

Earlier today we read these words in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer

“And let us now acknowledge the power of this day’s holiness,
for it is full of awe and dread...

You remember deeds long forgotten
and You will open the book of memories
and what is written there proclaims itself,
for it bears the signature of every human being.

The great shofar is sounded,
the still small voice is heard.

And angels, gripped by fear and trembling will declare in awe:
“This is the Day of Judgment!

For even the hosts of heaven are judged,
and all who enter the world will pass before You like sheep.

...And You will decide the end of all creatures,
and decree their destiny

On Rosh Hashana it is written,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

How many shall pass on, and how many shall come to be;
Who shall live and who shall die;
Who shall see ripe age and who shall not;
Who shall perish by fire and who by water;”

These words are taken from one of the most dramatic prayers in the High Holy Day liturgy. For some, this prayer sums up the essence of this penitential period. These words are part of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, and it is such an important a prayer, that it is one of the few that is repeated on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

As important as it is, this prayer can also be terrifying. Its words speak of a theology that believes that the righteous shall prosper and the wicked will wither. These words speak of all of heaven and earth being put on trial- even the angels are shaking in their proverbial boots! And this prayer paints a picture of what will happen to those souls that choose **not** to follow God’s laws. We know, that if we look around today there are those who were here with us last year that are no more, and next year surely some of us will no longer be here. And this prayer seems to imply that those who have passed on, did so because they failed the judgment on Rosh Hashana, and had their fate sealed last year at Yom Kippur.

But do we believe these words? Do we believe in the literal notion of reward and punishment? If we are to take the prayer at face value, then this is a painful and terrifying statement. Surely we all know people whose lives were cut short by disease or tragedy. Is this prayer implying that they were not righteous enough? If taken literally, this prayer implies that the young child who dies did something so horrible as to deserve an untimely death, and that **anyone** who perishes in

a natural disaster, be it a flood, tornado, fire, or earthquake- was so wicked as to deserve that fate.

As a liberal Jew, I, and I imagine many of you have rejected the notion that what we receive in life is a direct result of our actions. I would venture to guess that we all know wonderful, righteous, and kind hearted people that have fallen on hard times, or had their lives cut short by disease or tragedy. And we surely have all seen wicked people who seem to prosper and live long and seemingly care free lives.

So what do we make of this prayer? We can read it shaking our head and seeing it as a remnant of days gone by, or we can simply skip it and not acknowledge its theology... But is there some meaning that can be gleaned from it? This is a question that has dogged the Reform movement for several generations.

In several earlier versions of the American and British prayer books, the prayer was either omitted, shortened, or translated *very creatively*¹. For many years the liberal movements of Judaism around the world have debated whether or not to include this prayer. And when it finally was included in Gates of Repentance, our machzor, almost in its entirety, there were many who were very upset by its inclusion. When asked why he chose to include it, Chaim Stern, the author of this machzor, replied, "Because it has a nice tune and people like to hear it sung."²

OK , so it has a nice melody and found its way back into our prayer book, now we have to address it. We can read it with disapproval and think "this is not the God that I believe in" or we can try to reinterpret the prayer for a more modern sensibility.

First let's consider our ancestors- do we imagine that they were okay with the meaning of this prayer? Do we imagine that when a child died during their youth, their parents assumed the child had done something wrong, or worse, that they themselves had done something wrong? And did they never see a wicked man prosper?

Many of us believe that our predecessors were more pious and religious than we are, and that they believed everything they read or were told. But to do that, in a way, also assumes they were naïve. I would like to believe that our ancestors were smart, thinking individuals that thought about the prayers they said.

So why didn't our ancestors have the same issues with these prayers? Well, some of them did, even respected scholars like the Vilna Gaon, an 18th century scholar of much prominence, suggested skipping over particularly problematic passages in a few prayers. But beyond that, our ancestors may have had a different mindset when reading prayers. Rather than seeing each prayer as a description of what life is REALLY like, they saw many of these passages as poetic renditions of a perfect world, or at least a world that they imagined to be better than their own.

¹ Bayfield, Tony. "The Exodus and the Elephant." Who By Fire, Who By Water-Un'taneh Tokef. Ed Lawrence Hoffman. Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publishing. 2010. Pg 51-54.

² Goldstein, Andrew. "Awe-full Thoughts on Words a Melody Cannot Save." Who By Fire, Who By Water-Un'taneh Tokef. Ed Lawrence Hoffman. Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publishing. 2010. Pg 58.

