

**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5781: Rabbi Marina Yergin**  
***Un'taneh Tokef* During a Pandemic**

At this point in our service we come to a special High Holy Day insertion, *Un'taneh Tokef*. This prayer can be very complicated in normal times, but in our tumultuous 2020, 5780, the words are even more difficult to digest. Instead of a short introduction to *Un'taneh Tokef* and jumping right into the familiar music and words, I found myself truly struggling with the text and wanting to talk about it with all of you. Thus, instead of my sermon happening during the Torah service, it will serve now as our introduction to *Un'taneh Tokef* – a prayer some of you have told me you struggle with each year.

*Un'taneh Tokef* begins on page 174 in our prayer book, but the most famous words of this prayer are on page 178, "...who will live and who will die; ...who by fire and who by water;"<sup>1</sup> etc. In a literal reading of the text, God is a fatalistic God and knows who is going to die, when, and how. And then, suddenly, on page 180, the text says, "But through return to the right path (*utshuvah*), through prayer (*utfilah*) and righteous giving (*utzedakah*), we can transcend the harshness of the decree." So, now, we are saying if you do some great things, you can escape death in the coming year? I have a visceral reaction to this. Is this prayer saying that the nearly 200,000 Americans who have died from complications of Covid-19 in less than a year or those killed by violence did not pray enough or give enough *tzedakah*? Is the prayer saying that repentance, prayer, and charity can change the course of your life and save you from death? I find it unsettling.

I am not the only one who struggles with this prayer. *Un'taneh Tokef* only came to the forefront of High Holy Day liturgy in the 1950s when rabbis saw it as a text that reminded them of the Holocaust and the mortality that each of us must acknowledge<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Reform and Progressive Judaism have, at times, omitted it completely or shortened it. Now, it has become a prayer that people return to in moments when their mortality is looking them in the eye. Do we really need to have a prayer to remind us of our mortality in 2020 when we see people dying all around us from pandemic<sup>3</sup>, violence by humans<sup>4</sup>, natural disasters; all things that are explicitly stated in this prayer? We know these are happening. We see them and hear about them. We are inundated with information about them. We do not need another reminder. Or do we?

For many, to not hear the chanting of *Un'taneh Tokef* would leave a hole in their High Holy Day experience. While some may have a connection with the musical experience of this prayer, the words can sometimes fade into the background or leave something to be desired. I experience both – a deep connection to the music of *Un'taneh Tokef* and an aversion to the words. To still find meaning in the prayer, I need ways to strengthen my relationship to the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Goldberg, Rabbi E., Marder, Rabbi J., Marder, Rabbi S., & Morris, Rabbi L. (Eds.). (2015). *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe* (Vol. Rosh Hashanah). New York: CCAR Press. p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman, Rabbi Dr. L. A. (2010). *Un'taneh Tokef* as Poetry and Legend. In Rabbi Dr. L. A. Hoffman (Ed.), *Who by Fire, Who by Water-Un'taneh Tokef* (pp. 13-25). Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. p. 25

<sup>3</sup> Hoffman, Dr. J. (2010). *Un'taneh Tokef: Behind the Translation*. In Rabbi Dr. L. A. Hoffman (Ed.), *Who by Fire, Who by Water-Un'taneh Tokef* (pp. 33-48). Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. p. 41, verse 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 41, verse 17.

Rabbi Edward Feinstein points out that we should take a step back and look at the verse a little more carefully. The first step is to understand that the text in our machzor, our High Holy Day prayer book, does not say “Repentance, prayer, and charity cancel the decree” like it says in Genesis Rabbah 42:13<sup>5</sup>. The Rabbis could not stomach that statement – that by doing these three things, you could save yourself from death or suffering. The Hebrew is difficult to translate and so we have multiple versions. Our machzor, on page 180 says “through [these three things], we can transcend the harshness of the decree.”<sup>6</sup> *Gates of Repentance*, the previous Reform machzor, used the translation that these three things will “temper judgment’s severe decree”—that is, they might make the decree less severe.”<sup>7</sup> Another option is that the three things will “help the hardship of the decree pass,” meaning “that the three good actions might leave the decree unchanged but make its ‘badness’ less.”<sup>8</sup>

Frankly, just pointing out that by doing *t’shuvah*, *t’filah*, and *tzedakah* will not save us from suffering or death, but that the acts will calm down the suffering and may actually make the consequences of our other actions less harsh, helps...a little. I still struggle with the idea that these three things are the gauge of the degree of suffering we incur. I need to see them differently than just a simple translation.

First, when we see the word *t’shuvah*, we frequently see a translation of repentance – the simply stated, yet difficult task, to ask for forgiveness. However, Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins explains that this is not the case:

The Rambam, in his classic work, the *Mishneh Torah*, urges his readers to reach out to people who were harmed, and that the power of confession is enormous in healing old wounds. The modern [commentator]... [Rabbi] Adin Steinsaltz, ...takes the position that *teshuvah* is a spiritual awakening, a desire to strengthen the bond between us and the holy in all Being.

Rabbi Pinchas Peli, ... explains that [*teshuvah*] connotes not just remorse, but a complete break from the old environment and the old self—the veritable creation of a new personality.

