

Yom Kippur Morning 5778 Drash

By Alfred Munzer

I have had the honor of addressing the congregation on the High Holy Days for the past thirty-six years. But never before has it been in the face of an assault on our identity as Jews, as LGBT people, as people of color and at least for some of us, as immigrants to America. Today I hope you will indulge me as I reach way back in my own life.

This is a napkin ring. It's engraved: Freddy. Freddy, that's me, short for "Alfred," many years before "Alfred" became "Al." And there is a date, 5/12/1941, December 5, 1941. That's about three weeks after I was born and 18 months into the Nazi occupation of my native Holland. I wasn't supposed to have been born. When my Mom found out she was pregnant, her obstetrician all but ordered her to have an abortion. It would be immoral, he said, to bring another Jewish life into the world. It was only in reading the biblical story of Hannah who was desperate to have a child that my mother decided to defy the obstetrician's advice. By the time I was born, Jews had already been required to register their property and were already prohibited from using public transportation and were banned from public parks. So what was so special about December 5? What was there to celebrate during those terribly dark days? Why this trinket that might well have to be surrendered to the Nazi occupier? It was a gift—the date says it all—please don't laugh—in honor of Sinterklaas; Sinterklaas, the Dutch leaner and grimmer version of America's Santa Claus. Observing the rites of Sinterklaas was a gentle act of defiance against the Nazi occupier. And defiance is something I have thought about a lot this past year.

When I was nine months old my family went into hiding. My parents and sisters were denounced and deported but I was lovingly cared for by a Dutch-Indonesian family and their Muslim nanny. I have almost no memories of those years. My earliest memories are of being reunited with my mother and of a happy, carefree childhood, immersed in but also completely unaware of the wounds left by the calamity we many years later came to call the Holocaust. It was fun to play hide-and-seek in bunkers along the beach. And Sinterklaas was more important than ever. Every year I would anxiously wait for the arrival of Sinterklaas by "steamboat from Spain." And I would stand for hours to catch a glimpse of

Sinterklaas as he paraded through the streets of The Hague, riding a white horse. But the heart-pounding climax occurred a few days later when Sinterklaas visited our classroom and solemnly opened a huge book which listed all our deeds and misdeeds and from which he then proceeded to mete out reward or punishment.

My Sinterklaas apostasy ended when I started Hebrew School and for the first time attended High Holy Day services at the Great Synagogue of The Hague. Another wondrous experience: a grand sanctuary lit by huge brass chandeliers, a magnificently carved Ark, all the men solemnly garbed in white, and of course the heart-rending strident sound of the shofar, all beyond comprehension. But then, when Mr. Mossel, our Hebrew teacher, reminded us that on Yom Kippur the Almighty sits in solemn judgment and opens a large book and weighs every human being's rights and wrongs and then inscribes their fate, it all suddenly all made sense. Sinterklaas had been banished but awe of the open book remained.

Awe of the open book is central to the meaning and feeling of the High Holy Days. We greet each other *"I'shana tova tikatevu,"* "may you be inscribed for a good year." And in the *Amidah* we implore *"b'sefer chayim brachah veshalom nezaker lefanecha anachnu vechol amecha yisrael."* "In the book of life, blessing and peace may we and all the people of the house of Israel be remembered and inscribed before You."

But without a doubt the most moving reference to the open book occurs in the prayer *U-n'taneh Tokef*, a prayer attributed to a Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, "Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day: it is awesome and full of dread. You write and You seal, You record and recount. You remember deeds long forgotten. You open the book of our days. As a shepherd gathers his flock, You gather and number and consider every living soul, setting the bounds of every creature's life and decreeing its destiny. On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beast."

And yet there is something very unsettling about the words. Yes, they are words of great imagery, words of deep humility and words of submission to the will of God, all ideas that are in keeping with the spirit of the Day of Judgment. But they are also words that imply that our destiny is not in our hands and words that convey a sense of helplessness and of surrender to fate that seem so foreign to our Jewish religion, so much at odds with the idea that we are made in the image of God, that we are active participants in the act of creation.

I wonder what feelings the words “who shall live and who shall die” evoked in the men and women in my childhood synagogue, many of whom had had first-hand experience of being “selected” for life or death.

And what do the words “who by fire” mean as we think of the thousands of children maimed, burned and orphaned in Syria?

And what do the words “who by water” mean to the thousands drowned crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa to escape oppression and terror?

And what relief is there in the words “who shall go hungry” for the people starving in Uganda or the Sudan?

And do the words “who by sword” absolve us of the fate of thousands of Muslim Rohingya currently persecuted in Myanmar?

Yes, the words of the *U-n'taneh Tokef* do end with the promise from the Jerusalem Talmud, “*U-t'shuva u-t'fila u-tz'daka ma-avarin et ro-a ha-g'zera,*” words traditionally translated as “and repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the evil decree.” An impossible promise, some Rabbis said. So they pointed out that it only says “*ro-a ha-g'zera,*” “the evil **of** the decree.”

