

G'mar Chatima Tova.

King Solomon famously wrote in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) that everything has a season: “a time to be born, and a time to die... a time to weep, and a time to laugh... a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it can be hard to reconcile this with the world around us - there are too many for whom the time to laugh is short-lived, and the time to weep is all too long. And still others for whom the time to die comes too soon after the time to be born.

Instead, I like to think of life at a macro level as “zero-sum” - that is, if you look at it through a wide enough lens, it finds a way to balance out. No one person gets his exact share of goodness and his exact share of misfortune - but from a God’s-eye view of humanity, the world maintains a neutrality over the long haul. It helps explain Rabbi Kushner’s dilemma, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” and it helps us understand the opposite injustice when we witness it. God neither favors nor slights people - rather, they receive more or less than their fair share in a given time period.

Even still, sometimes individuals experience that balancing act at a micro level, and it can feel like a reward or punishment. This year has been one such roller

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 3

coaster ride for my family: in just six months, we experienced a fire in our brand-new garage, a miscarriage, a lost job, a flood, a destroyed porch, and a cancer diagnosis for my mom. It has been a very challenging year, and, at times, it was hard not to see the sum of the parts as a pattern, rather than the individual pieces as coincidentally coming together.

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I'm not the only one in the room who's had a tough year; communally, we've suffered many losses: from the anxiety and fear of the war in Israel, to the loss of Jewish role models like Leibel Fein, and, here at KI, our holidays feel incomplete without Betty Singer chanting the haftarah. Many of us shared the pain of rabbinic colleagues in Chicago when they buried their 8-year-old son who died from childhood cancer. We were saddened as neighboring Jewish communities were shaken by abuses of trust and power. We've memorialized the one-year anniversary of a bombing that shook our city.

Individually, some of us lost parents, spouses, siblings, and friends. Some of these losses were expected - we mourned together, feeling blessed that our loved one was no longer in pain, and thankful for the support of the community. Other losses were devastating - they completely shocked us, leaving us wondering when we might come out the other side - or if there even IS another side.

It's been a tough year, to say the least.

But if not us, can't someone say the same every year?

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We stand here on Kol Nidre, the holiest night of the year, looking back on the year that was. For those among us who believe in fate, the Book of Life is as real as the machzor in our hands, seeing the good and the bad as part of God's plan. Others wonder if the year turned out how God expected it to. But that begs the question: when we ask to be written in the Book of Life each Yom Kippur, do we think about what it means to be written in the Book of Life? Do we think about what that year of life will bring us?

Tomorrow - as we did on Rosh Hashanah - we will read the lines of the Unetaneh

Tokef prayer:

On Rosh Hashanah they will be written down, and on Yom Kippur they will be sealed:

...Who will live and who will die, who at their end and who not at their end?

Who by fire and who by water....who by earthquake and who by plague....

Who will rest and who will wander. Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled...(lines 14-19)

When hear the words “who will live and who will die” come from our own lips, we pretend that they are about someone else.

Rabbi Edward Feinstein takes the opposite approach.

Who will live and who will die? **I will.**

Who at their end and who not at their end? **Me.** Like every human being, when I die, it will be at the right time and it will also be too soon.

Fire, water, earthquake, plague? In my lifetime, I’ve been scorched, drowned, shaken and burdened, wandering and at rest, tranquil and troubled. That has been my life’s journey. <sup>2</sup>

This is Unetaneh Tokef as metaphor - each year, **we** are all the ones who live **and** the ones who die. Our fire, our flood, our plague may be literal, or they may represent trials through which we must find our way. There will be times when we feel that we are drowning - in obligations to work, family, or life itself. We will feel hunger - perhaps physical, spiritual, or emotional. An earthquake may shake us - or perhaps our beliefs - to the very core. We will feel anguish and turmoil, depression and anxiety.

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<sup>2</sup> Who By Fire, Who By Water - page 145

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One of the hardest things we can do is to let go of pieces of ourselves. But if pieces of us have lived this year, and pieces have died, then Yom Kippur is the day we take stock and see how our tough times have helped us shed parts of ourselves that we no longer needed. And it is also the day we look inward and determine what else needs to go.

