

REPENT AND REPRIEVE

By Aaron Finestone, given at Minyan Masorti, Yom Kippur. Special thanks to Rabbi Alanna Sklover for her counsel and assistance.

On July 23, my uncle and aunt were burned to death in a house fire. Minutes after I received the news, the haunting words from Unetaneh Tokef came to mind:

“Who shall live and who shall die. . . . Who shall perish by fire and who by water.”

In that moment, the words of the Unetaneh Tokef became real. I wondered if what it said were true. Had God imposed judgment on them? My uncle and aunt had lived 98 years. They had survived all of their siblings and friends, weathered illnesses, yet died in a most unnatural way.

Contemporary rabbis and scholars wrestle with this prayer. They question its view of divine judgment and punishment. As our rabbi emeritus Leonard Gordon writes in our Machzor, "We are not praying to be spared an ending in death. We are not even asking that death be postponed. Rather, after reminding ourselves relentlessly of the many ways that life might end, we tell ourselves that the way to

cope with ultimate vulnerability is through *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. Our goal is not security, but a life of meaning that recognizes our vulnerability but rises beyond it." (Mahzor Lev Shalom, <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/resources-ideas/lev-shalem-series/mahzor-lev-shalem>, page 315).

After my family members died by fire, Unetaneh Tokef echoed in my ears. I was called to study this text, to grapple with their death. I found Unetaneh Tokef a text to study, if not embrace.

In part, the Unetaneh Tokef draws from theology of Ezekiel 18.

Ezekiel speaks with clarity and precision, connecting righteousness to life and wickedness to death.

Verse 20: The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent's guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child's guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone.

Verse 23: Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die?—says the LORD, GOD. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.

Verse 31: Cast away all the transgressions by which you have offended, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, that you may not die, O House of Israel. For it is not My desire that anyone shall die—declares the LORD GOD. Repent, therefore, and live!

The theology of Ezekiel is severe. It addresses the core of Unetaneh Tokef: Straighten up! Life is fragile. We are not worthy, but we can try to repent. God, be gentle in your judgment.

What we seek this Day of Atonement is not a pardon, but a reprieve---a stay of execution.

Rabbi and psychotherapist Ruth Durchslag explains:

"We are reminded that *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*---repentance, prayer and charity---can transform the harshness of God's decree. Changing our ways may gain us a few more precious hours, a few more days or a few more years." (*Who by Fire*, *Who by Water*, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, editor, Jewish Lights, 2010, <http://www.jewishlights.com/page/product/978-1-58023-424-5>, page 188).

I would pose these questions:

1. Is reprieve only about lengthening our time on earth or it is about living the way we choose and living according to our values?
2. Are we seeking reprieve from death or reprieve from the expectations of others and the expectations we have for ourselves?

Durchslag's is a theology of praying for reprieve---a reprieve from fate or expectations, but nonetheless it is a reprieve for life in the next year. But reprieve does not answer the way my uncle and aunt died. So I needed to continue my study.

Writing in the Daily Beast on September 20, 2017 Jay Michaelson saw the Unetaneh Tokef in the context of its times. It was composed in the era of the Crusades, a time "in which the oppression of Jews was as unpredictable and violent as the prayer's text suggests." Unetaneh Tokef "reflects the religious yearnings of an oppressed people."

Michaelson writes that "the High Holiday liturgy reflects the hardship of oppression and exile. The endless petitions for forgiveness . . . are not simply remnants of a bygone theological era, in which God was understood as a kind of giant puppet-master pulling the strings of fate. Rather, that theology is itself the product of centuries of Jewish suffering and marginalization."

(Jay Michaelson, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/rosh-hashanah-is-the-holiday-of-immigration-marginalization-and-multiculturalism>, adapted).

If Unetaneh Tokef is a prayer that echoes the cries of an oppressed people, how does our understanding of "who by fire, who by water. . . ." change?

It's not about the fire and the water—it is about the trauma that comes from the uncertainty, the fragility of life when we live under oppression. When a people is oppressed, their fate is not in their own hands, but rather in those of their oppressor. Unetaneh Tokef flips the script and takes this fate out of the hands of the oppressor, and places it into God's hands.

In God's hand, even in those horrible fates (death by fire, drowning, plague, sword, beast. . .), we find a kind of freedom—since, even at the worst of times, our lives—our fates—are in the hands not of those who mean us harm, but in those of the God of our Salvation.

Here is the problem of Unetaneh Tokef. Jews in America do not live under oppression. This theology does not apply to us, and by extension, to my Uncle and Aunt.

Maimonides, in his Mishneh Torah on Teshuvah, Chapter 7, gives us a view more hopeful than the text of Unetaneh Tokef. Maimonides informs us that we have agency at all times of the year, not just on the High Holidays.

Maimonides teaches that we have the ability to become the masters of our own Teshuvah, our repentance.

Quoting from Teshuvah, Chapter 7:

1. Since free choice is granted to all men as explained, a person should always strive to do Teshuvah and to confess verbally for his sins, striving to cleanse his hands from sin in order that he may die as a Baal-Teshuvah—a Master of his own Repentance---and merit the life of the world to come.

2. A person should always view himself as leaning towards death, with the possibility that he might die at any time. Thus, he may be found as a sinner.

Therefore, one should always repent for his sins immediately and should not say: "When I will repent," for perhaps he will die before he grows older. This was implied by the wise counsel given by Solomon [Ecclesiastes 9:8]: "At all times, your clothes should be white."

(http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/911908/jewish/Teshuvah-Chapter-Seven.htm)

Today, on Yom Kippur, many of us stand in white.

Maimonides says that life is fragile, unpredictable, any day could be our last.

Repent every day, to temper the severity of God's decree every day.

For my Uncle and Aunt, Maimonides worked for the way they lived their lives, through the theology of living *Tefillah*, *Teshuvah*, and *Tzedakah*. Not being a direct descendant, I could observe the relationships they had with their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

I recognized that their death by fire not as punishment, but as *Korban*---Their souls were pure, ready to go up to heaven. By dying together, they were reprieved from the pain of widowhood. They had become *Baalei Teshuvah* --- Masters of their own Repentance---in the way Maimonides envisioned it. They took that daily opportunity to repent.

Unetaneh Tokef is a shake-up call. A call to reassess, a call to turn around our lives. Life can change in a moment. The great challenge is how to be prepared.