Clearly, the idea of *teshuvah* is one of the most cogent theological concepts ever created by any tradition, ancient or modern, in empowering human beings to make new beginnings and to re-create their own lives.<sup>9</sup>

This reminds us that *t’shuvah* is not something that happens ONLY during the High Holy Days, but every day as we pause to look at our actions and reactions to things going on around us. Are we going to react positively or negatively to situations? Are we going to push people away

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<sup>5</sup> Feinstein, Rabbi Edward (2010). The Answer is “Me!” In Rabbi Dr. L. A. Hoffman (Ed.), *Who by Fire, Who by Water-Un’taneh Tokef* (pp. 145-150). Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Goldberg, Rabbi E., Marder, Rabbi J., Marder, Rabbi S., & Morris, Rabbi L. (Eds.). (2015). *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe* (Vol. Rosh Hashanah). New York: CCAR Press. p. 180

<sup>7</sup> Hoffman, Dr. J. (2010). *Un’taneh Tokef: Behind the Translation*. In Rabbi Dr. L. A. Hoffman (Ed.), *Who by Fire, Who by Water-Un’taneh Tokef* (pp. 33-48). Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. p. 43, verse 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Elkins, Rabbi D. P. (2006). *U’Teshuvah: Much More than Repentance*. In Rabbi D. P. Elkins (Ed.), *Rosh Hashanah Readings: Inspiration, Information, and Contemplation* (p. 236). Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing.

from us or bring them closer? Are we going to realize our own mistakes and apologize for them or be stubborn and decide everyone else is wrong?

In taking a cue from a story told by Rabbi Yehoshua Rubin, an Israeli rabbi and storyteller, we can learn how to do this action of *t'shuvah* in our everyday interactions with others.

Reb Zusha asked the holy Seer of Lublin: "How would you make a person repent?" The Lubliner answers, "I'd show him, in the *Shulhan Arukh*, [a Jewish legal book,] what he did wrong."

Reb Zusha answered, "I don't think that would work. Do you think that would make the person feel good? On the contrary, it would make him feel bad. And if he feels bad, he would run away from you."

The Lubliner asked Reb Zusha, "Rebbe, how do you do it?" To which Reb Zusha replies, "I would shine light into him, into his heart, the great light, the love... for every human being." ...<sup>10</sup>

I love this imagery. We need to learn how to shine light, not darkness on other people. It sounds easy, but it is not. It is hard to go against human nature, which instinctively calls for us to put up defenses when we are told we are wrong. Instead, sharing brightness is what can inspire us to change and better ourselves.

*T'filah*, or prayer, is a challenging one to discuss – especially as a rabbi and prayer leader! I love prayer and what it can do for people in the right moment, but there are plenty of times when I'm just not that into it. Rabbi Elliot Dorff explains that "like baseball, prayer needs practice." He says "... The fact that prayer (or anything else) cannot remake us into ideal human beings does not negate its value, however, for prayer can remind us what to strive for and motivate us to try. Although it cannot move us in all dimensions every time, it can affect us on some level on many occasions. It thus can be a valuable practice even if it is not always or totally successful."<sup>11</sup> I agree with this wholeheartedly. It is something we are supposed to struggle with, to keep trying. It may be a conversation with God or maybe just a time to reflect on what we are thankful for, or even, what we are angry about at that moment. Prayer gives us the opportunity to look inward for a perspective that we may not give ourselves the chance to see very often.

The last of the three acts that are supposed to help us temper the suffering that is to come in the next year is *tzedakah*. In the simplest terms, people refer to *tzedakah* as charity. However, there is much more in that word. It is not just about monetary value; the root of the word is *zedek*, justice or righteousness; doing things to stand up for others and doing the right things. Monetary gifts are important, and, at the same time, we must take it a step further and

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<sup>10</sup> Rubin, Yehoshua (2006). *U'teshuvah: How Do People Change—Through Honey or Vinegar?* In Rabbi D. P. Elkins (Ed.), *Rosh Hashanah Readings: Inspiration, Information, and Contemplation* (p. 233-234). Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing.

<sup>11</sup> Dorff, Rabbi Elliot N. (2006). *U'Tefilah: Like Baseball, Prayer Needs Practice*. In Rabbi D. P. Elkins (Ed.), *Rosh Hashanah Readings: Inspiration, Information, and Contemplation* (p. 240). Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing.

do the work of making our world a better place every day. A text from Talmud highlights the importance of *tzedakah*, “What is stronger than death? Acts of *tzedakah*, as it is written: *Tzedakah* delivers from death.”<sup>12</sup> Who does *tzedakah* deliver from death? The giver or the recipient? The text does not tell us. I think it is about the recipient. If we donate money or stand up for someone else’s rights, it does not necessarily impact our lives profoundly – the experience might, but the act itself may not. Conversely, the person who receives the donation or sees you standing by them is deeply affected. *Tzedakah* is how we connect to others. It is the act that makes us think about others first and connects us with them. And it is something that we need to remind ourselves to do continuously, not just occasionally, so that we feel like we can pat ourselves on the back for what we have done. Instead, we need to make it a habit, a practice, for all times. This may seem like a giant task during a pandemic, but you only need to find one small thing to incorporate into your life. It could be choosing a different charity monthly to donate to or finding time to volunteer at the San Antonio Food Bank the first Tuesday of every month. Find a cause that connects personally to you, a way to help others, and start making it a part of your routine.

The words of *Un’taneh Tokef* can be difficult, harsh, and intense, but they also remind us that we need to be mindful of who we are, and how we can better ourselves. We must read or hear the words and connect with them without dismissing them. They are here for a reason; to make us uncomfortable, to force us to confront our mortality head on, and to encourage us to be better people – from the inside out. This prayer reminds us that it is not all on God, but that it is up to us to figure out how we handle life and its struggles, especially in the midst of a pandemic.

This year of 5781, let us ask these three questions:

- How can we work on ourselves to make the world a better place?
- What can we do with our lives when mortality is thrust in our face?
- How can we connect to God even in times when it seems difficult?

Let these questions sit with us every day. As we join together in *Un’taneh Tokef* beginning on page 174, let us be spurred to action in making our lives more meaningful every day.

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<sup>12</sup> Bava Batra 10a