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“Who Shall I Say is Calling?”

“Who by fire? Who by water? Who in the sunshine? Who in the nighttime?
Who by high ordeal? Who by common trial?...*And who shall I say is calling?*”¹

Leonard Cohen composed those verses after singing for Israeli soldiers in the Sinai desert on the front lines of the Yom Kippur War precisely fifty years ago. If the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer on which he based his lyrics tallied the deaths around him, his own final question – “who is calling?” – conveyed an uncertainty many of us share about God’s role in this world.

In June I received a phone call from a devoted congregant – I’ll call her Sheryl – who informed me she needed to resign. “Why,” I asked bewildered. She explained that after the awful injustice of her sister’s recent death, any involvement in an institution of faith felt to her an hypocrisy. And, she continued, under no circumstances would she sit through the High Holy Days. She had never believed in a God of reward and punishment to begin with, and now that her sister had been taken from her, she no longer believed in God at all. “How could a just God punish my sister who was so good,” she wept.

Long ago our rabbinic sages advised there is little wisdom one can offer to sooth a mourner in the rawness of grief.² But after my expressions of condolence, I responded: “I don’t believe God works that way.”

It won’t surprise you to learn I have had this conversation many times. Every rabbi has...especially at this season. So many Jews are troubled by the liturgy and imagery of the Days of Awe. *Yamim Noraim* can also be translated “Days of Fear” and their theology of divine judgment can be frightening. At the very least, for most of us, it seems completely out of sync with our perceptions of a world in which the innocent often suffer.

But the *Yamim Noraim* were never intended to reflect the world as it is. They constitute a ritual drama the significance of which lies not in its plausibility, but in our belief that the quality of our lives depends on how we live them.

And so tonight we reenter that drama. Perhaps therein lie some thoughts for Sheryl to consider about the meaning of the Holy Days and God’s presence in our lives.

Kol Nidre: An Encounter with Death

Ritual drama, as all compelling theater, confronts us with subjects we often try to avoid...like death. However, in his recent *New York Times* op-ed, “Rosh Hashana Can Change Your Life,” professor of psychology David DeSteno suggested that “Contemplating death helps people make decisions about their future that [may] bring

¹ Leonard Cohen, “Who by Fire?”

² *Mishnah Avot 4:23*.

them more happiness [in life]. This is an insight,” he concluded, “that the rites of Rosh Hashana capture especially well.”³

If Rosh Hashana captures that insight, Yom Kippur crystalizes it. *Kol Nidre* is a brush with mortality. In the traditional synagogue, as the piyyut is sung, the Ark is emptied of its Torah scrolls revealing an *aron*, a “casket.” The white *kittel* worn by men evokes a burial shroud. During *Kol Nidre* we meet the end none can escape.

Not even Moses. Infuriated that God would forbid him entry to the Promised Land before his death, Moses – the legend goes – traces a circle in the sand, steps inside it, and threatens defiantly: “Master of the universe, I will not budge until you void your decree.”⁴ But no circle can protect him. His death is terribly unfair. But life is not fair.

Many in our congregation know this too well. You have been touched by your own sickness, or, like Sheryl, the loss of loved ones – husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, parents and grandparents, friends, children, grandchildren. And there was nothing fair about it.

We do not understand it, and we cannot control it. There will be places we will not go, goals we will not attain, questions we will never answer.

But these inevitabilities do not signify our failures or God’s disfavor. They are simply the way of the world. Moses had to exit the circle of life, and ultimately so must we all.

In a beautiful comment on the text, Rabbi Dr. Norman Cohen writes: “Moses teaches all of us about the struggle to accept our mortality, especially when we are cognizant of all that we will miss in the future...We who long to see the fulfillment of our visions and efforts, or our children grow and mature, and have their own families and establish their own careers, know Moses’s pain.”⁵

When we die, something of life’s promise remains unfulfilled. “Our days are scrolls,” counselled Bachya. “Write upon them what you wish to be remembered.” Because sooner or later, every scroll must reach its end. The quill is lowered. The writing is no more.

And so the urgent message of this night: life is precious. Embrace it while it is yours to live.