After all, how wonderful would it be if all we had to do was be good, follow the rules, and we were assured health, wealth, and long life? In today's time, we have a more scientific bent and we like to see things as either being true or not true. Yet this prayer falls in the middle- it is not meant to be taken at face value, yet neither should it be seen as just the fanciful musings of an old poet. Rather, Unetaneh Tokef can be viewed as a window into our souls.³

If our ancestors saw prayer as a form of poetry then it is not at all unimaginable that this prayer would have been a moving, meaningful, and appropriate prayer. After all, we know that poetry is meant to evoke emotions in us- and in doing so it often speaks to the extreme, the fantastical, or the metaphorical to elicit that emotion. Let's consider a well known poem by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference

Mr. Frost doesn't expect us to believe that he was actually in the position of having to choose from two similar paths in a forest, rather, he uses the nature imagery to describe a time in his life when he faced two paths and knew that he had to choose one and could never go back. As with Unetaneh Tokef, this poem is not meant to be taken at face value, yet we see in it truths beyond its mere words.

As we read with Robert Frost's poem, so too can we read Unetaneh Tokef. It is a poem that is supposed to elicit strong emotions that jar us from our place of complacency and into a mindset of true introspection. And as humans, we seem to have quite an appetite for imaging our own

³ Langer, Ruth, "Laminated into the Book of Life?" Who By Fire, Who By Water-Un'taneh Tokef. Ed Lawrence Hoffman. Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publishing. 2010. Pg 113-116.

horrific deaths. We love ghost stories and horror movies and that feeling of fear we get as we begin the initial descent of the roller coaster. For only after we have been scared, dropped, and twisted, do we feel that rush of exhilaration just to be alive! In a metaphoric way, Unetaneh Tokef is like a roller coaster- we are dropped, twisted and turned in such a way that we come out on the other side feeling more alive and grateful for our life than before. And it is from there that we can truly review our actions in the past year and consider them for the coming year? Could I fall prey to these pitfalls in the coming year? What do I need to do to make sure that I can sit here next Yom Kippur and see that I have progressed from this year?

Even if we are to believe that this was written without the intention of literal belief, why use such stark images? Isn't there a less terrifying way to shake our complacency? Or do these blunt and disturbing images help to shock us into **really** examining our lives? For only when we imagine our deaths in a real and tangible way, are we forced to look at **how** we live our life. Only then, **might** we come to see that these images, such as fire, water, and wild animals, which can seem beautiful and majestic, can also be the source of our downfall. Maybe the author is purposefully twisting images that can be inspirational to remind us that this world can be a blessing or a curse dependent on how we live our lives.

Let's look at some of the imagery
Turn with me to page 312

(BEGIN MUSIC)

“How many shall pass on, and how many shall come to be;
Who shall live and who shall die;
Who shall see ripe old age and who shall not”

Why use the image of death? Is it possible to die without dying? Rabbi Zoob, a rabbi I worked with in Boston, once spoke of how we can find ourselves in a situation of living a deadened life. When our souls become so empty that our passions are quenched and the fire goes out of our eyes, we can be alive, but not really living. And on the flip side, even in death we can be so full of spirit and life, so that even as we pass from this earth, our loved ones keep our memory, and our love, alive.

(1st half of chorus)

Who shall perish by fire and who by water;
When we allow the fires of greed to flare up, do we not drown in the waters of disappointment?
But when we fan the flames of justice, righteousness will well up like a stream and flow from one community to the next.

Who by hunger and who by thirst;
Who among us will let the hunger for power cloud their judgment
And who will see their thirst for knowledge be quenched from a pool of learning?

(2nd half of chorus)

Who by earthquake and who by plague;
Whose faith will be shaken by tragedy and who will be plagued by mistrust and failure

And who after experiencing a life shattering moment will emerge strengthened by the love of family and friends?

Who shall be poor and who shall be rich;

Who will see their lot and only seek more, and who will be rich in love, laughter and vitality?

(full chorus)

By looking at this prayer metaphorically and seeing the stark, terrifying images as a reflection of both the best and worst aspect of our lives, we begin to see what our ancestors may have seen.

Rather than looking at the missing members of our community and wondering what sin caused them to miss being written in the book of life, may we use these images to shake us out of our complacency and inspire us to ponder the fires that plague our lives and the waters that enrich them. And as we leave the sanctuary this afternoon, may we remember that we have already begun to write the next chapter in our book of memories. May this year's chapter be filled with blessings, health, and simchas.

(full song)