

## Sheryl Eisenberg

2010/5771 Yom Kippur Lay Sermon

### The Unetaneh Tokef

Gut yuntif and shabbat shalom.

The representations of God in the Tanakh – the Torah and other books of the Bible – are many and various. In the Jonah story we have just listened to, God is all compassion. But elsewhere, God appears differently. Depending on the situation, God may be just or jealous – merciful or wrathful – loving or warlike. From one story to the next, the face of God changes.

The same is true in the Machzor, our prayer book for today.

On one page, God is our protector – spreading wings of shelter. On the next, God is our judge, weighing our actions, one by one.

I have always been disturbed by this judge-like aspect of God – so unlike what I think God should be.

And this year – because of my mother's failing health – I have been more bothered than usual.

Now 84, my mother has suffered for several years from chronic pain and disease. Nevertheless, she managed to live an active life, with winters in Florida, daily bridge games and as much socializing as her dwindling circle allowed – until about a year and a half ago.

Then surgery left her disoriented and unstable.

It has been downhill ever since. Falls, pneumonia, everything familiar to anyone with an elderly parent has hit her too. Ultimately, she became wheelchair bound, which shut her off from ordinary life in a single blow.

Even worse, she lost her mind. While she has thankfully regained much of her coherence in recent weeks, she is not what she was – or rather, *who* she was. There is no question she has dementia – or where it will eventually lead.

And that is not even the sum of her troubles or our family's. I won't go into them further. But as I sit in services and chant the High Holy Day prayers, I think of them and ask the usual questions about life and death – when, how, and most particularly and selfishly, why her and not another.

There is no way not to.

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is decided  
Who shall live and who shall die*

So says what may well be the holidays' most recognizable prayer, the Unetaneh Tokef.

*Who by fire and who by water*

Not only are death sentences meted out on this day, but the method of death is decided too. So says the Unetaneh Tokef.

*Who shall be at ease and who afflicted*

Not just death, but suffering.

*Who shall be impoverished and who enriched,*

Failure, too.

The message is clear. Forget free will. God decides our future

*As a shepherd gathers the sheep and causes them to pass beneath the staff, so You – God – pass and record, count and visit, every living soul, appointing the measure of every creature's life and decreeing its destiny.*

Animals, too. My dog's bad leg? Decreed. The untimely death of my cat? Ditto.

And it's their own damned fault. So says the Unetaneh Tokef.

*You, God, are the **true** judge and witness. You write and seal and inscribe and take account. You remember all that we have forgotten...*

So, what does this mean? That my mother, who in her active years did tikkun olam on a global scale, transforming thousands of lives, did things along the way, remembered by God if not by us, that earned her the drawn-out, painful ordeal she is now undergoing?

Ridiculous! And not, of course, the point of the prayer, which is

*Tshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah – repentance, prayer and charitable acts*

but it is implied nonetheless, this idea of punishment deserved. Which is why I have always rebelled against the Unetaneh Tokef.

And yet, and yet...

I also thrill to the Unetaneh Tokef.

It is one of our most powerful and moving prayers, rich with metaphor – from The Day of Judgment to The Book of Life. And that's not all. It offers redemption, a countdown and a midnight pardon. What a script! Even Hollywood could not do better.

But good scripting alone does not explain why this prayer achieves what so many others try and fail to do: **SUMMON AWE**.

Here's what I think the key is. The other prayers tell us what we are *supposed* to feel – that God is great and awesome – a fine sentiment if you happen to believe it, but otherwise just words.

The Unetaneh Tokef speaks to what we *do* feel – maybe not in the sunshine of our youth when everything still seems possible, but as we age and discover the limits of our powers. When we lose our job and can't get another because of the bad economy. When despite a lifetime of exercise, we find a lump in our breast. When our child is out past curfew and doesn't respond to our calls.

That catch in the chest – that terror in the night – that knowledge, deep down, that we are *not* in control – that is awe in the original sense of the word.

The Unetaneh Tokef captures it in the litany of horrors that may befall us in the coming year. And it also teaches us how we may cope.

**Tshuvah.** Resolving to do better – because when things go wrong, most of us can't help asking if we brought it on ourselves. Well, maybe we did and more likely we didn't. Either way, resolving to be the people we feel we ought to be eases the burden of self-blame.

**Tefillah.** Praying, which is to say, hoping against hope. In the face of misfortune, let alone tragedy, nothing is as essential as a belief in a better future. Without that, there is no point getting up in the morning.

**Tzedaka.** Giving of ourselves. Making someone else's situation better. If we can just do that, our lives have meaning, no matter how grave our loss.

You may note that I have taken God out of the equation – and that the "salvation" offered by the prayer still holds. That is another reason I think it is so brilliant – and for a non-believer like me, effective.

Nor do I think my reading is necessarily revisionist.

After we are presented with heaven and the angels quaking in terror – followed by the image of God the shepherd counting the flock – God mysteriously disappears.

We are left with an impersonal universe where "*it is written*" and "*it is decided*."

I am reminded of a Leonard Cohen song that I hesitate to mention, given the reception that "Tower of Song" got in some quarters on Rosh Hashanah. Called "Who by Fire," it is a take on the Unetaneh Tokef according to the songwriter himself, in which three modern recitations of fates are capped by a haunting refrain:

*And who shall I say is calling?*

The unspoken answer is no one – a universe without intention -- controlled perhaps by our genes or environmental factors or some interplay of the two, as complex and ineluctable as the weather.

And isn't that even more awesome – more dreadful – than a universe guided by divine judgments that appear unfair, but only because we never noticed or cannot remember what they are based on?

So given the choice, many of us, perhaps most of us, will take God the judge.

But we are not given the choice. Even in the Unetaneh Tokef itself, the decrees are not really God's rulings. They are the way things are, the human condition. And they cannot be altered.

What can be changed is the *severity* of the decree.

The *effect* of the condition.

Our *experience* of it.

Which DOES transform the outcome in a way.

And the one who makes the transformation happen is us – by the way we live our lives going forward.

This is where free will resides in the end. Free will is not the opposite of fate, as I used to think. Free will is the way to *deal* with fate – to overcome it if we can – or live with it if we must.

Shana tova *tikatevu*. May you all be *inscribed* for a good year to come.

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