

The Unetaneh Tokef: Jewish Koan

A little earlier this morning, as we recited some of the liturgy unique to the High Holydays, we chanted a prayer-poem—a *piyyut*—called the Unetaneh Tokef. It's a complex and challenging piece of liturgy, containing themes that echo throughout these Days of Awe.

In the poem, God is first described as sitting on a throne, reviewing a book that holds the records of our actions. A little further in, the image shifts to a shepherd regarding each member of His flock. Then, in the most memorable part of the poem, we recite, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...", followed by a litany of possible fates that await us in the new year: who will be enriched and who will become poor, who will thrive and who will suffer, who will live and who will die.

A number of years ago, I met with a congregant who was very troubled by the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. She told me that about 10 years earlier, her brother had died very tragically of disease at a young age. After his death, as she sat in Rosh Hashanah services and heard this prayer, she stood up and walked out of the sanctuary. She stayed away from religion for a long time after that. She interpreted the Unetaneh Tokef as saying that somehow her brother's death was his fault; that a distant God sitting on a throne had judged him and sentenced him to a premature death. The idea was so offensive to her that she could no longer bear to attend services.

Unfortunately, I know that this woman is far from alone in her experience of this piece of liturgy. Its images are powerful, and are often what people take away from their whole High Holydays experience, even though it just one poem within a large and long service. Some prayerbooks omit it, or substitute other things for it. Some rabbis hate it. I personally love it, because I think it contains the deepest truths that we are meant to confront during these High Holy Days, these Days of Awe.

So with your permission, I'd like to spend a little time unpacking this very ancient piece of liturgy, to see what use it might still have for us today. [Note: unless noted otherwise, quoted commentary is from the wonderful collection of essays in *Who By Fire. Who By Water: Unetaneh Tokef*, edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Jewish Lights Publishing 2010.]

The Unetaneh Tokef comes down to us wrapped in a folktale about a rabbi named Amnon who lived in Mainz, in what is today Germany, sometime in the 11th or 12th century, during the time of the Crusades. The story is quite gory, but the essence of it is that Rabbi Amnon is ordered to convert to Christianity, and he tells the local bishop that he will come the next day and give his reply. He immediately regrets saying this, realizing that his hesitation suggests that he might even consider renouncing his Judaism. The next day, he refuses to appear at the local church, and for his refusal, he ends up having his feet and hands cut off by order of the bishop. The following day is Rosh Hashanah, and the damaged Amnon asks to be brought into the synagogue. He is placed by the prayer leader at the front of the congregation, and when the time comes in the service for the Kedushah, the sanctification of God's name, Amnon recites the Unetaneh Tokef, which no one has ever

heard before. As soon as he finishes reciting it, he disappears from the congregation, mysteriously taken by God from this world.

It's a weird and terrible story, and as far as we know has no basis in reality. Local bishops at this time were not demanding that Jews convert, and there is no record of a famous rabbi named Amnon in the Rhineland at that time. Yet the story does reflect some truth about the terrors and challenges facing the Jewish community in Western Europe at that time, as marauding Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land regularly assaulted and killed Jews, often demanding that they convert on pain of death.

The Unetaneh Tokef actually has nothing to do with medieval Germany; it is a much older piyyut, a liturgical poem, most likely written by the great Jewish poet Yannai, who lived in the 6th century in the land of Israel. It would appear that the poem was adopted by the community of Ashkenazi Jews in the Rhineland in the 11th or 12th centuries, perhaps because they felt that it spoke to their own sense of precariousness at a difficult time. The myth of Rabbi Amnon then developed as an origin story for this ancient poem.

So, if we disentangle it from this disturbing folk myth, what is the Unetaneh Tokef about, exactly? How should we understand it? And how has this one poem come to capture, somehow, the meaning of these *Yamim Noraim* - these Days of Awe?

The scholar Lawrence Hoffman writes of our difficulty in approaching ancient prayers like this one, poetry that speaks with images and metaphors that often seem quite alien to us. Hoffman suggests that perhaps we should not assume that the authors of the liturgy were quite as humorless or literal as might imagine; that they too knew of irony and the complicated nature of language. Hoffman writes, "What if our most gifted writers of prayer almost never took their writing literally? What if they were gifted the way writers are today—able to stretch language imaginatively enough to convey what ordinary conceptual thought will never quite arrive at?"

I would add: what if we approached the Unetaneh Tokef as a kind of Jewish version of a Zen koan - a seemingly paradoxical poem that contains truths within it that cannot be spoken directly?

