

**WE PROCLAIM THE POWERFUL SANCTITY OF THIS DAY**  
**Yom Kippur Morning**  
**September 30, 2017 ☆ 10 Tishri 5778**  
**Rabbi Shelley Goldman**

We proclaim the powerful sanctity of this day for it is an awe-filled day.<sup>1</sup> *U'netaneh Tokef k'dushat hayom, ki hu nora v'ayom*. One of the most recognizable prayers from our High Holy Day liturgy begins with a bang. Every year we are drawn in by the brutal honesty and unrestrained power of these words.

The U'netaneh Tokef prayer is divided into three movements. The first describes God as a Shepherd examining the flock: The great Shofar is sounded, the still, small voice is heard, the angels, gripped by fear and trembling declare in awe: This is the Day of Judgement!<sup>2</sup>

The second movement begins with "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed!" And then we have the frightful litany: Who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe old age and who shall not; who shall perish by fire and who by water; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague,<sup>3</sup> and on and on. It ends with the softening note: But repentance, prayer, and charity temper judgement's severe degree.<sup>4</sup>

The third movement reminds us: Each person's origin is dust, and each person will return to the earth having spent life seeking meaning and purpose. Scripture compares human beings to a shattered urn, grass that must wither, a flower that will fade and ends with the sentiment that only God endures forever.

What are we to make of this intense and ominous prayer? Some argue that the prayer is about confronting our mortality and that the three movements of the prayer were the poet's attempt to get us there. The first movement proclaims God as the supreme judge, the second examines how we are to live a meaningful life, and the third acknowledges that God is timeless and unlike human beings, eternal.

The metaphor of God as shepherd, and we the flock, has been used for millennia by Jews and Christians. While this image does not reflect my theology, I was taken by the words of one of my teachers, "In my heart of hearts I know that I have as little control as any other sheep in the flock."<sup>5</sup> By itself, the shepherd analogy is not particularly problematic, but when combined with the next section, that details the many modes of our mortality, it becomes almost offensive. The poet Marcia Falk writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Falk, Marcia. *The Days Between: Blessings, Poems, and Directions of the Heart for the Jewish High Holiday Season*. Brandeis University Press: Waltham, Massachusetts, 2014. p29.

<sup>2</sup> *Gates of Repentance*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1984. p312.

<sup>3</sup> *Mahzor Lev Shalem*. The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010. p315.

<sup>4</sup> *Gates of Repentance*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1984. p314.

<sup>5</sup> Teutsch, David A., "The call to turn inward." *Who by fire, who by water: Prayers of Awe*. Ed by. Lawrence Hoffman. Jewish Lights Publishing: Woodstock, Vermont: 2010. p227.

“The U’netaneh Tokef leaves us with a theology that has challenged commentators for centuries. Why are so many good people struck down and so many bad people allowed to thrive? Indeed, the suggestion that we have the power over our ultimate destinies only highlights the contradiction between the fairness that the prayer seems to promise and the reality we face every day.<sup>6</sup>”

On this question our own Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, adds, “The U’netaneh Tokef prayer [at face value] is an affront to all the innocent children who perish needlessly in famine.<sup>7</sup>”

Other contemporary American rabbis suggest: “We can’t dictate our fate. We can’t hide from death. But there are three things that we can do to bring meaning into the radical uncertainty of our lives: *T’shuvah*, *T’filah*, and *Tzedakah*. *T’shuvah* (Repentance) – We need to find the courage to repent and ask for forgiveness from the people we have hurt. *T’filah* (Prayer in Community) – We don’t have to be alone. We are part of a story that is bigger than us, where the critical currency is God and the soul, not money, power, or celebrity.<sup>8</sup> And *Tzedakah* – “*Tzedakah* is not just about giving from our treasure and cultivating personal generosity, it is also about making the pursuit of *tzedek* (Justice) a central part of life.<sup>9</sup>” “We cannot ensure long life, but we can find meaning, purpose, and celebration in the life that we have.<sup>10</sup>”

As our prayer unfolds we are poignantly reminded that, “Nothing – no words, no poetry, can fully extinguish the pain we feel in grappling with the inevitability of suffering and death. But living one’s life with integrity (*t’shuvah*), with thoughtful appreciation (*t’filah*) and with acceptance of one’s responsibility for others (*tzedakah*) can ease the difficulty and diminish the hardship.<sup>11</sup>”

As the metaphor reaches the third movement we are bewildered. Why must we be reminded that people are like a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, a vanishing dream? We have already acknowledged God’s sovereignty. Do we really need to be reminded that in contrast to the broken urn that we are, God lives on forever and is ever-present?

It is this question that first drew me to this prayer at a seminar on the High Holy Days during my final year of rabbinical studies. We considered an argument in the Talmud<sup>12</sup> regarding the difference between the first simile on the list, the broken shard, and the seven that follow. Six of the eight similes are natural phenomena that cannot be recreated: grass that must wither, a flower that will fade, a shadow moving on. The last one, a dream soon forgotten, however, is a human construction. Once lost it cannot be found.

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<sup>6</sup> Falk, p209.

<sup>7</sup> Sasso, Sandy Eisenberg, “Theology or Anthropology?” Who by fire, who by water: Prayers of Awe. p212.

<sup>8</sup> Brous, Sharon, “At the edge of the abyss.” Who by fire, who by water: Prayers of Awe. p143.

<sup>9</sup> Teutsch, p227.

<sup>10</sup> Brous, p144.

<sup>11</sup> Falk, p219.

