

Happy Sinners
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Rosh Hashanah (Second Day)
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One of my fondest memories from rabbinical school was coming together at 7:00am each day during the month of Elul for the daily morning practice of reciting S'lihot. This collection of penitential prayers prepares us for Rosh Hashanah, and many of them are also recited on Yom Kippur. Although it is the Ashkenazi practice to recite these prayers beginning on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah, my rabbinical school followed the Mizrahi practice, which starts reciting S'lihot on the 1st of Elul. This custom was established by one of our teachers, Rabbi Ebn Leader, who had spent many years with a Kurdish Jewish community in Israel, and brought many of their traditions to our rabbinical school community.

During the year that I lived in Israel, I experienced this community myself, going to the S'lihot services of these Kurdish Jews in Jerusalem, although I only attended once because they started at 4:00am. One of the regular prayers during the Hebrew College S'lihot service is a well-known Mizrahi liturgical poem structured as an alphabetic acrostic, with a refrain every few lines. It begins:

Master of forgiveness,
The One who examines hearts
The One who reveals the deepest places
The One who speaks righteousness
We have sinned before You; Have mercy on us.

It is sung in a festive mood, and its recitation builds to a crescendo of elation. Here is the melody:

אָדוֹן הַסְּלִיחוֹת, בּוֹחַן לְבָבוֹת

גּוֹלָה עֲמוּקוֹת, דּוֹבֵר צְדָקוֹת

חֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ

One morning, as we were nearing the final stanza, belting out the words in an uproarious state of near ecstasy, Rabbi Arthur Green, the founder of Hebrew College and one of the most well-known theologians of contemporary American Judaism, walked in the room and said, “You all are the happiest bunch of sinners I have ever seen.”

Rabbi Green’s quip was really funny in the moment, and it still brings a smile to my face when I think about it, and when I hear that song. However, it was also a concise summary of the Spanish and Middle Eastern Jewish experience of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, especially when compared to the Ashkenazi experience.

A large majority of the American Jewish community is of Ashkenazi descent, which is reflected in the demographics of Beth-El Zedeck. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we expect certain prayers that the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe have been reciting for hundreds of years. It would not feel like the High Holy Days without them. One of the most familiar moments in our service is the recitation of Unetaneh Tokef. In fact, it is one of the high points in the service, a divine drama that is demonstrated by its pageantry, reverential expression, and powerful melody. Unetaneh Tokef poetically outlines the basic Ashkenazi understanding of these days. It famously begins, “Let us speak of the sacred power of this day...” We are brought before the Supreme Judge, along with all other living creatures, to hear the judgment that will be proclaimed, based on our actions of the past year.

We confront this most precarious of moments, saying “On Rosh Hashanah the decree will be written; and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed. How many will pass; How many will be born. Who will live; And who will die.” This poem reveals the ephemeral nature of existence, but also that our destiny is determined by human action, as we dramatically declare, and I translate this most literally, “Repentance, prayer, and deeds of righteousness remove the evil

decree.” We are given free will, but this is only for the purpose of bearing an enormous burden. It is an acknowledgement of the fearful and terrifying nature of our lives.

And yet, this powerful moment, so central to the Ashkenazi experience, is nowhere to be found in the tradition of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews. When I lived in Israel, I attended 2nd Day Rosh Hashanah services with an egalitarian Mizrahi minyan, a unique phenomenon in Israel, where I also sounded the shofar. When the time came for Musaf, the absence of Unetaneh Tokef was palpable, at least to this Ashkenazi Jew. At that moment, not reciting this prayer, which was essential to my experience of Rosh Hashanah, felt jarring.

Certainly, these are days of reverence, but in the Sephardi and Mizrahi communities, this reverence is communicated in a spirit of joy, not fear, and the basic themes of Unetaneh Tokef do not prominently appear in the liturgy. Even as the prayers of the service help us recognize and confront our failings, the Sephardi tradition conveys faith in forgiveness and repentance.

The Talmud teaches that today is *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment, when the books of life and death are opened. In the traditional understanding of this day, the stakes are higher than ever, but the Sephardi tradition emphasizes humanity’s free will, without the burden of fear. Out of all of the creatures in the created world, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, humans are elevated above the rest and given the chance to stand before God, as it were, and demonstrate our moral capacity. What an amazing opportunity and a boost to our self-esteem!

With this as the framing of our High Holy Day season, it is no wonder why we are meant to feel joy and hope, rather than fear and trembling on the Day of Judgment. The prayers and poems of the service reiterate how our bond with God is eternal, and that, no matter the disruption, we are still on the right track towards the redemption of the Jewish People and all humanity. To put this theology even more simply, “God forgave us last year, and if we try to be our best, we know that God will forgive us this year.”

