

Behind the *Un'tane tokef*
Yom Kippur 2013
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Let's pretend, for just a moment, that we're sitting not in *shul* but in school; that what we have before us is – not a prayer book but a blue book, an exam book, where the task at hand is word analogies. I know, it sounds a bit nightmarish. Here you are, fasting, and on top of it, I'm asking you to pretend to be taking an exam! But don't worry - there is only one word analogy that I'd like you to complete. Here it goes:

L'cha dodi is to Shabbat like “blank” is to the High Holydays.

Ok, you might have said *Avinu Malkeinu*, and that would have been a good response. But, from my perspective, the prayer that most vividly captures the spirit of these days is the *Un'tane tokef*. The prayer tells us that God judges each of us and today, on Yom Kippur, God seals the decree. I quote:

You review all living beings as You have them pass by
And You will decide the end of all creatures
And write down their sentence
On Rosh Hashanah it will be written down and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed
How many will pass on and how many will be created
Who will live and who will die
Who by fire and who by water.....

It's, on the one hand, a moving liturgical poem with beautiful melodic passages. And on the other hand, it confronts us with troubling imagery: with sentences handed down by God and horrible deaths – by drowning, fire, stoning. Even the idea that if we repent (if we do *t'shuvah*), pray wholeheartedly (*t'fillah*), and engage in acts of loving-kindness (*tz'dakah*) we avert the evil decree, leaves many of us uneasy.

So, how do we reconcile this ancient text and find meaning in it for our lives in the 21st century?

This past Shabbat a member of our congregation raised just this question during services. We discussed the ways in which we understood this prayer when we were young and how our interpretation has changed over time. We think back to our own experiences, of loved ones, for example, who died in the prime of their lives, and we can't reconcile this prayer with what we know to be true. Are we to believe that our loved ones did not repent, pray fervently enough or behave kindly enough to avert the evil decree?

In June, a dear friend of mine died of a rare form of cancer just before her 60th birthday. She was here, at Ohabei Shalom – in the front row during services last year. She wanted to make sure that she was close enough so that I could see her big smile, encouraging me along throughout the service. I don't believe – not for a moment, that last September she was judged, and received a decree of death by cancer. That is not the God I believe in, and I venture to say – you probably don't either.

It is therefore comforting to know that our tradition provides us with an “address,” a “place marker,” to register our doubts about the world being a place where the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. That “place marker” is the Book of Job, which is nearly a total rejection of the idea that we are punished in response to sin. Remember the story? We are told that Job is a righteous person and then he endures all sorts of hardships – his children die, he loses everything. When his friends come to comfort him they tell Job to take a hard look at his life because he must have done something wrong to deserve these hardships. Job doesn’t buy the argument and insists that God stand before him and explain why he is suffering.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the well-known book “When Bad things happen to good people,” has written a new book interpreting the story of Job. (For those who might be interested, he will actually be speaking this Monday evening at the Newton Public Library about his new book.) The God that emerges from his interpretation of the Book of Job is a God who chooses to limit himself. It’s an all powerful God who pulls back voluntarily, giving us the freedom to choose right from wrong and letting the laws of nature take their course.

As we look back at the past year, we see frightening implications of this: how Hurricane Sandy, for example, destroyed all that crossed its path; a force of nature that didn’t differentiate between those whose lives were full of righteous deeds and those whose lives left a lot to be desired.

And closer to home, we reflect on the suffering inflicted by two brothers who chose evil – who chose to murder innocent people to promote their ideology. Did God issue a decree calling for death by water or by fire for the victims of these tragedies?

If we don’t believe in such a God, then what is the point of reading a text that says: “who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water?” Doesn’t it make more sense to offer an interpretive reading – as we did earlier this morning when we said: “who shall be pierced by a sharp sword of envy and who shall be torn by the wild beast of resentment?” Maybe...

The problem with interpreting the poem metaphorically is that we dilute its stark message: life is fragile and we’re vulnerable. It’s a hard message to hear, because we know it’s true. In fact, it’s so true and painful that we probably wouldn’t be able to hear it other than once a year!

The point, however, is not to scare us to death. The point is to scare us into purposeful engagement with life. The poem calls out to us and says: the time for *t’shuvah*, for looking honestly at our lives and seeing where we have missed the mark is now, because we don’t really know what awaits us in the coming year.

These are the days when we confront the Fear of Heaven. Fear's twin, the Love of God, belongs to Shabbat and Pesach when we envision the extra soul and read the Song of Songs, a beautiful love poem. On these Days of Awe, however, our tradition is "banking" – as it were, on fear, because at times we do need to be confronted with the harsh reality of our mortality and vulnerability in order to change course. Fear, however turns to hope when we say the poem's signature line: *u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roa hag'zeirah!* But repentance prayer and *tz'dakah* can ease the harsh decree! These are the three things that are under our control, that help us face the radical uncertainty of our lives.

What's amazing is that this signature line represents a revision of several earlier rabbinic sources. The rabbis of the Talmud claimed that repentance, prayer and *tz'dakah*, annulled the evil decree. It seems, however, that the author of the *Un'tane tokef* knew better. So, instead, he offers us a version that claims that these three things ease rather than annul the harsh decree.

What we're left with is a version that recognizes that we don't totally control what befalls us, but insists that our behavior can mitigate the severity of what comes our way. How, you might ask, does this play out?

Well, when we do *t'shuvah*, when we reach within to examine our shortfalls we begin the process of putting our "house in order," as it were. We mend relationships and re-align priorities – and hopefully this hard work brings a greater sense of peace and meaning to our lives. *T'shuvah* will not prevent a diagnosis of cancer but it will help us be that much more resilient, that much stronger and better equipped to do battle with the hardships that come our way.

While *t'shuvah* is about reaching in, *t'fillah* or prayer is about opening up to something beyond the physical and the tangible. *T'fillah* is about cultivating a spiritual life – about appreciating what is at once wondrous, awe inspiring and mysterious. And because in our tradition, community and prayer are intertwined, *t'fillah* helps us transcend loneliness and alienation and discover the warm embrace of community. This is what draws us to say *kaddish*, for example, when we lose a beloved spouse, parent, sibling or child. We come together to connect with fellow mourners as well as others in our community. And in the process, many of us also find our way back to God.... Feeling like we have been heard, feeling that someone else understands our pain is what matters – whether that is God, our rabbi, or a caring soul in our community.

But in including *tz'dakah* in our *Un'tane tokef* refrain we are expressing the belief that no matter how deep our suffering and pain, there are people "out there" who need us. *Tz'dakah*, in its broadest sense, is about extending ourselves outward. It's about desisting from wallowing in self-pity, from thinking of ourselves as victims. Because when we find someone to help, when we can see ourselves as a giving person, we begin to feel alive. And we begin to turn our own lives around.

I am reminded of the soldiers who came to visit the Boston marathon victims at area hospitals this past April. Like many of the victims, they also had lost limbs. They stood at the bedside of the marathon victims giving them courage to fight back. But, in their giving I don't doubt that these soldiers found the healing they themselves needed.

T'shuvah, t'fillah and *tz'dakah* cannot prevent the hardships that come our way. But we are not powerless. We possess three divine gifts that enable us to transcend the limitations of our human condition: we are free to shape our character; we are able to share our common suffering in prayer and song. We are equipped to heal and to help one another and to bring a measure of peace to the world.

My hope is that our community will be a place where each of us can both express and cultivate these divine gifts; a place, where we are inspired, challenged and supported to inscribe *ourselves* to a life that is purposeful and meaningful.

G'mar hatimah tovah.