

U'netaneh tokef- Putting God Second¹)

One day, when my oldest grandson was 9 (he's now 11), just he and I were walking on the beach in Santa Barbara, CA, where he lives. We were meandering; not walking with purpose; just sort of "being". He wasn't very talkative. His eyes gazed at the ocean and then down at the sand and then up at the sky. Suddenly, he took my hand in his; he looked up at me with his big blue eyes and he asked: "Savta, does God have ears that really work?"

To be perfectly honest, I was stunned. I probably stood there wide eyed and unresponsive far too long! Finally, I took a deep breath. I looked down at him, looking up at me. We Jews have a tendency to answer a question with another question. "Does God have ears that really work?" he'd asked. I responded: "That's a great question, Sam. What do you think?" The conversation continued: "Well, I talk to God a lot but I don't know whether God hears me," he responded, thoughtfully. "What do you say when you talk to God?" I asked him. "Sometimes I ask for things, but mostly I just tell God what I'm thinking about." Meanwhile, there is a conversation running rampant in my head. It goes something like this: "Please, God, when I open my mouth, let something wise come out." And simultaneously I'm thinking: "This is an amazing question coming from a 9 year old. I wonder what he is really asking? Does he want reassurance that the world is a safe place? That life is not random and that there is "somebody" in charge?" It occurred to me that, if we adults were less self-conscious, and more open and honest, most of us would wonder about those same questions. Experience tells us that the world is not *always* a safe place. Is God real? Does God see us?

¹ Rabbi Donniel Hartman

Hear us? Know what we need and take care that we have it? *And*, is it God who decides our fate at this time each year?

As a recently ordained Rabbi, I have been on your side of the pulpit for well over 60 years and on this side for only two. Now that I can, I am willing to talk about *Un'etaneh tokef*, the “elephant in the sanctuary”, because I am quite sure that the image of God deciding who shall live and who shall die, and by what means, is a strain on the theology of the vast majority of us.

All through the days of awe, we hear the mesmerizing tune and the haunting words of *Un'etaneh Tokef*: “On Rosh Hashana their destiny is inscribed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die; Who by an earthquake in Hawaii and who by hurricane in Puerto Rico? Who will be cut down by hatred and violence? And who will be crushed under the heel of a dictator? And who will be raised up to riches and glory for no apparent reason?”

Un'etaneh tokef paints a picture of God's high court convening. God is judge, prosecutor, expert and witness. God remembers all that is forgotten and will complete the indictment. On Rosh Hashana two books lie opened in front of God: the completely righteous will be written in the book of life, which will be sealed. The completely evil will be written in the book of death which, similarly, will be sealed. Those in between will be suspended and must prove before the end of Yom Kippur that they merit being written in the book of life. *Un'etaneh tokef* gives us a recipe for how to earn that merit. We read in our Machzorim: **“U'teshuva, u'tzedakah, u'tefilla *ma'averin et roah h'gzara*. The translation (on p.243) is: “But repentance, prayer and good deeds can *annul the severity of the decree*.” [repeat] A different contemporary Conservative machzor,**

translates the phrase as ***“have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.”*** (Machzor Lev Shalom, p. 144) Still others say: **will soften or mitigate the decree.**

That refrain, which we repeat throughout Un’etaneh tokef, is *based* on a verse in Rabbinic literature. The Hebrew text we find in the Talmud, and what we have in our *machzorim*, are *not* the same. The translation for what we find in rabbinic literature is: “teshuva, prayer, and charity ***annul or cancel the harsh decree, or the evil decree;***² [REPEAT] The “modern” writer of un’etaneh tokef *changed* the Hebrew word from one which translates as “will *annul*” to one which means “will *transform or lessen* the severity (*of the evil*) of the decree.” This difference leaves us with a dilemma: Do repentance, prayer and tzedakah CANCEL or MITIGATE the decree?

In the opinion of the modern author of *un’etaneh tokef*, repentance, prayer and tzedakah **cannot** cancel or *eliminate* an evil decree, but by **searching our souls through teshuvah, by praying to God through tefillah and by helping other people through tzedakah, we help ourselves cope; we can “mitigate the evil of the decree”.**³

“What does all that mean?” “Why are you bothering us with all these details”? I hear you silently asking. Those are appropriate questions and I want to explore with you two answers:

First, my experience in life and my understanding of history, tell me that life simply does not work according to the words in the Talmud. It is *not* within the

² Un’etaneh tokef: A linguistic analysis of the phrase Ma’avirin et Ro’a HaGezeirah, Dr. Rabbi Jeff Hoffman

³ Ibid, Rabbi Marc Saperstein

realm of what God does, to reverse an act of nature. Many great rabbis in the Middle Ages agreed with that opinion. They quoted biblical verses, rabbinic statements and invoked empirical evidence to insist that many wicked people survive from one year to the next, and many fine, good, people die prematurely, for no apparent reason. The idea of an all-powerful God who has complete control over our lives, defies our modern credulity and simply is *not* true. Judaism has survived because Jews have adapted it to the times. Modern, post-Holocaust theology recognizes that God does *not* have unilateral control.

