

Transcending the chaos.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah.

Earlier this evening, we stood together during Kol Nidre's powerful words and haunting melody. We collectively accepted the truth that we will not always be able to hold to our commitments and promises, and that all we can really count on is that the unexpected will most definitely occur. A few years ago, I learned from my teacher Rabbi Dr. Lawrence Hoffman that while this idea is important, it is only actually part of this holy day's larger message.

Often we get so caught up in the Kol Nidre prayer that we miss the drama of what's actually happening on the bimah— a beit din composed of three congregational leaders taking out the Torah scrolls from the ark, leaving an empty, or at least partially-emptied, ark behind it. Dr. Hoffman pointed out that in Hebrew the name for the space that houses the Torah scrolls is the *aron kodesh*—the holy ark—and when we remove that which makes it *kodesh*— the Torah scrolls— what we're left with is an *aron*, which in Hebrew can mean closet or cabinet, but also, coffin. And the coffin, Dr. Hoffman suggested, was the intended imagery for the start of Yom Kippur. We are meant, while contemplating our shortcomings and limitations, to face this stark visual. We are meant to wonder, what if this is it? What if this were my last day to live? Did I use my days well, finding meaning, and building a better world for my family and descendants?

Our mortal limitations appear throughout our High Holy Day liturgy, particularly in the text of Un'taneh Tokef, a passage that often makes Jews uncomfortable with its blunt theological perspective on life and death.

Un'taneh Tokef explores whether or not God will write us into the Book of Life, and if not, how we may die: by fire or by water, by strangling or by stoning, in joy or in sadness. It tells us that God may change our fates based on whether we engaged in *t'shuvah*, *t'fillah*, and *tz'dakah*—repentance, prayer, and righteous giving. Many of us are deeply troubled by this—the belief that God actively decides on our fate based on our behavior from the past year. I am one of those people troubled by this theology and I find it difficult to accept the literal meaning of this text. I do believe, however, that there is great value in its figurative message. I see Un'taneh Tokef as a meditation on the human condition. Rather than reading it as saying “today is your day of judgment, and this may very well be your end,” I see it as saying “death can happen to us at any moment, in any manner.” And this, to me, is a statement that we all need to hear, because it leads us to ask, “if death may come at any moment, what should I be doing while I am still blessed with life?”

In Un'taneh Tokef, Kol Nidre, and numerous other textual passages, Yom Kippur points us to the harsh reality that our worlds are by nature unpredictable and chaotic. Many of us feel chaos throughout our personal lives; as we face illness and disease, death of loved ones, job loss, unexpected changes in relationships, and certainly, our own mortalities. We feel what seems to be an ever-increasing amount of instability at the national and global scales, with war, famine, disease, terror, senseless hate of all kinds, climate change, and mass shootings, to name just a few. Even though we know that overall, the human condition has vastly improved over time, the impact of the chaos that remains, when it hits, feels as strong as ever. Today's liturgy takes us back there, to the unknown and the unpredictable. It forces us to look our existential fears right in the face and acknowledge them.

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But there is good news. Our tradition does not leave us in the emotional dust to deal with this harsh reality. We believe that there is a way, not to stop that which we can't predict, but to work through it and transcend it. We have a way of finding meaning in every moment, of bringing new order to this world, of making things count, and ensuring that we're satisfied and feel good about the limited time we have. We Jews understand that our God-given role in this world is partnering with God to repair and complete Creation, and this very much means imposing order, control, and predictability through belief and through action.

Our tradition teaches us that the mitzvot— our sacred obligations listed by Torah and taught by the rabbis— are the key to bringing order to this world, and the High Holy Day liturgy narrows the path down to three key acts, which I'm sure that you can cite with me. *T'shuvah, T'fillah, Tz'dakah*. The Machzor says, *t'shuvah, t'fillah, tz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'ah ha'g'zeirah*. Literally, repentance, prayer, and righteous giving remove the awful decree. And as before, though the literal approach doesn't work for many of us, a figurative approach can: repentance, prayer and righteous giving transcend the decree. They shift our focus. The limits of existence remain, but in busying ourselves with constructive and connective acts, we surround ourselves with a sense of order, with more control, and a whole lot of meaning. The *ro'ah g'zeirah* may very well yet exist, but when we seriously engage in these three paths, the so-called decree becomes significantly less the focus of our concern.

Let's take a few moments and explore these three paths so that we might get a better understanding of how they can actually shift our perspective.

T'shuvah? We can translate it as penitence, as repentance, or most literally, returning. Returning to who we are, to who we want to be. T'shuvah is making amends and repairing relationships. It is reflecting on our shortcomings, in connection to others, to God, and to ourselves, and knowing that we always have the ability to change, for the better, no matter what. Our tradition teaches us that we are all starting with good material— not with a hopeless, tarnished spirit, but with an essence that is pure. The morning liturgy reads, *Elohai n'shama shenatata bi, t'hora hi*. The soul you have given me, O God, is pure. Doing the work of T'shuvah— of acknowledging our shortcomings, making amends to repair any damage done, and not repeating the same mistakes over and over again— enables us to become our best selves, to feel good about who we are, and to stand in strength and self-assuredness before whatever may lay on the horizon.

