Unetaneh Tokef: Rosh Hashanah 5786/2025
Chava Weissler

L'shanah tovah. Today I'm going to speak about one of the central prayers of the liturgy for the High Holidays, the Unetaneh Tokef, and more broadly about the role of ritual, myth, and emotion on the High Holidays. And because the High Holidays were a favorite topic for the *tkhines*, the prayers for women written in Yiddish in 18th century Eastern Europe, I'll quote from a couple of the *tkhine* authors as well.

Many decades ago, when I was an undergraduate at Brandeis University, I had the privilege of being a student of Prof. Alexander Altmann, A"H, a rabbi and scholar of Jewish philosophy (his greatest love), and Kabbalah. He was a distinguished and formal man who had fled Germany in1938, and thus it was all the more surprising when he came into class in some agitation one day shortly after the High Holidays, during which he had attended services at his usual Orthodox congregation. He told us, in tones of indignation, that when the congregation came to the Unetanah Tokef prayer, "The rabbi started to explain what the prayer meant! When you come to Unetaneh Tokef, you don't explain! People start to cry!"

Clearly, Prof. Altmann spoke from the memory of decades of common practice among traditional Jews in Hungary, Germany, and perhaps in England. In fact, when I told this story to Alan Lehmann, whom some of you may remember from the earliest days of the Germantown minyan, he said, "So that explains it!" Apparently, he had been at a service for the Yamim Nora'im conducted by young people, perhaps at Havurat Shalom, and an old woman had been in the congregation. When they reached Unetaneh Tokef, she burst into loud weeping. Nobody else did, and she was terribly embarrassed.

Since we have not yet come to the point in the service at which the prayer is said, before Kedushah in the repetition of the Musaf Amidah, I'm going to read a little of it, mostly in English, to remind us of what it is:

[Chant the beginning; then read from the mahzor p. 143, first paragraph, summarize second paragraph, then "On Rosh Hashanah it is written…" and a few examples, finally But Repentance, Prayer, and Righteousness can ameliorate the harshness of the decree.]

The themes of the prayer are clear. At this season, all of us are judged by the King of Kings, and all our failings, even those most secret, are recorded and signed by our own hands. Not even angels will be found innocent. All of us are imperfect, all found wanting. And our frail lives hang in the balance, whether we will live or die, and if we live, whether we will prosper or suffer. We are praying for our lives. Well might we weep.

Yet many of us do not. Why do some people weep at Unetaneh Tokef, and others not? How many of us have the memory, from childhood or more recently, of members of our congregations bursting into tears at this prayer? How many of us have wept, ourselves? I have not and have no memories of it. But perhaps this question holds the key to both the profound experiences and dilemmas we have in prayer.

What do tears mean? Last Thursday evening, Joey Weisenberg led a session entitled "Warming Up Our Voices and Our Spirits for the Days of Awe," one of GJC's classes in preparation for the Yamim Nora'im. He recalled the weeping of older people at Unetaneh Tokef, and regretted that he was "not yet" able to weep in prayer. He said that these worshippers wept so that their prayers for life and health would be heard, because "the gates of tears are not locked." He explained that this is based on the Talmudic passage in Berakhot 32b:

וְאָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: מִיּוֹם שֶׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ נִנְעֲלוּ שַׁעֲרֵי תְּפִלָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "גַּם כִּי אֶזְעַק וַאֲשַׁוֵּעַ שָׂתַם תְּפִלָּתִי". וְאַף עַל פִּי שֶׁשַּׁעֲרֵי תְּפִילָּה נִנְעֲלוּ, שַׁעֲרֵי דִּמְעָה לֹא נִנְעֲלוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "שִׁמְעָה תְפִלָּתִי ה' וְשַׁוְעָתִי הַאֲזִינָה אֶל דִּמְעָתִי אַל תֶּחֱרַשׁ".

Rabbi Elazar said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked, as it is said: "Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:8). **Despite** the fact **that the gates of prayer were locked** with the destruction of the Temple, **the gates of tears were not locked, as it is stated: "Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears"** (Psalms 39:13). Since this psalm verse requests that God pay heed to the tears of one who is praying, Rabbi Elazar is certain that at least the gates of tears are not locked. That is, even though it seems, in this world of woe, that God does not hear our prayers, if we weep, God will surely hear them.