This optimism undergirds Sephardi and Mizrahi traditions of uplifting songs with heartwarming melodies, like **אָדוֹן הַסְּלִיחוֹת**, which I mentioned earlier. From the Ashkenazi perspective, it might seem strange to appeal to the Master of forgiveness by belting

out in jubilation, “We have sinned before you; Have mercy on us.” But it is perfectly in line with the Mizrahi tradition.

Another song that was a favorite of Hebrew College’s early morning S’lihot service is called **עֲנֵנוּ**, with a continuing refrain that implores God to answer us, addressing God with attributes that affirm God’s relationship with our patriarchs and the great men of Jewish history. The version that we sang at Hebrew College was adapted to add the matriarchs and other important women in Jewish tradition. Its theme is simple: because God answered our ancestors, we know that God will answer us as well.

We also sang a poem from the Middle Eastern Jewish tradition, written by the famous Sephardi Medieval poet and philosopher Yehudah HaLevi, called **יְהִי שְׁמֵעַ אֲבוֹנוֹתָ**, which begins:

Yah, hear your poor people,
That seek your presence;
As our parent to your children,
Do not turn your ear away.

While **עֲנֵנוּ** is framed as a relationship between ancestors and descendants, **יְהִי שְׁמֵעַ אֲבוֹנוֹתָ** utilizes the metaphor of God as the parent and the Jewish People as the children.

We also find the use of this metaphor in the well-known **אֲבוֹנוּ מִלְכָּנוּ**. However, if we think about Unetaneh Tokef as the high point of the Ashkenazi custom, we find a distant, almost unbridgeable relationship. We are like sheep, and God is the Supreme Judge, impersonally weighing our merits and our failings on a scale, like an arbitrary bookkeeper who is not invested in the process or the client. The parental bond of love is not present in the central prayer of the Ashkenazi liturgy.

The theme of fear does appear in Sephardi liturgy, but with a different nuance. One example of this is the liturgical poem **עֵת שְׁעָרֵי רְצוֹן**, which was composed by the 12th-century poet Judah ben Samuel ibn Abbas, a Spanish Jew living in the Moroccan city of Fez. The poem tells the tale of the Akeidah, Abraham’s binding of his son Isaac, which we will read from the Torah later this morning. Instead of the cosmic fear of standing in judgment before the

Supreme Judge, it is the personal fear of a father commanded to kill his son, and a son faithfully willing to accept his father's actions.

The divergence in practice between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities has a long and complicated history, and there are no simple explanations as to why one theme became more dominant than the other in the High Holy Day liturgy. According to legend, Unetaneh Tokef was composed by Amnon of Mainz, who was tortured and mutilated for refusing to convert to Christianity, and who saw his own suffering as a punishment for hesitating when he was first offered the possibility of conversion. The story goes that he composed this prayer before the ark with his dying breath, which he then taught to Rabbi Kalonymos ben Meshullam in a dream. Even though Unetaneh Tokef predates Amnon of Mainz by hundreds of years, and the story itself is fantastical, the very fact that this legend exists as the origin for Unetaneh Tokef tells us that Ashkenazi Jews associated this poem with torture and martyrdom. Similarly, the Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish communities faced their own waves of forced conversions, persecution, torture, and expulsion in Christian Spain and in the Muslim Middle East. Both communities faced historical traumas, and each chose to react to these horrors in different ways.

We should not see the differences in liturgy between these two Jewish communities as irreconcilable contradictions. In fact, just the opposite. We live at a time of wonderful comingling of Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In Israel, these two ethnicities have become intertwined, enriched by the foods, music, poetry, and lifestyle of both cultures, producing a new Israeli Jewish culture that is the best of both worlds. American Jews, who are predominantly Ashkenazi, are being exposed to Sephardi customs and incorporating them into their lives. Our Lev Shalem Mahzor includes many liturgical poems and prayers from Spanish and Middle Eastern Jewish communities. Beth-El Zedeck has been ahead of the curve on many of these innovations, thanks to Rabbi Dennis Sasso, who brought so much of his own Spanish Jewish culture to our services, customs, and traditions.

Unetaneh Tokef has tremendous power because it speaks to the reality that life is fragile, and acknowledges that not everything is in our hands. At the same time, the spirit of joy that is affirmed and elevated by the words and melodies of אֲדוֹן הַסְּלִיחוֹת and עֲבָדוֹ give us the

assurance that the New Year will be one of forgiveness and hope. As the rabbinic saying goes, **אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים** “both these and these are the words of the living God.” (Eruvin 13b) Even as we understand the high stakes of these precious moments, we must be confident that our repentance will be accepted and that the year ahead will be full of opportunities to be better. May we embrace this diversity of ideas, so that, as we journey through the High Holy Days, we do so as happy sinners. Shanah Tovah!