Rabbi Amnon's prayer, according to them, in other words, is simply to be taken as words of consolation, words recognizing that God's will is beyond human understanding. But that approaching God through repentance, prayer and charity will make it easier for us to bear our fate.

Yes, I'd like to believe that having lived a life of “*t'shuva u-t'fila u-tz'daka*” eased the suffering of our brothers and sisters who were killed in the concentration camps. And I do want to believe that repentance, prayer and charity may offer some measure of comfort to those of our fellow human beings who suffer in the world today. But merely proclaiming “*U-t'shuva u-t'fila u-tz'daka ma-avarin et ro-a ha-g'zera*” in a prayer or on a bumper sticker simply doesn't cut it.

One possible explanation is that *U-n'taneh Tokef* is a personal prayer, a personal submission to whatever fate or the Almighty has in store for us. But why then is it not a silent, private prayer? Why is it not written in the first person, but as a public proclamation? It is, I believe, because there is a much more powerful message in the words of *U-n'taneh Tokef*. I believe while the text is one of submission, there is an even more important subtext, a subtext of defiance, defiance in the face of pain, defiance in the face of oppression, defiance in the

face of humiliation. And to find that subtext we have to look at the circumstances that prompted Rabbi Amnon's prayer.

Rabbi Amnon was a legendary 10th century figure. He was described as "a leader of his generation, wealthy, of distinguished ancestry and pleasing appearance." He was a close friend of the Prince of Hesse, something the bishop of Mainz resented. The Bishop therefore demanded that Rabbi Amnon convert to Christianity. To gain time Rabbi Amnon asked for three days to meditate on the question. But on returning home he was distressed that he had spoken words that gave the impression that he might even consider renouncing his God. And when he returned to the bishop, he asked that his tongue be cut for the sin of his words of betrayal. But instead, the bishop ordered Rabbi Amnon's limbs to be cut because he failed to heed his request. A few days later on Rosh Hashanah Rabbi Amnon was carried into the synagogue and was given permission to pray before the Ark. And his *Vidui* or final confession were the words of the prayer *U-n'taneh Tokef*.

Whether Rabbi Amnon was a historical or imagined figure, is immaterial. What the story tells us that, yes, the words of *U-n'taneh Tokef* are words of submission, but submission to the will of God and defiance of the decree of man. They are words of humility, but of humility before God and of standing upright in the face of human tyranny, injustice and cruelty. They are words of helplessness, but of helplessness before our maker and of strength before those who would destroy us, destroy us physically or destroy us spiritually.

It is no wonder that *U-n'taneh Tokef* gained its place in the liturgy during the dark times of the crusades. It resonates in the defiance of Rabbi Leo Baek who on Yom Kippur 1935 told his congregation in Germany "We stand before God. And with the same courage with which we acknowledged our sins, the sins of the individual and the sins of the community, we shall express our abhorrence of the lie directed against us, and of the slander of our faith."

It was defiance of the idolatry of his ancestors that caused Abraham to discover the One God we worship today.

Defiance was at the heart of the uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Defiance saved my life and the lives of thousands of others who were rescued during the Shoah. My rescuers Papa Madna and Mima never told me why they risked their lives and the lives of their family to save mine. All I know is that they

had the strength of character to defy the Nazi beast, to do right even when surrounded by evil.

When my mother and I immigrated to the United States almost 60 years ago, it was to escape the memories of the Nazi tyranny. But as we witnessed the ugliness of racial segregation we quickly learned that America was far from perfect.

Defiance was a hallmark of the struggle for civil rights.

Defiance was Stonewall.

Defiance are the words of Justice Kennedy. “It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.”

Defiance is what is called for today. Never in a million years did I expect thousands to march in Charlottesville, Virginia waving flags emblazoned with the Swastika, chanting violent racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic and xenophobic slogans. And never in a million years did I expect an American president to have to be prompted to condemn such an overt display of hate.

Rabbi Amnon had his limbs severed. We face the threat of having our spirit broken.

Fifty-four years ago during the March on Washington Rabbi Yoachim Prinz said “when I was the Rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.”

Teshuva is to defy our greed, our indifference, our complacency. *Tefilah* is to imbue ourselves with a little of God’s strength, a little of God’s backbone so we can defy the pressures to submit, to conform, to be silent. *Tsedakah* is to use that strength to quench the thirst in the world around us, a thirst for justice, a thirst for peace and a thirst for love. In Exodus God calls us “*Am K’she Oref*,” a stiff-necked people, a trait we admit to in the *Ashamnu* confessional, “*k’shinu oref*”. This Yom Kippur let us turn vice to virtue. Let us turn from being “*Am K’she Oref*,”

a stiff-necked people before the ways of God to being "*Am K'she Oref*," a stiff-necked people, a defiant people in the face human tyranny and evil.

And may we then truly deserve *G'mar Chatima Tova*, to be inscribed and sealed for a good year. And when *Sinterklaas* visits our classroom, may he find no demerits, only praise.

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