<sup>12</sup> Sarra Lev

The shattered urn is also made by human hands and merits explanation. The ancient rabbis detail various methods to make vessels holy again after they have become impure. “Metal vessels have their own method of purification, as do wooden and glass vessels. Earthenware is purified by being broken<sup>13</sup>” and reshaped anew. This simile is about us!

“The first thing in the Torah made from earth is the human being. We are the primary earthen vessels in God’s world. The truth embedded in the image of broken earthenware is that hope grows, paradoxically, out of fracture. Because our hearts have the capacity to break when we [truly] acknowledge our errors, we can have hope. When our hearts break within us with remorse, the earthenware becomes pure again and we can be [remade] into a pure and worthy vessel. God’s very best work is done with broken tools.<sup>14</sup>”

A Hasidic leader from 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland, put it a different way: “There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.<sup>15</sup>” I imagine people as clay vessels in a potter’s studio. All of our lives we strive toward perfection. Some years we need a minor adjustment of our handle, or a new spout. Other years we need to go back into the slip bucket, with the water and extra clay, to be re-formed.

U’netaneh Tokef is recited on Rosh Hashanah and then again on Yom Kippur to sensitize us to the work of this season, to break ourselves open: To awaken us to our mortality and recognize that we can live life more fully and with more meaning with ourselves and with others. We must guard ourselves against succumbing to the numbness that contemporary life often induces with its emphasis on always being busy and technologically connected, and understand that we are our best selves when we make amends, when we spend time with our family and friends, with neighbors and in community face-to-face.

This past year has given us ample opportunity for the practices of *t’shuvah*, *t’filah* and *tzedakah*. We have watched as hurricanes have devastated our neighbors to the south in the Caribbean and our own citizens in Houston and Puerto Rico. Oil companies’ refusal to face global warming and their successful efforts to stymie the government in taking meaningful action has begun to put millions of people’s lives in danger, disrupt our daily lives, and even kill. As I work in this season on *tshuvah* in my personal life and in my corner of the universe I pray that climate change deniers will finally wake up to the crisis which is now at hand, and decide to place the welfare of all people ahead of corporate profits. And, unfortunately, environmental crises offer ample opportunity for the rest of us to give *tzedakah* in an attempt to mitigate the effects of natural disasters on people, made worse by insufficient governmental funding in response.

In the past year I have found myself spending time working with others in the multifaith community as we attempt to create change here in Indianapolis. As a Jew, I look to the root of *tzedakah* and see *tzedek*, justice. And I ask myself, “What have you done to create more justice in the world this week?”

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<sup>13</sup> Tucker, Gordon, “Shattered Pottery – Unshattered Hope.” Who by fire, who by water: Prayers of Awe. p230.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker, p231

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

One of the most concerning articles I read in the past year was about the widening gap between rich and poor in the United States. Its focus was on housing and the effects on children who grow up living in communities where they do not interact with people of a different socio-economic. The effects of living in a neighborhood where everyone is poor and struggling are clear as many young people and adults alike give up hope for a better life. In contrast, when the rich and poor, the upper middle class and the lower middle class, lived in mixed neighborhoods there was ample opportunity for friendships to develop organically, for a person to help out her neighbor. But what do you do when you do not have meaningful material support to give to your neighbor, nor they to you? Or, perhaps more concerning, what do you do when your neighbors have all that they need and so do you, and you lose sight and empathy for those in the next community down the road?

A few responses to these important questions can be found in the pages of our Beth-El Zedeck Adult and Family Programs booklet. We offer opportunities to deliver Kosher meals to homebound members of our community, build a new home with Habitat for Humanity, serve food with the Cathedral Soup Kitchen, and march in the Pride parade, among others. Take the opportunity this year to get involved in efforts to make our community and world a better place.

Much of this past year I have spent time in *t'filah*, in prayer. Each morning when I wake up I decide if I'm ready to listen to the news or if I would be better served by listening to music. I find meaning wearing my *tallis* and *tefillin* while singing the words of our ancient sages as I breathe life and love into my soul.

The question that the U'netaneh Tokef prayer asks us every year is: "What do you want to do with the time you have left?"<sup>16</sup>

In her reflection on this prayer Rabbi Sandy offers the insight – "It is not that God is just, compassionate and forgiving, but that justice, compassion, and forgiveness are godly, and we are its agents and vessels."<sup>17</sup> I share this theology.

As we engage in the work of this season and break ourselves open to the ways that we can be and do better, as we forgive ourselves and others, we are carrying out God's ongoing work of renewal and re-creation of the world. It reminds me that we are *shutafim*, partners of God, in actualizing the divine potential inherent in our humanity. God has been working at this for a long time. This work requires consistency, patience. As the sages remind us – *Lo Alecha Hamlacha Ligmor* – It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task of repairing the world, but neither are you free not to try.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Offit, Suzanne, "Unetaneh Tokef: Facing Death, Embracing Life." Hebrew College High Holiday Companion, 2017. p40.

<sup>17</sup> Sasso, p214.

<sup>18</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:21

The U'netaneh Tokef reminds us again this year:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed:  
But amidst overwhelming forces  
of nature and humankind,  
we still write our own Book of Life,  
and our actions are the words in it,  
and the stages of our lives are the chapters  
and nothing goes unrecorded...

For the things we can change, there is *teshuvah*, realignment,  
For the things we cannot change, there is *tefilah*, prayer,  
For the help we can give, there is *tzedakah*, justice.

Together, let us write a beautiful Book of Life  
for the Holy One to read.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “An Alternate U'netaneh Tokef” by Rabbi Joseph Meszler