Unetaneh Tokef: A Summons to Judgment

The ritual drama resumes tomorrow morning: *Unetaneh tokef kedushat haYom*, “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day; it is awesome and full of dread.”⁶

This most gripping Holy Day prayer ushers us into a divine courtroom where God is “Judge and Arbiter, Counsel and Witness....On Rosh Hashana it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed,” the prayer continues, “who shall live and who shall die.”⁷

The origin of this liturgical enactment lies in the Talmudic legend of three volumes opened on Rosh Hashana: the Book of Life for the wholly upright, the Book of

³ David DeSteno, “Rosh Hashana Can Change Your Life,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2023.

⁴ *Devarim Rabbah 11:10*.

⁵ Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Cohen, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership*, p. 164.

⁶ *Unetaneh Tokef, Gates of Repentance*, p.107.

⁷ *Unetaneh Tokef, Gates of Repentance*, p.107.

Death for the wholly wicked, and a third book for the rest of us where our names await removal to one of the other two on Yom Kippur.⁸

Some years ago, Rabbi Harold Schulweis received a letter, written by a woman in his congregation on Rosh Hashana afternoon:

Dear Rabbi,

Several months ago I had surgery for cancer, and I felt very keenly as I approached these [Holy] Days that in a real sense my fate for the coming year has been written, if not in a book of judgment, then in my own body....As I read the questions...“How many shall pass away and how many shall be born?”...it seemed to me...that my own liturgy was binding my fate to my behavior, that my illness, seen in this light, has been the result of some terrible unknown transgression....

I do not believe this – not with my head or with my heart. Nevertheless, as a committed Jew who takes language very seriously and believes in community prayer, I would be forced to repeat the central cornerstone over and over should I attend services for Yom Kippur. It seems today that my choice is a terrible one: to flagellate myself emotionally by joining my congregation or to spare my feelings by isolating myself from my family, my friends, [and] my community....

I know there must be others...who sit suffering silently, as I did today....⁹

Of course there are others.

As Rabbi Schulweis’s congregant understood it, as Sheryl understood it – as probably many of us do – *Unetaneh Tokef* describes a causal relationship between sin and suffering. Those enduring tragedies, over which they had no control, are compelled to consider that their own moral failings may have brought them about.

I reject such doctrine. And so should you. I don’t believe God works that way. And as Rabbi Schulweis concludes: “No theology should pour the salt of self-recrimination and blame on the wounds of those who suffer.”¹⁰

So what can we glean from this prayer? Certainly its litany of sorrows and joys – who shall be secure and who shall be driven, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by earthquake and who by plague – catalogues those human experiences to which the evening news and the tragedies in Morocco and Libya bear witness; and the prayer reminds us that the bounds of our lives – their duration and their path – are not entirely within our control; and that the foundations on which we build our lives – our health, our relationships, our financial wellbeing – are more fragile than we realize.

⁸ Three books are opened on Rosh Hashana, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for those in between. The thoroughly righteous are inscribed immediately in the Book of Life. The thoroughly wicked are inscribed immediately in the Book of Death. The fate of those in between is suspended from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur. If they merit it, they are inscribed for life. If they do not merit it, they are inscribed for death (*B.T. Rosh Hashanah 16b*).

⁹ Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, *For Those Who Can’t Believe*, pp.102-3.

¹⁰ Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, *For Those Who Can’t Believe*, p.118.

And yet, as committed Jews who do take language seriously, we cannot escape nor should we try to evade the urgent summons to judgment. Even those who aren't sure they believe in God – even those certain they don't – still must “stand before some enduring truth,” writes my father Rabbi Jerome Davidson. We all must “measure ourselves before some set of standards.”¹¹

We may not consider *Unetaneh Tokef* to be more than ritual theater; but if we allow it to, the prayer can imbue in us urgency to begin the process of *tikkun middot*, self-repair...work our tradition believes we can do, otherwise the drama would be pointless. We possess great power over our lives.

Teshuvah: Our Power to Change

U'*teshuvah u'tefilah u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roa hag'zerah*, the prayer concludes. “Repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment's severe decree.” By reaching inward through self-examination, finding the fortitude that wells inside us when we strive to become our best selves; by reaching upward to the reservoir of strength with which faith can replenish our spirits if we let it; by reaching outward to repair relationships with those precious to us or to find courage in their love, and to support others travelling the same difficult road – through these acts of *teshuvah*, *tefilah* and *tzedakah* we discover our power...God's spirit within us, the soul, what makes us holy.