T'fillah? Why would prayer make a difference in our outlook and resilience? For one, it provides for us a sense of connection to each other, our tradition, and our people. It offers us a regular dose of music, reflection, and spiritual learning. And more than that, a solid prayer practice provides order and rhythm to our lives. In a sea of busy-ness and bouncing from item to item on our calendar or phone, we pause and take moments to just be present, and meditate, and be in awe of the sublime. Prayer provides us with the Jewish version of mindfulness meditation, a practice that has been scientifically demonstrated to benefit us mentally, spiritually, and even physically. Our liturgy provides us with prompts to ponder on our desires and needs, our family and people, the grandeur of creation, and on gratitude and appreciation.

There's another function that prayer performs for me, however, that is absolutely extraordinary. I know that we're all familiar with the phrase *Barukh Atah Adonai*, translated as Blessed are You Oh God, or sometimes Lord. While this translation works for some, I know that there are many who are at best indifferent to thinking about God

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as a Lord and at worst, completely turned off. I prefer to use a different term when encountering the name Yod-Hay-Vav-Hey. Lord is in fact the translation of the word Adonai, which is not the word spelled out when we see those four letters. That four-letter name for God is one for which we've lost the pronunciation that was known in ancient times to the High Priest who would pronounce it once a year in the Holy of Holies, on Yom Kippur. These four letters also just happen to make up the Hebrew words for 'was, is, and will be'— '*haya, hoveh, and yiyeh.*' Which means, that when we pray to God whose name is spelled Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey, we're praying to the being who I and many others address as the Eternal One. And when I say blessed are you oh Eternal one, I'm tapping directly into the infiniteness of the universe and finding my place in it. To me, there is no better treatment against entropy than this.

Finally, tz'dakah: righteous giving. It is direct, concrete participation in improving this world through giving our money, our time, and other resources to make a positive impact on the life of another. In the moment we give, we create order. We improve society and bring justice to the world. The Torah tells us *Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof,*<sup>1</sup> justice justice shall we pursue, and this means working to bring justice, through all means, including monetary gifts. A chapter earlier, we read, "there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Eternal your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, God will richly bless you,"<sup>2</sup> We will be given the ability to support those around us in need, thus standing in the way of the unpredictability of life. And this certainly sounds to me like a good way of transcending that Ro'ah G'zeirah— that evil decree.

On the topic of tz'kadah, I recently heard a story that was a little ridiculous but which demonstrated just how powerful the feeling of giving Tz'dakah can be. I attended a lecture late this summer by one of the heads of SpacEL, the Israeli non-profit that sent up the B'reishit moonlander earlier this year. Yonatan Winetraub, one of SpacEL's

founders, told us that when things started to malfunction as they moved in for the landing, he remembers one of the members of the team grabbing five shekels from his pocket and putting it in the tzedakah box. The act was this man's go-to when he needed some added blessing, which I see as a way of exerting just a little bit of control in an impossible situation. Given B'reishit's "hard landing" on the moon, Winetraub reflected that the man probably should have put in 10 shekels. Ridiculous, perhaps. But tz'dakah served its purpose, bringing in a little bit more order and comfort in their world of unknowns.

T'shuvah, t'fillah, and tz'dakah may not guarantee us anything about what could come tomorrow, but they do ensure that we'll see things a little bit differently today. And, if we turn them into regular daily and weekly practices, like any other behavior in which we wish to learn, grow, and transform, we'll really notice a positive change in our orientation towards life.

Going back to the start of our conversation, it is important to note that seeing the ark as a coffin was not the end of the Yom Kippur story. The Torah scrolls go back into the ark. K'dushah is returned. And tomorrow evening at ne'ilah, after we've done the work of Yom Kippur, we will look into the ark, this time once again filled with Torah scrolls— an *aron* abundant with *k'dushah*. After we've done the work of working towards a life renewed, Yom Kippur presents us with exactly that: a space filled with holiness, and a year of positivity, order, and blessing.

May this year of 5780 be the year where we take control and make t'shuvah, t'fillah, and tz'dakah part of our regular lives as our go-to-habits and self-help practices. We can

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start small, committing to one additional act each week, and as we build momentum, we can add and add and add, until they become regular parts of our days and weeks. In doing so, we'll be more resilient, stronger, and ready for a life renewed. Perhaps, we might for the coming year make a significant commitment along each of those paths to make t'shuvah, t'fillah, and tz'dakah regular transformative parts of our lives. And together, we'll have the benefit of a strengthened community, better equipped to handle whatever may come our way, resilient, and always oriented towards possibility, hope, and renewal.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah, may we all this year feel present and sealed in that great Book of Life.

<sup>1</sup> Deut 16:20

<sup>2</sup> Deut 15:4