

Untaneh Tokef 5781: Reflections on Fighting for Life

Rabbi Guy Austrian – Fort Tryon Jewish Center

The aches in my back were like no back pain I had had before. I dragged myself out of bed on Shabbat morning, and nursed my sore throat and dry cough with a cup of tea. I davened and then listlessly watched my daughters play a card game in the living room. By 10 AM it was back to bed for “just a little nap.” It turned out to be the first of three that day—which sounds like a really luxurious Shabbat, but by the third one, I was worried.

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I didn’t tell Jill that I wasn’t feeling well. I told myself it was probably just my body releasing the stress of the last three days—the terrible days in March between Purim and Shabbat when the shul’s Board and I stayed up late, deciding to suspend in-person services, and writing a long message to the congregation, and hastily designing our first online Kabbalat Shabbat.

But what if it wasn’t just stress and exhaustion? What if the virus was here, in me? Jill was coughing too, and our girls had had a runny nose for days. What if my illness was just beginning? Standing there over the bathroom sink, my mind wandered forward in time. I envisioned myself in the hospital. I envisioned my funeral. I imagined what would happen to my family without me.

*

אֱמֶת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא יוֹצֵרָם. וְאַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ יִצְרָם. כִּי הֵם בָּשָׂר וְדָם: אָדָם יְסוּדוֹ מֵעֶפֶר וְסוּפוֹ לְעֶפֶר. בְּבִפְנֵי שָׁמַיִם יִבְיֵא לְחַמוֹ.
מְשׁוּל כְּחֶרֶס הַנִּשְׁבֵּר. כְּחֶצִיר יִבֶּשׁ. וְכֶצִיץ נוֹבֵל. כְּצֵל עוֹבֵר. וְכַעֲנַן כָּלֵה. וְכִרְחוֹם נוֹשָׁבֵת. וְכֶאֱבֶק פּוֹרֵחַ. וְכִחְלוֹם יַעוּף:

“True, You are their Creator, and You know their form, that they are flesh and blood. A human’s beginning is from dust and their end is in dust; risking their life to get their bread, a human being is like a vessel that breaks, like grass that withers, like a flower that fades, like a shadow that passes, like a cloud that vanishes, like a wind that blows, like dust that disperses, and like a dream that dissolves.” (from *Untaneh Tokef*)

2020 has forced us to confront anew the possibility of our own death. Not only our mortality, but the fragility of our lives while we live. Not only our fragility, but also our ephemerality—how soon we might die, and how little a trace we leave as the world moves on. We don’t know how much time we have. And the impression we make upon the world is not indelible. Yes, the consequences of our presences will go on in the endless rippling outward of each action and interaction, the unforeseen unfolding of each cause and effect. But even three generations from now, how many of us will be personally remembered?

So the great paradox of a Jewish approach to what Heschel called “the inconceivable surprise of living” is how to battle fiercely for life, while at the same making peace with the reality of death. If we cling so tightly to life that we deny death as a natural part of life, then we wrench ourselves out of alignment with a holy way of living. But so too, if we become so accepting and

blasé about death that we fail to fight for each precious moment of each precious life, then we slip toward passivity, or even complicity, in the presence of suicide and murder (God forbid).

And so we fight to live, while making room for the possibility of death.

*

We often locate the climax of Untaneh Tokef at the famous line that “*tzedakah, tefillah, and teshuvah* avert the harshness of the decree.” (And machzor layouts encourage that with big bold print!) That may indeed be the climax, if we think that the central dilemma is how to avoid or endure the reality of suffering and death.

But maybe the broader dilemma, in light of our limitation, is how to live. In which case, we can see the climax of the poem much closer to the end. The author of *Untaneh Tokef* comes to terms with our limitations not just by listing the ways in which we die, but by contrasting them with God’s infinity:

אין קצבה לשנותיך. ואין קץ לארך ימיך. ואין לשער מרכבות בבוךך. ואין לפרש עלום שמך. שמך נאה לך ואתה נאה לשמך.

“There is no end to Your years and there is no limit to the length of Your days. Immeasurable are the chariots of angels who glorify You, and there is no way to describe Your imperceptible Name. Your Name is fitting for You, and You are worthy of Your Name.”

And then comes the line which suddenly collapses the vast chasm between us and God:

ושמנו קראת בשמך: עשה למען שמך. וקדש את שמך על מקדישי שמך. ... דרי מעלה עם דרי מטה קוראים ומשלים בשלוש קדשה בקדש

“But our name, You have called by Your Name. Act for the sake of Your Name, and sanctify Your Name through those who sanctify Your Name. ... Those who dwell on high together with those who dwell on earth, proclaim the three-fold sanctification in Your Sanctuary.”

We are named with a name of God, “*Yisra-El*,” those who wrestle with God. And it was one of us, that first lump of clay, *Adam*, who named God *Adonai* in the first place (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 17:4). Like *Adam*, we are animated by the divine breath of life that enters through our nostrils and courses through our flesh and blood.

It is we who sanctify God’s Name through the actions of our bodies, our dust and clay. It is we who make God’s Presence manifest in this world of dust and clay. We emerge from the Eternal Divine Unity into this differentiated life, we push and pull and rise and fall, and then dissolve back into that which is greater than us and from which we came.

Coming to terms with our finitude is really the precondition for transcending it. Our fragility and ephemerality are the necessary boundaries to make a container for a life lived with purpose, meaning, and urgency.

In the words of a poem by Rabbi Suzanne Offit:

The harshest decree is not
Dying—without breath.
The harshest decree is
Not living—with breath.

We are left to ask ourselves: What is the breath that animates our life? And what will we do with the breath we have left?

In the words of Psalm 119:19: גַּר אָנֹכִי בָאָרֶץ אֶל־תַּסְתֵּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ, “I am a sojourner in this world; do not hide your *mitzvot* from me.” The commentator Radak (French, 1160-1235) elaborates: “We are like sojourners in this world, in that we will depart from it, because we have no real status or enduring existence here. Therefore, God, do not hide your mitzvot from me, because I do not know when I will be leaving.” In other words: show me what to do and how to live, and don’t let me miss a single opportunity.

*

If the pandemic has taught us something—not only about death, but about life—it’s yet another paradox. It’s enough to do mitzvot, to live a life of service to God and other people. It’s not just enough; it’s a lot. It’s maybe everything. If they can say at our funeral, that we were נֹחַ לְשִׂמְיָם וְנֹחַ לְבְרִיּוֹת, “pleasing to God and pleasing to other people” (in the language of the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, 143:21), then מה טוב חלקנו, how good is our portion.

At the same time, we do have choices about how we fulfill that service, how we make the most of our talents and skills, our heart and our soul, in every waking hour. If the pandemic has shaken our assumptions, or changed our plans, or caused us to reconsider our path; if we find ourselves unsatisfied, or awakened by a holy restlessness about our life or our world—then let’s take the opportunity to live into our mission with all we’ve got. That renewal and realignment, that return which collapses the chasm between us and God, between us and our best selves, is what we call *teshuvah*.

*

It was a frightening Shabbat, that first Shabbat of not being together at FTJC. But when I woke up Sunday morning, I felt entirely better. No pain, no cough, no fever. Jill took antibiotics in case she had a sinus infection, and everyone cleared up. Maybe it really had been stress. Maybe it was nothing.

Only weeks later did we did get antibody tests, and we awaited the results: positive exposure to the virus. Maybe it really had been Covid-19 after all. But did that make us lucky or unlucky? Maybe it meant nothing. Maybe it meant everything. Had anything changed?