
Unetaneh Tokef

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Each Yom Kippur we face our deaths. As the Cantor intones the minor key masterpiece of *Kol Nidre*, the congregation prepares. Step by step we are led closer to imagining our end. Finally the process culminates in that disturbing, electrifying prayer, the *Unetaneh Tokef*.

Unetaneh Tokef. Literally, “we give power.” We give the prayer power, and the day power, when we realize what is at stake. What gives Yom Kippur its awesome authority? The recognition of its central message—you are mortal. You do not have forever. Repent now. Repair now the broken relationships of your life. Return to the wholeness of your full self. There is little time to craft a self in this world before life is taken. Begin today, because death looms above all life.

“*The great shofar is sounded and a still, small voice is heard.*” The call to prayer is the shofar, whose piercing, plaintive notes grab our attention. But on the heels of the shofar is the soft voice. The message of prayer is in the stillness and silence. God does not speak in thunderous pronouncements, but in a small, insistent tone. God will not take away our choice by forcing us to listen. We can ignore that voice if we choose, the voice heard in a whisper, in the frail prodding of law and conscience. On Yom Kippur we attune our ears and our hearts to really listen to God’s call, so easily ignored, but so overwhelming once we attend to it.

“*Who shall live and who shall die?*” asks the *Unetaneh Tokef*. Each year on Yom Kippur, in each synagogue, we look around, and notice the absences, the familiar worshippers who are gone. The question becomes real, and its truth begins to strike us: we do not know who will live and who will die. Mortality is wanton, capricious; it could claim anyone. It could claim me.

“Who shall die by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by wild beast; who by famine and who by thirst, who by strangling and who by stoning . . .” Substitute modern terms. “Who by heart attack and who by car crash? Who by AIDS and who by cancer? Who by neglect and who by despair?”

Gradually the message begins to force itself upon us. Every stratagem of poetry and ritual is employed to teach us something we already know—that we will die. But although we know it, we do not feel it. We hide.

We are not the first to hide. Recall the story of the greatest King of Israel. In the Bible, David is vital, alive—the most vibrant of all biblical figures. He is a warrior, a lover, a sinner, a poet, a harpist, a forerunner of the Messiah. Throughout the book of Samuel we see in David a man filled with the zest and *brio* of life. Yet when we open the book of Kings, David is an old man, shivering in bed, and he cannot even keep himself warm. The first verse of the book reads: “King David was now old, advanced in years.” One chapter later, the Bible reads “David was dying” (I Kings 1:1, 2:1). The Rabbis notice a significant difference in those two verses. When he is old, he is still called King David. When he is dying, he is simply David.

We hide behind power and position and title in this world. But when we face our own deaths, we do not face it as a king, or a rabbi, or an employee, or a parent—we face it as David, as the essence of each individual soul. Death brings you face-to-face with who you are.

We can delay that confrontation with our souls until the instant of death. The *Unetaneh Tokef* urges us to feel it now, confront our mortality, see ourselves, and face God.

Traditionally on Yom Kippur we dress in white—not only for purity, but to remind ourselves of the shrouds in which we will be buried. Like corpses, we need no food, for we have no bodily discomforts or desires. While our spirits cry out, our physical being is as if dead.

“But repentance, prayer and tzedakah avert the severity of the decree.”

The decree is death. Nothing can avert the decree itself. It comes to all, great and small, Kings and humble shepherds. But a life of closeness, of *teshuvah*, of kindness, envelops us in a loving community. With that community, a conscience that is clear, and a relationship to God that is close, the ache is eased somewhat. The end comes, but softly.

“Our origin is dust and our end is dust. At the hazard of our life we earn our bread. We are like a fragile vessel, like the grass that withers, the flower that fades, the shadow that passes, the cloud vanishes, the wind that blows, the dust that disperses, the dream that flies away.”

Finally we come to understand our fragility, and we seem left with nothing but despair. The prayer has beaten down our resistance and we understand. Alone, mortal, we are nothing. What are we to do with the inevitability of death?

“But You, Sovereign of all, are the Living and Everlasting God . . . We therefore pray that our name be linked with Yours.”

We are fading, but God is forever. On Yom Kippur, if we recognize our plight, we find in ourselves the need for God, and the path to God.

Then we have joined the only thing in the world that does not fade away. We have linked ourselves with immortality. The finality of death is no more.

Above the clamor of the everyday, and the din of history, the message of *Unetaneh Tokef* shines: There is so little time. When the shofar blows, let the shudder of mortality awaken your soul. Come out of hiding, and seek the eternity promised by our covenant with God.