Teshuvah means “turning.” “Now is the time,” urges our *machzor*. “The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red and orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds, and animals turning comes instinctively. But for us turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits...It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do.”¹²

Why are they so difficult? Because deep down most of us don't believe we can change, that our tendencies are either hardwired into us or the inevitable result of prior life experiences; that anchored to past disappointments, we can never be more than we are right now.

Judaism emphatically rejects determinism. It insists we do have the power to change.

Once before I quoted Fred Shoemaker. The renowned golf instructor wonders why golfers get so upset after hitting bad shots. And this is his answer: “They think they are going to do it again.” And then he offers a bit of practical wisdom not just for golfers: “Just because you did something once [or even many times] does not mean that you will do it again. Your future is not determined by your past.”¹³

Our future is not determined by our past. But we must be willing to let go our frustrations, put down our resentments, forgive others and ourselves. Certainly we work

¹¹ Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, “What a Day is Like,” Yom Kippur Eve, September 20, 1988, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck.

¹² Rabbi Jack Riemer in *Gates of Repentance*, p.372.

¹³ Fred Shoemaker, *Extraordinary Golf: The Art of the Possible*, pp.9-11.

to heal hurt we have caused. But we also must learn to see ourselves as capable of doing better, of growing.

Most of us are hardest on ourselves. We strive for unreachable standards, and when we fail to meet them, shame overwhelms, angers, even paralyzes us. We may imagine we beat ourselves up privately, but often we exact our frustration on those closest to us. Or we wall ourselves off from them, leaving them the impression that they are the problem.

Yom Kippur reminds us that to err is human. Self-forgiveness is Yom Kippur's gift to us. The late Rabbi Alan Lew explained: "We can forgive others on our own. But...to wipe [our own] slate clean...we need to feel [as if we have been] judged and accepted by a Power who...embodies our highest values."¹⁴ We need the ritual drama, to hear the words: *Vayomer Adonai salachti kidvarecha*, "God said, I have pardoned in response to your plea."

And if we believe in God's forgiveness, then perhaps we will believe in our own power to change. And perhaps we will even embrace God's power to help. The *midrash* implores us, if we open a hole in the hardening we have grown about our hearts the diameter of a needle's eye, God will come through that breach.¹⁵ If we harbor the faintest desire for change in our lives, God will find us where we are and lead us to where we hope to be.

This is the promise of *Neilah*, the "closing" act of the ritual drama tomorrow afternoon.

Neilah: Rebirth

Last year as we were turning the page from our *Yizkor* memorial service to *Neilah*, I asked everyone to remain for the additional half hour and its brief liturgy punctuated by the final blast of the *shofar*. The Days of Awe are not only about introspection, judgment and memory, they are most of all about forgiveness, rebirth, and hope – precisely the gifts of the Holy Days' final thirty minutes. To depart the sanctuary without them – well imagine leaving Beethoven's Ninth Symphony before the "Ode to Joy."

Atah noten yad, "You hold out your hand to us" sings this beautiful service. "Your right hand is stretched out to receive those who turn back to You." God reaches out to us, yearns for us. And we are drawn once more to the Ark¹⁶ – standing before the Gates of Repentance not now to be judged, but to be forgiven, assured of God's acceptance.

If *Kol Nidre* confronts us with death, *Neilah* promises us life. We sound the *shofar* one final time – the ram's horn, the call of which our tradition likens to the wail of a woman in labor and to a newborn baby's cry. If we are willing to participate in the ritual drama, then *Neilah* can be our rebirth into a New Year, one of reconciliation with others, with ourselves, with the vicissitudes of life.

¹⁴ Rabbi Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, pp.126-127.

¹⁵ *Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:2, no.2.

¹⁶ The *aron*, with the Torah Scrolls replaced, is again an *Aron Kodesh*.

And with the *shofar's* blast the drama ends.

