

U Teshuva, utefila, utzedaka

Every year at Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah we work our way through the UnetanaH Tokef, singing the haunting melody and reading the complicated text. On Rosh Hashanah everything is revealed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. My reaction to the text mirrors the discussion that emerges every time my family talks about religion: my father argues, “why say a prayer about all the ways that people suffer?! Why would God make us suffer? Why would you believe in that God” I respond, “Why believe in a God that is limited to bestowing gifts for good behavior?”

In one sense, the UnetanaH Tokef is obviously correct -- people are hurt, suffer, and die every day regardless of the God they believe in. Who by drowning in the Rio Grande, who by gun violence, who by cancer. I believe that it is our duty on these high holidays to bear witness to these unimaginable challenges of living this ‘one wild and precious life,’ as Mary Oliver so succinctly puts it. And regardless of the type of God in which we believe or don’t believe, terrible things are happening on a daily basis.

But the UnetanaH Tokef is not simply a dreary accounting of the daily suffering of our world. As our hearts cry out the question of why so many people will suffer this year in so many ways, we arrive at a new section and a new melody.

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But repentance and prayer and just action lift the evil decree.

The answer to the existential question of suffering is not a human explanation of God. Instead, we find the answer to this question of “why” through action. Teshuva, tevila, tzedaka. Repentance, prayer, and giving back.

Sitting together in services, we have all immersed ourselves in the tefilah part. Rabbi Katie has spoken to us extensively about the teshuvah part. But we must remember the equal and essential role of tzedakah.

This year, 5780, is a year to shift our relationship to tzedakah -- from marathon to sprint. Close your eyes and think for a moment about sitting here again in a year, just a month and a half shy of the 2020 election, listening to the review of the year. Have you given enough? Have you volunteered enough? Do you regret not doing more? Have you supported the organizations that give you strength as well as the ones on the front line of alleviating suffering? At the end of this coming year, as we look at the suffering that we know will surround us, from inhumane treatment of immigrants, to mass shootings, to climate disasters, and more, will we have done enough? Will our tzedakah have made the difference in the book of life?

Here is how I am thinking about tzedakah this year:

Supporting Or Shalom because it uplifts my spiritual strength to rise to my best in every arena, including to give more to the many causes that are important to me.

Supporting my children’s school because it allows them to grow and blossom into a future promise

Supporting civic institutions that bring beauty to our community, allowing us all to stretch

Supporting Sanctuary through volunteering and resources

Supporting under resourced communities, including here in the Bay area through donations and Or Shalom's food drive. (If you haven't yet filled a bag for the food drive, please consider doing this before this evening.)

Supporting political candidates that promise a more just and vibrant future for our children and our planet

Each of us will have our own particular focuses, strategies, and capacities. I hope you give tzedakah to the organizations, like Or Shalom, that encourage us to rise to our best and sustain us through difficult times, as well as the organizations and causes addressing larger needs.

Take another moment to visualize sitting here at the beginning of 5781. Imagine arriving with a kind of joyful exhaustion, having given more than we ever thought we could, having shifted the trajectory of the world to an arc of love and abundance.

What if this is the year that makes the difference?