And what are those truths? Rabbi Daniel Zemel suggests that "The great poet who wrote Unetaneh Tokef...is asking our deepest question: Why? What can faith mean when the young are taken before their time, when senseless tragedy abounds? Why do some reach old age and some but a few moments? On one side of the scale is justice, on the other that searing 'Why?' How can we be persons of faith when consumed by this mystery of life and death, fairness and injustice? These mysteries can be too enormous for us to bear....This prayer leaves no stone unturned, no question unasked."

Unetaneh Tokef asks these questions, and it also attempts some answers. Not one definitive answer, because there is no such answer. Rather, it offers a series of images, some that contradict one another, intentionally woven together to get at the paradoxes and ironies that lie at the heart of this existential "why"?

Let's walk through this poem, and explore some of these images.

The first metaphor we encounter is one of God as king, ensconced on a throne. Yet already, we have some contradictory images - the throne is "established in *chesed*, lovingkindness" upon which God sits "*b'emet*/in truth." Often in Jewish tradition, "love" and "truth" are seen as conflicting qualities; the one demanding justice, the other, lenience and compassion. This line, with its combination of love and truth, echoes a verse from the prophet Isaiah, describing a righteous and loving ruler that gives shelter to those who are outcast. The wording here seems to suggest God as Protector, as the source of both lovingkindness and truth, both love and justice.

Then, we rather abruptly shift to another metaphor, the language of the courtroom. Here God appears as judge, prosecutor, and expert witness all in one. And apparently God is also the court reporter, showing us the accounting of our deeds, a confession which we have signed.

The whole image is rather disturbing—not least because, according to Jewish law, this entire scenario is completely unacceptable! The judge, the witness and the prosecutor in a case cannot be the same person. Furthermore, a person's confession of guilt cannot be used to incriminate himself, according to rabbinic law. What are we to make of this image, then—is it justice that is being described, or something else entirely?

The mystery continues in the next section, as we shift metaphor once again . Here, God appears as a shepherd: "All who come into the world pass before you like sheep for the shepherd—for, just as a shepherd numbers the flock, passing the herd by the staff, so do you make us pass before you, and number, and count, and determine the life, one by one, of all who have lifebreath within..."

Again, on the surface, this might be taken as a reference to some kind of judgment—the shepherd reviewing the flock, sorting out the good sheep from the bad. But in fact the words used here refer to another process entirely, one described in the Torah (Leviticus 27:32-33), where the shepherd must separate out one-tenth of the flock, to offer at the Temple as a tithe. To do this, the shepherd simply counts—one, two, three, four, five—until he or she arrives at 10. Every tenth sheep is taken, with no particular regard for what it looks like or any particular qualities it has. If the Unetaneh Tokef likens our fate to the tithing process, then there is a large element of randomness, of the arbitrary, in whatever we might face in the new year.

As the scholar Ranon Katzoff notes about this passage: "Being good or bad makes no difference to the person's fate; for it is not the person's title or deeds that affect his or her fate. God will 'count, number, tell' –three verbs of counting—but will not examine, evaluate or judge." (www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/yomk/985Katzoff.doc)

But there is another interesting biblical echo in this metaphor of the shepherd, from the book of Ezekiel. There, the prophet offers a damning critique of the leaders of Israel,

comparing them to shepherds that have abandoned their flock. God, the prophet announces, will sweep these oppressive leaders aside and take on the role of shepherd. Here the prophet Ezekiel speaks in God's voice, beginning with the words that we see here in the Unetaneh Tokef:

"*K'vakarat ro'eh edro* - As a shepherd seeks out his flock in the day when he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day...I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, says Adonai." (Ezekiel 34:12, 15)

Here, the shepherd metaphor conveys not the random offering of the tithe, but an image of God as protector, particularly concerned for the powerless and the oppressed. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer writes that here, "God acts as shepherd to stray sheep, which are explicitly compared to the most vulnerable of society: the sick, injured, and lost. God castigates Israel for not tending to this flock and steps in as the ultimate shepherd to seek out the lost and neglected. It is at once an image of intimacy with the downtrodden and a critique of the powerful. This is not an impartial, unfeeling judge, but a justice-demanding shepherd."

So we have here in the Unetaneh Tokef two possibly contradictory ideas stemming from the metaphor of God as shepherd: on the one hand, the sheer randomness of the tithe, and by implication the randomness of our fate; and on the other, the personal concern of the shepherd for the weakest of the flock, desiring only the best for the flock as a whole, with its suggestion that Something in the Universe does indeed care for us, seeks to protect and nurture us.