An adaptation of this passage is quoted in The *Tkhine* of the Matriarchs for Rosh Hodesh Elul, which, despite the title, contains prayers for the whole High Holiday season, written by Serl bas Yaakov Segal. (Her father was the famous Dubno Maggid (preacher) renowned for his parables.) Let me quote two paragraphs, each of which is headed by a Hebrew sentence, followed by an expanded interpretation in Yiddish:

"We will stand before Your Judgment."
Before Your judgment seat we will stand. Therefore, I weep and cry before Your Holy Name that You may respond with grace and mercy... Do not punish us with harsh decrees,...And may our children live to raise their children, for You are the God who is merciful to little children.

"All the gates are locked, but not the gates of tears."
All the gates are locked but the gate of tears is not locked. And so, merciful Father, accept my tears and place them in a flask (cf. Psalms 56:9) and wash away our sins with these tears. Move from the seat of your attribute of justice to the seat of your attribute of mercy. Amen.

What a wonderfully concrete image for what tears can accomplish!

Yet I wonder if all who burst into tears at Untaneh Tokef know this passage in the Talmud. In anthropology, there is a concept of "ritual weeping," that is, weeping on cue as part of a ritual occasion. Ritual weeping is not merely a spontaneous emotional response,

but a symbolic activity that signifies social, moral, or spiritual relationships. Certain ritual or ceremonial contexts can free us to weep or even require us to weep. For those of us who do not weep at Unetaneh Tokef, when do we weep in public? At funerals, in part because we ourselves, or our families, or our friends and community have suffered the death of someone dear, and in part because it's OK, even expected, to cry at funerals. Even more concretely than Unetanah tokef, funerals are also about life and death. For similar reasons, many of us weep during Yizkor.

(We may also cry at happy occasions, but that is not my subject today.)

Tears can be the expression of our fears and vulnerability as we face an uncertain future. But in Jewish mystical tradition, tears can also be understood as having a special redemptive quality. There is some complicated kabbalistic symbolism involved, which I won't go into. But in the kabbalistic understanding, the suffering and exile of the Jewish people, and the brokenness of the world, are an expression or a reflection of the broken state of the Godhead. Another way to say this is that the kabbalists understood the suffering and struggle we face as the earthly expression of the exile of the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of the divine, from the masculine aspect. Prayer with tears for the sake of the Shekhinah, according to the Zohar as well as later Kabbalists, has the power to heal the rent in the cosmos expressed by the Exile of Israel.

The importance of tearful prayer was central to the argument of Leah Horowitz (ca.1710-ca.1800), that because women weep in prayer more easily and frequently than men, women would have the power to bring the messianic era. But to exert this spiritual power, they must weep for the Shekhinah, rather than for their own material needs. In her *Tkhine of the* Matriarchs, she writes:

"And it is known that prayer is called *avodah*, service, and the key aspect of prayer is weeping. And one must weep for the sake of the exile of the Shekhinah, but not for the sake of food, because that cannot be called either prayer or *avodah*, service…And they should pray and weep about the exile of the Shekhinah, and not for the sake of the needs of this world." Leah goes so far as to provide a paradigm for tearful prayer, picturing the Israelites weeping at Rachel's tomb on their way into exile, and Rachel responding by "weeping for her children," (Jeremiah 32:15-17), and, as described in Midrash Lamentations Rabba (petihta 23-25), extracting a promise from the Holy Blessed One that he would bring her children back home.

While tears can acknowledge our fears and our frailty, or provide the vehicle that we hope will hasten the Messianic era, there are still those of us who do not weep at Unetanah tokef. For another approach to this, let me turn to a more recent Jewish author, one who could even be called in some cases a liturgist: Leonard Cohen, who quotes from and reframes Unetaneh tokef in his song "Who by Fire?" Let me quote the first stanza:

And who by fire, who by water
Who in the sunshine, who in the night time
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial

Who in your merry merry month of May
Who by very slow decay
And who shall I say is calling?

Each of the three stanzas details various ways in which people may die, and each ends with the same line: “And who shall I say is calling?” Do we know who is calling? Is there, in fact, anyone on the line? If we don’t know the answer to that, prayer can seem less real. Can tears still have redemptive power if we don’t know who is calling? But when Cohen was asked in a 1979 interview, “Who *is* calling?” He said, “Well, that is, that is, that is what makes the song into a prayer.”

For all of us, those who weep and those who do not, Rosh Hashanah is a time of deep emotion, in which we face our fears, our deepest selves, and our hopes for the coming year. L’shanah tovah tikatevu.