Friedman commented that Unetnah Tokef is a “frightfully succinct summary of [his] existence”. This scary list is our reality. And it is a reality that we prefer to avoid, but know that we need to encounter and embrace.

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Alexander Levy authored a book called, “The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change after the Death of Our Parents.”<sup>3</sup> In it, he writes:

We in Western culture currently consider death formidable and avoidable. We avoid thinking about it. We avoid preparing for it. We almost never talk about it and when we do, we avoid saying its name ... We avoid looking at death directly, as if trying to avoid eye contact with the playground bully,

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<sup>3</sup> Page 10

in the belief that if he doesn't notice us, he'll leave us alone. And yet the more we try to avoid facing the bully, the more menacing he becomes.

Yom Kippur forces us to confront that bully - to not just come face-to-face with the possibility that we might die, but to attempt to reconcile it. There is vulnerability in this day; we are constantly reminded of our mortality, and even more frighteningly, of our lack of control over it. Confronted with death, we are scared, fragile, and alone, even in a room full of people. As painful as it is to admit, some of us will not be here next year, and for better or for worse, those of us who are here next year will not be unchanged.

It is the act of facing our own vulnerability that lets us observe and accept our limitations - and this, in turn, affords us the opportunity to heal and overcome them. If we were given a grave diagnosis tomorrow, how might we change? What would we prioritize within our lives, our relationships, and our schedules?

Rabbi Sharon Braus writes:

The greatest spiritual challenge of the High Holy Days is to recognize the fragility of life, the brevity and capriciousness of human existence - but not in some distant, theoretical way. The challenge of the High Holy Days is to

confront the radically unpredictable trajectory of our lives and live as if every single day truly might be our last.<sup>4</sup>

We are not spending Yom Kippur bargaining with God *for* our lives - instead, we are debating ourselves, struggling to understand what is truly important *in* our lives, and how we can keep it in our sights during the inevitable tough times. Or put another way: the Yiddish proverb . דער מענטש טראַכט און גאָט לאַכט. (Der mentsh trakht un Got lakht)- “Man Plans and God Laughs,” so we spend Yom Kippur planning not what to do, but who to be in the coming year.

But what do we do with that fragility - the knowledge that the only certainty is uncertainty? How do we live with the unknown, navigating our own mortality without succumbing to the weight of it?

Unetannah Tokef gives us some guidance. Do t’shuvah, t’fillah, and tzadakah - repentance, prayer, and acts of charity, the prayer says. However, an earlier version of Unetannah Tokef said “u’tshuvah, u’tefillah, u’tzedakah **m’vatlin** et ha’gzerah”, instead of “**ma’avirin**” - that repentance, prayer, and acts of charity would **nullify** an unfavorable decree. The rabbis changed the prayer. They understood that we

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<sup>4</sup> Who By Fire, page 142-143

don't control our fate, and that there is no easy formula for living a good and long life - no panacea, no magic words, and no Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card.

It is comforting to think that we could have an answer - it fits neatly into the "Happy Ending" idea that Western culture has taught us to expect. But it's just not the case, and worse, if it was, any harsh outcome would be theologically challenging. So that line from UnetanaH Tokef now reads "Repentance, prayer, and charity *help the hardship of the decree pass*". We cannot change what will happen - but we can ensure that life is meaningful while we are here.

That is the goal of tshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah. Through these sacred acts of redemption, we create a fuller, richer life - a life worth living. We cannot extend the **years in our lives**, but we can extend the **life in our years**.

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As depressing as our liturgy seems at first glance, it is actually incredibly empowering. We don't have control over the end result - but we maintain some power over how we get there and what we do on the journey.



Rabbi Or Rose, of Hebrew College, writes:

We are not ultimately or exclusively in control of our fates. For all of our efforts at mastery in our personal and professional lives, the complex and unpredictable forces of existence are greater than any individual can fathom, let alone hold sway over. While this realization can lead to despair and apathy, it can also free us to focus our attention on those areas of life over which we do have control and to which we can respond meaningfully. Accepting our limitations, embracing our vulnerability, in other words, can actually lead to empowerment and transformation.<sup>5</sup>

It's a lesson I learned the hard way this year.

The day after tomorrow is the one-year-Hebrew anniversary of moving into our brand new home.