There is yet another metaphor that runs throughout this first section, along with king and shepherd—and that is the image of God as writer. Based on early teachings in the Talmud, the theme of each of us being "written into" the "book of life" is found throughout the High Holyday liturgy. In the Unetaneh Tokef, we have a list of verbs related to writing and reading in something called *sefer hazichronot*, the "Book of Remembrances." It is an ancient image, echoing the myths of Near Eastern gods who possessed tablets on which were inscribed the destinies of human beings. But here there is something postmodern as well—because it is unclear who exactly is doing the writing. *V'chotem yad kol adam bo*—"the signature of each person is in it"—it is we, ultimately, who sign our names in this cosmic Book. Again, an inherent tension or contradiction—is God the author of our fate, or are we?

These three metaphors - God as King, as Shepherd, as Writer—culminate in perhaps the most challenging, and most thrilling, part of the poem—the great list of possible fates awaiting us in the New Year: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the fast day of Yom Kippur, it is sealed: How many will pass away, and how many will be born? Who will live, and who will die? Who in their time, and who not in their time? Who by fire, and who by water?..."

What we have here is an exploration not just of life vs. death, but of quality of life - who will be calm, and who will be tormented? Who will be exalted, and who will be humbled? Who will be rich, and who will be poor?

Interestingly, nowhere does it say precisely who or what does the writing or the sealing. Given the images of Godly power that precede them, the verbs introducing this section are oddly passive - "it shall be written, it shall be sealed." The list thus becomes not a statement of Godly intent, but a statement of fact - in the coming year, some will live, and some will die; some will be enriched, and some impoverished; some will suffer, some will find peace. These are the existential truths that confront us during these Days of Awe.

With stark language, the Unetaneh Tokef forces us to confront this reality. And, by utilizing a combination of metaphors to lead up to it—metaphors of judgment, metaphors of randomness—it provokes a question: Do these fates, for better or for worse, hinge on anything that we have done, or that we might do?

Joel M. Hoffman suggests that the Unetaneh Tokef itself does not actually say that our fates are a result of our actions; rather, it pushes us to see the extent to which we tend to walk around with that assumption, even if we don't fully admit it. Whether we mean to or not, we tend to look for cause and effect. We want to believe that we have some amount of control over our lives—meaning that we should be able to keep bad things from happening to ourselves and the ones we love. That is why, when something bad happens, our first reaction tends to be—"Why me?"—as if there is, out there, some cosmic reason why this has happened to me, if only I could discover what it is.

When terrible things happen - even when our more reasonable nature suggests that no one was at fault, that accidents happen, that illness is beyond our control, that sometimes we're just in the wrong place at the wrong time - even in those situations, we sometimes subconsciously search for ways it could have been averted. What did I do? What did I fail to do?

If bad fortune happens to someone else, I can comfort myself by coming up with reasons why this happened to them and not to me. If it's my own bad fortune, I might blame myself or blame others, urgently rehearsing every possible "what if" to see if this might have been averted.

Of course, sometimes suffering is the result of my own or others' actions, just as sometimes the good things that happen are the result of our own actions. But just as often - perhaps more often - it's just dumb luck, good fortune or bad. Unetaneh Tokef reminds us of this in the very first pairing mentioned in this list of possible fates - *kamah ya'avurun v'kamah yibayerun* - how many will pass away, and how many will be born. It begins with those two moments over which we have almost no control, our birth and our death.

Our lack of control is an uncomfortable reality to embrace. It's hard, perhaps impossible, to fully accept the sense of being at the center of a completely random whirlwind. Interestingly, the Unetaneh Tokef quotes and references the Biblical book of Job at a

number of points. Job is the most existential of the books of the Hebrew Bible. It features a completely righteous man to whom every conceivable tragedy occurs. He does nothing wrong, yet he suffers terribly. His so-called friends try to get him to see that he must have done something to deserve this, and he tells them to shut up. He cries out to God, why have you done this to me! He demands justice.

And then the Source of All answers him "from the whirlwind" and says - more or less, in flowery poetic language - I am the Cosmos; I am completely beyond your understanding, so stop trying to understand why things happen. It's too big for you. The cosmos has its own calculus, and humans are only one small part of a much larger equation. This is the nature of Reality. You can fight it, or you can flow with it.

And this seems to be the place where this prayer is taking us. It brings us to the edge of an existential cliff, and then—just before it pushes us over the side into the abyss—we arrive at the dramatic turning point in the poem:

U'teshuvah utefilah u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah hagezera. Teshuvah, tzedakah and tefillah "make pass" the harshness of the decree.

This line is a conscious rewriting of an older rabbinic text (Genesis Rabbah 44:5), a midrash which says: "Three things *m'vatlin et hagezerah*, three things nullify the decree, and they are *teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah*." This early midrash puts forward the somewhat preposterous notion that we can actually change our fate through prayer or repentance or generosity. But here in the Unetaneh Tokef, the poet makes a subtle but significant change, telling us that these three actions can't change our fate, but can *ma'avirin et ro'ah ha'gezerah*; can "mitigate the harshness, the difficulty, the experienced evil of the decree."

