

**UNETANEH TOKEF SERMON**  
**Rosh Shanah 5770**  
**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

*Who shall live and who shall die?*

*Who by water and who by fire .....*

One of the most difficult prayers in Jewish liturgy,  
and a recurring prayer during the High Holy Days,  
is the *Unetaneh Tokef* from which these words are taken.

Many consider this poem to be the pinnacle of the Rosh Hashanah service.

The prayer paints a terrifying picture of the most solemn day of the year.

"Awesome and terrible" are the most fitting words to describe it.

This is the day when humanity is put on trial and judged  
by a supreme king seated upon his mighty throne.

Spread before us is a frightening spectacle of heaven and earth  
called to judgment. Even the angels are judged on this day.

The prayer tells us that some of us will receive  
the ultimate punishment, the severe decree – the penalty of death—  
through one means or another -- through drowning or fire, or starvation...

In essence, the prayer is saying: Look around this congregation.

Next year, some of you won't be here.

And it seems that the reason for this disappearance  
are the sins committed by these absent congregants.

We are told that this consequence of sin can be averted,  
or at least softened, by following the advice of the Sages:

"Three things cancel the decree, and they are prayer,  
charity, and repentance."<sup>1</sup>

As if the prayer itself were not horrifying enough,  
the legend about its origin is even more disturbing.

Rabbi Amnon was a wealthy and respected Jew of Mainz  
in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The Archbishop commanded him repeatedly to convert to Christianity.

When he was ordered to convert one final time,

Amnon asked for three days to think about it.

But he failed to appear on the appointed day,

so the archbishop had the rabbi brought before him.

Amnon pleaded guilty, asking that his tongue be cut out

because it had expressed a doubt about Judaism.

He felt he should not have taken the 3 days

to refuse the Archbishop.

But instead, the archbishop ordered that Amnon's hands be cut off

as well as his feet, which had refused to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis Rabba 44:12

This was done.

With blood dripping from his arms and legs,

Amnon asked to be carried into the synagogue

where Rosh HaShannah was being celebrated.

As the Kedushah, God's Sanctification, was about to begin,

Amnon recited the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. He died as soon as he finished.

What a dreadful way to begin the New Year!

All of us have family members, friends or members of our community who, in the past year, have been touched by tragedy – some dread disease or some freak accident or a natural disaster that has befallen them.

Some have died and some have survived.

In our Temple Beth El family alone,

we've lost several beloved members to cancer, to heart disease, to pneumonia. Countless others are still suffering from these and other illnesses, such as Alzheimer's.

Many are suffering from the treatment of these diseases – from chemo or radiation or dialysis. We also have lonely members, languishing in nursing facilities or isolated at home.

As if losing a parent or spouse or sibling were not painful enough, some of you have lost children, ripped away at far too young an age.

Hearing the Unetaneh Tokef adds salt to the wound of these losses,

because the prayer makes it sound as if these ravages are deserved.

It sounds as though God has decreed these fates willfully,

as punishment for past misdeeds.

Some try to justify the blow by seeing God's decrees

as a blessing in disguise, a means of alerting us

to the important things in life.

The high powered executive who devotes all her time to her career

has a heart attack and realizes that she must reorder her priorities.

The wealthy man who takes his possessions for granted, loses all,

and develops gratitude for the gifts that money can't buy.

And this does happen, and sometimes for the best.

The Talmud calls this understanding of life's pain *yisurin shel ahavah* – chastisements of love, afflictions sent by God to push us towards *teshuvah*, repentance.

There are also those who claim that God's justice

is beyond our understanding – we just cannot know God's will

but we assume that God has good reasons for subjecting us to our fate.

Unfortunately, these explanations assume a judgmental, punishing God,

a God lacking in compassion and the power of gentle persuasion.

It's a God that might very well push some of us not to believe in God at all.

Indeed, one of our sages, Elisha ben Abuya, became an atheist

when he saw an innocent person sent to his untimely death.

He observed a young boy climb a ladder in order to

send away a mother bird before taking her eggs.

The boy was following a commandment in the Torah admonishing us to do just that in order to spare the mother bird the pain of losing her young ones. So here was an obedient child, performing a mitzvah -- and what was his reward?