For some, perhaps, the liturgical Sturm und Drang, fire and brimstone, may feel over the top – more than is necessary for a day of quiet self-reflection and spiritual renewal. It was for early Reform liturgists who excised much of it from the prayerbook or hid it in services few worshippers attended. The prophet Elijah himself heard God not in the howl of the wind or the shaking of the earth, but in a still, small voice.¹⁷ Ritual drama, at most, seeks only to awaken that voice inside us. The transformative potential of these Holy Days lies in us – in our willingness to believe in the possibility of new beginnings.

Make no mistake: faith does not deny challenge or pain. Hope is no declaration that all is right in our worlds when it is not.¹⁸ It is an outlook,¹⁹ a determination to see light even in darkness; to search, as Nachman of Bratslav taught, for just one joy – one white dot amidst the black – and then finding one, to search for more, and then to fashion those dots into musical notes.²⁰

So let me turn very directly now to Sheryl's question: "How could a just God punish my sister who was so good?"

This past year, the world lost a rabbi whose gentle wisdom brought comfort to Jews and non-Jews alike, Rabbi Harold Kushner. After the tragic death of his young son, Rabbi Kushner wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Many of you have read it. God does not cause suffering, Rabbi Kushner taught. God helps us endure it. Where is God? "In the resilience of the human soul, the ability of people to find even a pain-filled life...worth living."²¹ This is the way God works.

The same week that Sheryl called me about her decision to leave the temple, I spoke with Susan, a young mother battling breast cancer and in the midst of radiation treatment. As difficult as the side effects were, she was surprisingly upbeat. "Being sick changes your perspective," she explained. "You appreciate every moment." Somehow, Susan had found the strength to embrace the joys amidst the difficulties and string them into a melody. And then there was Steven, whose wife has pancreatic cancer. "We are grateful for every day," he said. He, too, had found that courage.

How is it that one person perceives the world one way and another so differently? No two people's circumstances are the same, of course. And we are influenced by the beliefs we have grown up with, shaped by the experiences we have already encountered...but not unalterably.

In July, Mia and I travelled along the breathtaking coast of northeast Scotland. On one particularly windy and rainy day we complained to a local bookseller about the unpredictability and intensity of the weather. She smiled and said, "Aye, but we wouldn't have that landscape if we didn't have that weather."

¹⁷ *I Kings* 19:11-12.

¹⁸ In the final version of the prayer, the *g'zerah*, "the decree," is not torn up (though *B.T. Rosh Hashanah* 16b reads *m'karin*, "tear up," and *Bereishit Rabbah* 44:12 and *Jerusalem Talmud Taanit* 2:1:9 read *m'vatlin*, "annul") no matter how unfair. There are tragedies that befall us that are beyond our control, and even beyond God's control.

¹⁹ The *roa hag'zerah*, "the evil of the decree" is *ma'avirin*, "transformed."

²⁰ Rabbi Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, p.128

²¹ Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*.

For us too, the storms of misfortune beat against the shores of human experience and carve our perception and understanding of the world...and our ability to appreciate life's beauty even in hardship. Perhaps because of the hardship.

I believe that true for individuals; and tonight I would add, I believe it true for the Jewish people. And our collective resilience should strengthen each of us. Fifty years ago, the Yom Kippur War shook the Jewish world. Those who imagined themselves secure realized suddenly their vulnerability.²² Israeli songwriter and poet Rachel Shapira gave voice to Israel's shock – a dismay we all feel when misfortune strikes us. But she also sang of the fortitude we all possess, and the faith that can flow from it:

Early in the morning, we set off...quiet and amazed.
Traces of the storm were everywhere,
Like great shadows, like silent witnesses....

Then the sun rose before our tired eyes
And shone a new light on the cold and loneliness...

We promised ourselves to teach anew...
The meaning of good and evil, profane and holy....

Then the sun shone on our resting brothers...
A new light on our visible wounds.
[And] little by little we learned to notice again...
The miraculous power of life.

Avinu Malkeinu, help us to believe in the power of this day. Awaken us to Your presence as our strength. Enable us to trust, as You do, in our own power to change and grow. And as a New Year begins, open our eyes to the miraculous power of life – the bright and shining notes – that we might sing to You an ode to joys past and those yet to come.

Amen.

²² Yehudah Mirsky, "Faith, Responsibility, and Suffering: Rav Amital's Response to the Yom Kippur War," *Tradition* 55:3, 2023, p.27.