Almost from the day we moved in, we had *tzuris* - problems with the house itself, but also life, health, and job challenges. It felt like one blow after another. Feeling hopeless, a bit out of control, and at my wit's end, I sheepishly sent an email to a listserv for rabbis, asking about rituals for changing luck. As you might expect, I received a variety of responses, from amulets and prayers to the suggestion that we change our names.

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<sup>5</sup> Who By Fire, page 170

One of the responses was from a classmate of mine, Rabbi Ute Steyer - and her story captivated me. She told me about her 97-year-old Sephardic grandmother, who is known as a mystic in her community. If you have a problem, you go to Ute's grandmother and she has a ritual for solving it.

Here's what I learned: our tradition tells us that demons live in new homes. In fact, rich people used to hire people to move into their new home before they did, to rid the house of the demons. Sepharadim don't call them by name, but instead refer to demons as "los de abajos" (those from below) or just "Buena genta" ("good folks"). Not all of them are dangerous, but they are believed to cause all kinds of trouble and mischief.

What struck me most was the advice that Ute shared. According to her grandmother, her rituals are worthless if performed alone; rather, they need to be performed with a community. If someone needs to exorcise a demon, Ute's grandmother will only come and help if they invite the entire community. The belief is that it is not enough to say the blessings, make the amulet, or burn the incense - your troubles are your community's, as are the solutions. Extending the invitation makes you vulnerable, and forces you to publicly confront that which you wish you could just push away. At its core, the power of the ritual lies not in the actions or words themselves, but in sharing the experience with others.

So I told my family and friends that what I wanted for my birthday was for them to come to our home for a House Exorcism. They very reluctantly humored me. Everyone was skeptical; even my husband called me crazy for weeks.

We blew the shofar, recited psalms, burned cloves, and collectively made a piece of art with a chamsa on it that hangs on our kitchen wall to this day. We checked our mezzuzot for imperfections and put up new ones. And in case none of that worked, we burned sage in the corners of the living room, and got the dog to bark loudly to scare away any remaining demons.

{PAUSE}

A few months later, Josh has a new job, my mom's cancer is under control, and I am pregnant with, God-willing, a healthy baby. One might say that the exorcism worked!

Do I really think that demons were wreaking havoc with our lives? No. Nor do I truly believe that the rituals actually gave us any control over the situation. Still, it helped tremendously to invite our community into our struggles and to ask for help. I can't explain why so many things went wrong in such a short period of

time, but it gave us an opportunity to come face-to-face with some of our biggest fears - our financial vulnerability, our reproductive uncertainties, and our mortality - and to come out the other side. It allowed us to welcome God back into our lives as a partner, rather than an adversary.

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In her Rosh Hashanah sermon, my colleague and friend Rav Claudia Kreiman, from TBZ, highlighted the moment that Hagar faced her own death and the death of her child in last week's Torah reading. Wandering in the desert, without water, Hagar wept and sent her son away. It was at that poignant moment, the text tells us: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים, אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָ "Vayishma Elohim et kol ha'na'ar" - And God heard the voice of the boy.<sup>6</sup>

"That moment of fear", Rav Claudia says, the moment "of closeness to the unspeakable, [brought] an encounter with the Divine Presence." Embracing, rather than fearing the unknown brings us closer to God... and God closer to us. Perhaps it is because we are vulnerable, or perhaps it is through that vulnerability, that we forget our limitations. It is in the moments where we let God in, that we find great strength.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 21:17

Life is fragile. So often we sweep our deepest worries under the rug, rather than confronting them and changing the way we live. That is what Yom Kippur is about. It is a rehearsal for death - we wear the same kittel that we will be buried in at the end of our lives. We ask forgiveness from those we love. We say confessional after confessional, accounting for our sins. We avoid the pleasures of life, such as eating, drinking, intimacy, and bathing. We come face to face with our own mortality through our liturgy.

But because today is merely a rehearsal for death, tomorrow night, after the shofar is blown, we have an opportunity for renewal and rebirth. We get another chance at life. We don't know - we can't know - what the year will bring. But it is precisely that uncertainty that allows us to elevate the time that we do have. What we choose to do with that opportunity will help determine the course of our year. I pray that we each make the right choices.

Gmar Chatimah Tova.

We rise for Barchu on page 213