We can't change our fate; the truth is, we can't even anticipate our fate. We have no idea what's going to happen in this coming year. So what can we do? This is where we are not like sheep. We can reflect, we can make change in our lives, we can open our hearts to others. Through these practices of *tefillah*—prayer, contemplation, reflection; of *teshuvah*—changing the direction of our lives, returning to the pure essence that lies within each of us; and *tzedakah*—the practice of justice and of generosity—we can face our existential terrors. We are neither in control nor completely powerless. There is a way out of suffering, and it lies with us, our intentions and actions.

With such a climax, you'd think the poem would just end there. We found the answer! Our fate is random, but our response is meaningful. What more do we need?

Yet the poem goes on. It turns back to God, and our relationship with That which is Ultimate. Why are our actions meaningful? Because, it would seem, there is Something with which we are connected—referred to here as "Your Name." What is this "name"?

In rabbinic tradition, the holiest name of the divine, that Name which we can't even pronounce—Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay—is taken to stand for God's essential nature as Compassion. The Name—God's essence—is Love, is Compassion. This is how God is

described here—as “You” who are slow to anger, quick to forgive; as That which desires our return, our *teshuvah*. God waits patiently for us, waiting for us to get it, to get on the right path, to do the right thing. The relationship described here is of God as our Creator, our ultimate Source. There is a lovely play on words here in the Hebrew: God is *yotzram*--“their—our—Creator”—and God is the One that knows *yitzram*—their (our) urges; our tendencies, our psyches. What a wonderful comment this is on the nature of Reality: It knows us, perhaps better than we know ourselves, and It embraces us, waits for us, loves us.

And what are we, truly? Here we return to our existential dilemma as human beings, but in much gentler language than earlier in the poem. Here, the metaphors describe us, not God. With a series of beautiful images, we are told the truth about our lives. Our origin is dust and our end is dust. We are like pottery, easily shattered; like grass that withers in winter, like flower petals that fade away, like passing shadows and vanishing clouds. We are ultimately like a dream that dissipates.

You might call this the Buddhist heart of Unetaneh Tokef. We are carbon-based life forms; our days on this earth are limited. It’s not a truth that we like to acknowledge. These lines gently call to all of us to wake up, to see Reality as it is. We are delicate pottery, petals on a flower, passing clouds. We can fight against this reality, or we can accept it, know it, embrace it.

And once again the connection is made between our own fragile nature and That which endures, That which connects us to something both within and beyond ourselves. We come back to God, but now there are no more thrones, no more shepherds, no more cosmic accountant. In the end, the poet refers only to “Your Name” - meaning, the essence of Divinity, of Reality, of that which is beyond naming. And here is my favorite line in this whole piyyut: *shimcha na'eh lecha v'atah naeh l'shmecha, u'sh'menu karata bishmecha*. Your name is fitting to you, and you are fitting to your name, and our name is called in your name - or, “you named us after you.”

A Jewish koan!

We are dust; we are eternal; our name is God's name.

And this is where the Unetaneh Tokef leaves us. We begin with all the pomp of the heavenly court, replete with a Sovereign on a Throne and hordes of trembling angels, and we are left at the end with the beautiful simplicity of me and You, my name and Yours.

The Unetaneh Tokef contains paradoxes, contradictions, a multiplicity of images - all trying to get at a truth that is complex, a truth that challenges us to hold contradictions without attempting to resolve them. We are powerless, it says; our every action counts, it says. In one stanza it declares “randomness rules our lives!”; and in the next, “the universe cares for us like a shepherd cares for the weakest lamb.” We are ephemeral, like dust, yet we carry within us Something eternal that lies at the heart of creation.

Perhaps the question that the Unetaneh Tokef comes to answer is not “Why?”—but, “How?” How do I live my life in the midst of radical uncertainty? How do I stay hopeful in the face of difficulty? When everything seems random, how do I make meaning?

Do not run away from the contradictions at the heart of existence, the poet tells us; look them squarely in the face, know that they are true. Revel in the knowledge that life is precious, that we do not know how many moments we are given on this earth, and so need to embrace each one as if it might be our last. Tend to those things that can be tended to. Do the work of *tefillah*, of spiritual practice—pay attention to what is sacred. Do the work of *teshuvah*, of aligning yourself with what is Godly in this world. And do the work of *tzedakah*, the practice of generosity and justice. *Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom*—this is how we declare the sacred power of this day—indeed, of every day.

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