He fell to his death on his way down the ladder. PAUSE

Abuya could not accept that a just and good God could possibly mete out such a harsh judgment.

So he rejected God altogether.

But we might consider another way of understanding disease and accidents – not as God’s punishment or as God’s decree, but as the result of the limitations of the material world.

Our bodies cannot live forever, and are subject to illness and death.

We do not need to attribute moral meaning to these tragedies.

There is emotional meaning to be sure.

We can feel sad; we can feel sympathy. But we should not feel guilty.

God did not make you sick because you did something wrong.

God did not cause the plane to crash

because the passengers were guilty of misbehavior.

God did not take your child away because you were a bad parent.

The laws of aerodynamics are the reason the plane crashed.

The body’s lowered resistance to infection, or its genetic predisposition, is the reason he got sick.

It is possible to understand the prayer,

not as the consequence of our behavior

but as the inevitable reality of life as we know it.

Rather than finding fault within ourselves or others and looking for blame, we might focus on our response to life's trials and tribulations.

And the prayer actually gives us some clues about how we might do just that.

The Unetaneh Tokef concludes with:

*U'tshuvah, u'tfillah, u'tzedakah maavirin et roah ha-gezerah.*

Repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.

Rather than viewing these actions as ways to influence God's judgment, we might think of them as coping mechanisms.

Teshuvah, which we usually translate as repentance, really means return.

If we return to our true and highest selves,

and we pray to align ourselves with our deepest values,

we will behave righteously --

with compassion and generosity towards ourselves and others.

This kindness will help us cope with the pain of loss,

with the agony of suffering.

Indeed, it may even help to heal us.

As we have been learning in recent years,

our attitude towards life has a very real impact on our health.

The mind-body connection has been verified

in any number of scientific studies.

For example, Dr. David Spiegel of Stanford University found that women with metastatic breast cancer, who provided emotional support for one another, lived twice as long as those who did not receive such care. Of course, they eventually died from the cancer, but the support of their peers gave them just a little more life.

Even the rabbis of our Talmud showed us that compassion and love could help remedy someone's malady.

When Rabbi Akiva cleaned up a sick man's room, he revived.

And visiting the sick, an important mitzvah,

is supposed to take away one sixtieth of the person's illness.

Clearly, the rabbis knew that the state of our body

is affected by our state of mind.

If we can experience love and compassion to a greater degree,

we might just find that we are able to face painful situations

in a less damaging way.

Teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah, if practiced on a consistent basis,

can effect a permanent transformation of our attitude and responses to life,

changing us physically.

For example, one researcher discovered that patients

who were diagnosed with AIDS lived several years longer than expected

when their belief in God was positive --

when they believed that God loved them rather than punished them. Those who turned to God appeared to boost their immune system and stave off the disease far more effectively than those who rejected God. This is one of the findings in a new book called *Fingerprints of God*, by Barbara Bradley Hagerty, a religion reporter for National Public Radio. Hagerty describes a variety of scientific experiments that demonstrate how faith and spirituality actually change our brain – for the better, as far as Hagerty is concerned.

Hagerty introduces us to, among others, Richard Davidson, who “attended a yeshiva for seven years in Brooklyn before delving into Eastern philosophy as an undergraduate at New York University.

As a doctoral student in psychology at Harvard, Davidson ventured to India for his first meditation retreat. There...he watched in awe as some contemplative monks sat hour after hour...

A question arose for Davidson...

Was there something about the monks’ brains that allowed them to respond more positively to ‘life’s slings and arrows’— and could anyone do the same?...

Davidson believed – and later demonstrated – that mental exercise can sculpt a person’s mental circuitry, just as lifting weights could sculpt his biceps. Davidson had shown...[that]

Buddhist meditators were able to shift their brain-wave activity

to the left side of the brain...

Earlier studies had shown that people with higher brain-wave activity in the left side of the brain reported feeling more alert, energized, enthusiastic, and joyous. People with higher brain-wave activity in the right side reported feeling more worry, anxiety, and sadness; they rarely felt elation or joy.”<sup>2</sup>

The question that Davidson asked himself was:

“Could anyone achieve that state of joy, peace, and holiness with a little practice?”<sup>3</sup>

Davidson endeavored to check this out.