In his book, Why do bad things happen to good people?, Rabbi Harold Kushner refers to the opening lines in the book of Genesis. “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste, darkness over the face of Ocean, [the] rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters-God said: let there be light! And there was light.” “This is what it means to create”, Rabbi Kushner explains; “... **to make order out of chaos**”. (p.51) God created the laws of nature. They are precise and reliable. They always work the same way. “God [cannot and] does not reach down to interrupt [the workings of nature] to protect the righteous from harm.” (p.58) And then Rabbi Kushner asks: “could man, without God, do it better?” (p.43)

Which brings me to my second reason for bringing up the discrepancies between the Hebrew *in an ancient text* and what we have in our modern machzor.

I have encountered enough bumps in the road we call life, to say definitively, that we humans *do not* have complete control over what happens to us or when. That does *not* mean however, that God has *all* the power; bears all the responsibility and we have none of either.

Gilbert Kaplan, born in 1941, is an American businessman, journalist and amateur conductor. He had always dreamed of conducting an orchestra and he figured out a way to make it happen. He decided to conduct **Mahler's Resurrection symphony**-a challenge for even the most accomplished conductor. He studied the composer, the symphony and the art of conducting for a year and then, at Lincoln Center he conducted the American Symphony Orchestra and the Westminster Symphonic choir in a performance of the symphony.

When **Bernard Holland**, music critic for the NY Times, was asked about the quality of the performance he said: "For a self-admitted amateur trying to negotiate a complicated piece, he could have done a lot worse. *One of a conductor's important tools is the good will of his musicians, and they seemed to want to get him through it.*"

We are *all* instruments in God's orchestra. God created the world, made order out of chaos, with God's words. The writing process is ongoing *and* God has made us co-authors and editors. We need not shiver in fear under the weight of God's quill. We can write our *own* destinies by virtue of how we live our lives; how we respond to what life brings to us. Perhaps, God will do the fact checking.

When tragedy comes to you, God forbid, or life doesn't go the way you wish it would, contrary to what you might feel, you are *not* alone. Getting a potentially fatal disease, witnessing or being a victim of a school shooting or even losing a job, has nothing to do with God; which is great news because since God is *not* the source of our misfortunes, we can turn to God for help. Providing solace, strength, compassion and love are God's strong suit. If we reach out- or in, we will find that *God is with us*.

The summer after my 3rd of what should have been 5 years of rabbinical school, I was diagnosed with cancer. It was not the most common type of cancer and it was aggressive. Over a period of nine months I was in treatment; first, surgery, then Chemo and finally radiation. I never left school, but I did need to figure out an Option B that would enable me to complete my studies and fulfill my dream of being ordained as a Rabbi.

Rabbis over the ages have understood that during our lives, there will be times when we feel sad and alone. Judaism has built into it, ways to avert that tendency. That is why Jews pray as part of a minyan, for example. When we pray as part of a community, it can be easier to feel God's presence. We can ask God for help to find our own inner strength. And we can turn to God for comfort. [pause] **Except, if we can't.** If we feel that God is distant and that we don't have a meaningful relationship with God, praying for whatever we need, is not a viable option. Despite that I was in rabbinical school, and everybody around me seemed to have direct access to God, I did not.

During 9 months of treatment, I realized I had an inner strength of which I had been unaware. As days passed when I could barely get myself to class, I developed wisdom. My classmates asked me how I was. I thought to myself: "How the hell do you think I am?" but what came out of my mouth, was "Today is a good day." After two weeks, nobody asked how I was anymore. Instead, they approached me with understanding and asked: "Is this a good day or a bad day?" I felt the presence of God in that space. The spark of the divine in me, had touched and been touched by the spark of the Divine in them. **I had been looking for God in the wrong places.** What I learned to do is look into the eyes and touch the souls of members of my community. One of my biggest disappointments at that time, was that I had radiation for 40 consecutive weekdays

at 7:15 am, in the Dana Farber building. That meant I couldn't participate in the daily minyan at school. Through no fault of my own, or theirs, just when I needed it most, my community and I would be separated. Then, a friend of mine voluntarily organized a minyan to come to Dana Farber and daven, outside the room where I had radiation. *That* is what God looks like. *That* is real tzedakah; not giving money but sharing yourself. I began to realize that I *did* have a connection with God. It was through regular people, like you. People who showed up bringing the gifts of who they are, just because. If you think you don't have a relationship with God or not the kind you would like, take a minute; look at the person sitting next to you [PAUSE] and remember a time when you were there for each other. When we feel sad or unworthy of God's love, if we do something nice for another person, we will feel the presence of God overflowing from within; surrounding us with God's love.

I'm glad our prayer book doesn't tell us that teshuva, tzedakah and tefillah *will annul* an evil decree. If that were the case, I wouldn't have the privilege and the responsibility to bring the spark of the Divine in me, together with the spark of the Divine in you. *Those* are the ways we transform and mitigate, *for ourselves*, together, the harshness of what life might bring.

Amen/May it be so.