that God's presence is enhanced, and not further diminished. The heroic efforts of those who risked their own lives to save others, the outpouring of support from people all over the country and all over the world, these are all sparks of Godliness. But we are only at the beginning of the challenge this situation presents to us.

Much has been spoken in these past few days about the military and political challenges ahead, but I think the spiritual challenges are as great, if not greater.

Teshuvah, response. What will be our response? Will we as a nation respond out of anger and fear, or from a place of reason and clarity? Will our actions serve to root out the potential for further violence, or will our actions only stoke the fires of hatred that produce that violence? Will we use the loss of our own innocents to justify taking the lives of others who are innocent? How can the words "collateral damage" even be spoken after a horror such as this?

Our vulnerability makes us fearful, but it is also an incredible opening. From suffering we learn compassion for others, and we as Americans can now learn compassion on a level that perhaps we have not been afforded until this moment. The tens of millions of human beings around the globe who are refugees, the people who live daily with violence and the terror of gangs and of governments—these are our brothers and sisters in suffering. Will we see ourselves in their faces, or will we try to rebuild the walls that have convinced us that we are somehow different?

As American Jews, we have been given a profound opportunity to create alliances with Muslim and Arab-Americans. Our shared scapegoating in this situation gives us the opportunity to forge real and lasting connections. My hope is that our community will understand from our own history the importance of responding to the attacks that have already begun against Muslims in this country. The possibility that such an alliance could lead to dialogue and understanding and perhaps contribute to bringing peace in the Middle East would be a miraculous outcome of a terrible tragedy.

Tzedakah: how we express in material ways the underlying truth of interconnection. After our own country's healing has begun, once we have attended to those who have lost loved ones, to those who have lost their livelihood, will we as a country be able to respond to the real roots of terrorism? I read in the paper yesterday these words from an intelligence officer in Washington, speaking of Osama bin Laden: "He is the inspiration to franchises all over the Muslim world where poverty and despair give him an endless supply of followers." Poverty and despair are the real enemies of peace and freedom: how will we fight them?

However dark the world might seem at this moment, the reality is that every new year, every new moment, holds the hope and the potential of our response. Violence is not new, suffering is not new, but our ability to transform violence into compassion, to bring peace from suffering, is the possibility that is always held out to us. I'd like to end with a few words from Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, the son-in-law of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism. Rabbi Eisenstein was in many ways the person who built the Reconstructionist movement, and he died this past summer after living a long and inspiring life. In 1983, he wrote:

“For me, God is the name we attach to those powers in nature and in [humanity] which promote harmony and growth, interdependence and individualization...I want to improve the world. The question is: can it be done, and how? The first question demands faith, that is, faith in the potency of that Power. Is the potential powerful enough to overcome the chaos of human nature? If the answer is yes, then the next item on the agenda is: how? What are the means available and how can those means be best utilized to achieve the desirable ends? Speculation concerning ultimate things is a pleasant occupation, but there is work to be done, and that work presupposes only one affirmation about the nature of life: namely, that the potential is there.”

Like Rabbi Eisenstein, I believe the potential is there. And I agree that there is work to be done. My sincere prayer for all of us is that we find our own way, through our own process of teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah, through our own work of turning, of reflecting, of connecting to others, to make that potential manifest in this new year. I pray for strength of spirit, for compassion, for wisdom and clarity for all of us. May this be a year of healing and of expanded vision, a year in which we meet the spiritual challenge set before us.

Shanah tovah.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer

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