

Yom Kippur Day 5781

Our ancestors knew that much of what happened to them was beyond their control: illnesses and plague, natural disasters, pogroms, despots, wars....

The great sense of uncertainty they must have felt is expressed hauntingly in the same ancient prayer we read this morning as generations before us read, the *Unetaneh Tokef*:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed:
Who shall live and who shall die
Who in a ripe old age, and who before their time
Who by fire and who by water
Who by earthquake, who by plague
Who by hunger and who by thirst...
Who will wax rich and who wane poor
Who'll be tranquil and who troubled...

These images echo the feeling we often have that the world in which we live is so vast while we are so small. It says matter-of-factly what we usually pretend isn't the case: that we have little or no control over what happens to us since - vulnerable as we are - our personal destinies seem determined by arbitrary chance, divine judgement, mighty enemies, or nature's occasional brutality.

If this prayer ended here and wasn't also beautiful poetry, it would be a bleak assessment of life and the human condition, depressing us each year on the High Holidays rather than inspiring us.

But the prayer adds another line, not even a whole line actually, just a clause. It is this clause which, I want to suggest, makes this prayer one of the greatest assets our ancestors possessed to cope with their circumstances.

... But Teshuva -Repentance, Tefilah - prayer, and tzedaka lift the evil, bitter severity of the decree.t

These words are defiant, almost rebellious. They stand in contrast to the fatalism and awareness of the forces beyond our control that were just detailed, a shift of

focus away from death and despair, and from wondering upon whom they will soon fall.

What these words say is that despite all those malicious forces acting upon us, we still have the ability to respond to all that befalls us. More than that, we get to choose how we respond.

How exactly did these words from the prayer help our ancestors cope with difficult times? Is it really possible that in our time of pandemic, social upheaval, and seemingly increased incidents of natural disaster, that these ancient words could somehow be helpful for us too?

As always in Judaism, everything depends on interpretation:

... But Teshuva, Tefilah, and tzedaka lift the evil, bitter severity of the decree.

Teshuva empowers us to respond, in fact teshuva itself means “a response”: Even with reality swirling around us and pushing us around and far from what we had expected or planned for our lives, we can respond. We can choose to do teshuva – to return – to return to our best or truest selves, return to a relationship with God, return to our own thoughts and focus on the people we have become.

We get the message that despite all the harrowing possibilities of what could happen to us, we can turn and change ourselves – therefore we can never truly be victims of arbitrary conditions. Nothing is inevitable because with the possibility of teshuva – the possibility of changing - we remain ultimately in charge of who we are and who we become. We can't be blown off course by the buffeting winds of fate, because with teshuva we can always turn ourselves around, change direction and start making our way back.

Moreover, the idea of teshuva includes “an answer”, not necessarily a solution that solves anything about our predicament, mind you, but an answer, as in, as I said before “a response”. So, we may not understand why things happen to us, or feel we have any control over events, but we persist in seeking, in asking why, even in demanding answers and explanations and justifications from God.

Teshuva comes to teach us, perhaps, that the answers themselves are the experiences that raise the questions we ask with such temerity.

Then there is Tefilah – prayer. If through teshuva we focus on our thoughts, and (as we'll see) tzedaka is all about our deeds, then tefilah is primarily about our words. On all three planes – in thought, word, and deed – we strive against the idea of fate. We use words to create and share the vision of what we want, need and aspire toward, we use words to define, teach, and share our values, goals and dreams, and of course words express and convey our feelings.

Tradition teaches us that prayer is – *avodah sh'b'lev* – service of the heart. That is, the act of prayer reveals what our heart feels, what we might not be able to express any other way. Prayer is not only in words of course: music, dance...a hug can be a prayer, or as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said about marching across the Edmund Pettus bridge with Dr. Martin Luther King: "I felt like my feet were praying."

Like Teshuva and Tzedaka, Prayer is transformative. We need prayer all the more if we recognize that the world seems cruel or indifferent. We need prayer to remember how to be kind and to care, to recall what we aspire to be and to imagine what the world could become ...To quote Heschel again:

"Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods." We need prayer in order to remember who we are and become them once again, to remember where we are going, and which direction to set our course to get there.

And finally there is tzedaka. Tzedaka completes the idea we started with, that the ability to respond despite everything is a most crucial and radical tool to help us through difficult times. An act of tzedaka is an act of helping someone else, so doing tzedaka means opening your heart to see the needs of others. It gets us out of our all-too-often myopic focus on ourselves. And when we do recognize the needs of others, we can then discover that we have the ability to respond to their need. But what then leads us from thought and ability to the actual action is... responsibility. Remember that tzedkaka comes from the word "justice" ... tzedaka

is charitable giving that we sense is an obligation, an act of justice in an otherwise unjust world.

Finally, let's consider once again what was said earlier: that despite all those forces impacting us in ways we cannot control, we can nevertheless respond to all that befalls us.

... But Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedaka lift the evil, bitter severity of the decree.

We don't claim in this prayer that we can change the decree itself. We really can't change by very much what's in store for us. Things like pandemics, social injustice and unrest, the economy, and natural disasters will impact us. We really do not know who will live and who will die, or why this one has many years and this one has few.

But what this one redemptive line of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer tells us is that if we can do teshuva, tefilah, and tzedaka, then we control our response to whatever is decreed for our lives. And through these transformative experiences of responding, then whatever befalls us may not seem so severely evil or bitter after all.

This year, may we respond to life by determining our own thoughts, words, and deeds, by connecting and reconnecting to God, our true selves, and to others. May we discover that the world seems to respond to us as we respond to it: with a capacity for greater depths of joy and happiness, with seeking fulfillment and purpose, and with making our peace with all that awaits us.

Kein yehi ratzon – may it be so.

Gamar chatima tova – may you all be written and sealed for life in this New Year.