For two months, employees at a high stress biotechnology company in Massachusetts were trained in mindful meditation which they practiced for a minimum of 45 minutes a day.

After eight weeks, the employees reported “feeling less anxious and more engaged at work.

When they were hooked up to the EEG...their brain-wave activity had shifted leftward, to the ‘happy’ part of the brain.”<sup>4</sup>

The brain-waves of those employees who had not participated in the meditation training remained unchanged.

Another researcher in this field is Andy Newberg,

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<sup>2</sup> Page 182-3.

<sup>3</sup> Page 183.

<sup>4</sup> Page 186.

a professor in the department of radiology  
at the University of Pennsylvania. For the past few years,  
he has studied a variety of practitioners of prayer and meditation –  
Tibetan Buddhist monks, Franciscan nuns, Sikhs, Pentecostals.  
Newberg says that, according to some of his research,  
“when people are engaged in meditation practices  
over a long period of time,  
it does ultimately alter how the person’s brain functions.  
As one does a particular practice...over and over,  
that becomes more and more written into the neural connections  
of the brain. So the more you focus on something...  
the more that becomes your reality.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Hagerty, people who have had  
these brain changing experiences,  
whether through a dramatic life event or  
consistent daily meditation and prayer,  
and no matter what their religious backgrounds –  
these people say they feel  
“a loving presence, infinitely intelligent and gentle.”  
And “often, an overwhelming sense of unity with the universe –  
and, always, light.”

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<sup>5</sup> Page 169.

Author Hagerty calls these brain changing experiences spiritual awakenings.

Rabbi Nancy Flam, who runs the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, explains that: “Through meditation practice... we cultivate a compassionate witnessing awareness that in Jewish theology we call ‘*HaMakom*’ (the Place/Space)” – a name for God.”

For too many of us, says Rabbi Flam, “what we experience as painful we judge as ‘bad.’ But if we [consider compassionate] awareness... to be like a loving parent, and painful moments of consciousness to be like the appearance of the child who has a skinned knee, we...learn to sit lovingly with our painful experiences, rather than to judge them or ourselves as bad.”<sup>6</sup>

According to University of New Mexico researcher Bill Miller, people’s priorities change after these profound spiritual experiences. “Before the experience, men ranked their top personal values as: wealth, adventure, achievement, pleasure, and being respected....

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<sup>6</sup> “The Angels Proclaim It, But Can We? ‘The Whole Earth Is Full of God’s Presence,’” by Nancy Flam in *CCAR Journal*: Spring 2009, p. 23.

After the experience their top values were: spirituality, personal peace, family, God's will, and honesty."

In the book, "How God Changes your Brain," authors Newberg and Walkman tell us that positive things happen to our brain when we have faith in a loving God.

A belief that God will give us the strength and courage to face the vicissitudes of life may improve our health -- or at least the health of our brains.

Newberg and Waldman list eight ways to exercise your brain

to increase its health. They are, in descending order:

8. Smile
7. Stay intellectually active
6. Consciously relax
5. Yawn (though hopefully not during this sermon!)
4. Meditate
3. Aerobic Exercise
2. Dialogue with others

And the number one best way to exercise your brain is to have faith.

So I propose that in the year ahead, we try to smile a little more, take time to meditate and to pray, and reach out to one another with compassion.

I leave you with this poem by Rabbi Nancy Flam: ***Spiritual Midwifery***

I don't have  
a technique  
to teach.

I won't ever  
write a book about

instant enlightenment  
or even about  
the hard, slow way  
to get there.

The road  
I'm traveling on  
is mine alone.

The truth is  
I can't tell you  
how to live.

But I can listen  
to you  
with great care  
faithfully  
without tiring  
over long  
periods of time.

I can attend  
to your tears,  
the way you clutch  
your fists  
when the real pain  
starts up,

how your face

smoothes

when you breathe

more fully again.

I can follow

your labored

metaphors

about God

and speak

in your tongue;

you

need not

birth new life

alone.

I can live

big enough

and fearlessly

so when

you sit before me

to speak your life

you sense

the presence of

the vast darkness

and striking light

of creation

and trust

that you, too,

can bear it

*all.*