

Temple Emanuel
Kol Nidre
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Before Rosh Hashanah I often go into the Early Childhood Center to show the children the *shofar*. One year I took Rabbi Aaron's *shofar* -- long, twisted, and beautiful... almost as big as some of the children. When I raised it to my lips to blow, one of the children started to cry. He was apparently afraid the sound would be too loud. The teacher gently turned to him and said, "Use your words."

Use your words...

The prophet Hosea said the same thing to us in the *haftarah* this past Shabbat, Shabbat Shuva, the Sabbath of Returning. "Take words with you...and return to God..."

What words? What words are we supposed to bring with us that can help us turn, return, respond, restore?

Some of the words we've already talked about... words that ask for forgiveness, words that forgive, words that form the conversations we should have had or we need to have...

Tonight I want to talk about other words we bring with us... words of prayer.

We are told: "bring words"... and we certainly do! Look at this High Holy Day prayer book. It's filled with words. We speak them, sing them, listen to them - or don't listen. They move us; they challenge us. Sometimes they might even bore us - so many words, maybe too many.

Among them are the difficult words that crystallize the themes of this day... the words of the *U'netaneh Tokef*, words we sing tomorrow.

I have trouble with these words, especially this year. How can you read: "Who by fire and who by water?" Who by fire? My friends who had to evacuate their home in Calabasas because the fire got so close? Who by water? The victims of Hurricane Katrina, sick people trapped in hospitals with no way to escape, poor people without cars who couldn't leave? Who by earthquake? The more than 40,000 people killed in the South Asia earthquake? Who by epidemic? The threat of avian bird flu?

And how can you say this prayer that seems to suggest that God is right now making those decisions for the year ahead... deciding what will be in store for each of us this year... who by cancer and who by a drunk driver... who by an airplane crash and who by heart attack... who will fall in love and who will win the lottery. Yes, I know that prayer isn't theology, that I should be able to take a prayer seriously without taking it literally... but even so... this one seems so harsh, so unforgiving, so random.

The *U'netaneh Tokef* breaks my heart... because it is true. Life is harsh and unforgiving and random. Life happens...and death is part of life. In this coming year there will be floods and fires, earthquakes and epidemics... metaphoric and most probably also real. Some of us will live and some of us will die.

I look out over the congregation. I've been here long enough to know most of you. I've celebrated with you and I've mourned with you. I remember the one who sat next to you last year who is not with you this year; I know that some of you have a family member with cancer; and I also know that some of you have joy in store for you this year, the impending birth of a grandchild, an upcoming wedding.

The *U'netaneh Tokef* breaks my heart. That doesn't mean I believe in the God who seems to be described in it. I don't believe in a God who rewards some people with life and punishes other people with death. And I don't think that that was the intention of either the religious poet who wrote the prayer or the rabbis who selected this poem for our *machzor*.

Notice that in a traditional *machzor*, the *U'netaneh Tokef* is introduced by the word *uv'chen*...a word that doesn't translate easily. It occurs only twice in the Bible, each time in connection with the idea that much of what happens in the world is arbitrary. Both times *uv'chen* seems to point to the unfairness of life, so it's not about a God who punishes evil and rewards good, but about a world where life happens.

The randomness of life breaks my heart. Maybe it breaks the heart of God as well...

So what is this Book of Remembrance, this Book of Life into which we are inscribed and sealed? What is this "Day of Judgment" that the angels proclaim with fear and trembling? Who is judging? Who is being judged? Who is writing? What is being written?

God is writing, the prayer seems to say... and yet, I am writing too, with the life I live, the choices I make. Our days are like scrolls, our tradition says. Write on them what you want to be remembered.

And *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*... *ma'avirin et roah ha-gezerah*... the prayer continues. Returning, prayer, and acts of justice avert the severity of the decree.

The decree is the decree. It doesn't change. We are all eventually written in the Book of Death. We can't change the decree. But, says the *U'netaneh Tokef*, we can change the severity of the decree. We can't change the cards we are dealt, but we can decide how we will play them. God doesn't decide who by earthquake and who by epidemic, but God does give us the power to choose how to respond to whatever might unfold in the new year.

Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah. Let me start with *tzedakah*. How does *tzedakah* avert the severity of the decree?

The hurricane happened. But we have the power to lessen its severity by how we respond. And respond we did... and we are still responding. And we will be judged as a nation by how we continue to respond, not just through palliative relief but through systemic change... by working for a more accountable government, with more appropriate leaders in key positions. We will be judged by how long the aftermath of the hurricane holds our attention, even as other disasters crowd the front page of the newspaper.

The world sometimes feels overwhelming. We often feel powerless. But today is the Day of Judgment. We will be judged - by how we respond to what we see is wrong. What is it you need to respond to... the threats to civil liberties, to privacy rights, to the way you see our country moving? How will you respond this year? Genocide is still happening in the world... how will you respond this year? Will you join with our Jewish World Watch effort -- we along with twenty-three other synagogues in Los Angeles, educating and advocating to keep Darfur in our consciousness? [Display Jewish World Watch brochure, placed on every other chair]

What about local challenges... education, health care, elder care housing. How will you respond this year? Will you join with other congregants and say *Hineni*, "Here I Am" -- this year is the year I will take another step toward *tikkun olam*? [Display two-page *Hineni* sign-up sheets] Israel... will you register to vote in the World Zionist Congress election, so that moneys from the Jewish Agency will help support the work of progressive Judaism both in Israel and around the world? [Display brochure] Mitzvah Day -- will you sign up and be part of this congregational effort? [Display brochure]

Tzedakah averts the severity of the decree. These acts of justice, these acts of loving kindness, have the power to change the quality of our lives.

Second, *tefillah*: how does *tefillah* avert the severity of the decree? Members of the congregation, people we love, will get sick. There are really only two groups of people in the world, those who are sick, and those who are not yet sick, and the boundary between the two groups is so very porous. We can't change the decree. But we can lessen the severity by being a community, by visiting the sick, bringing food to a homebound, lonely elder among us. We notice the power of the *misheberach* we just prayed together, the moment it gave us to focus on someone we love who is ill. Just that noticing is often the gentle push we need to pick up the phone, to make a visit, to reach out and remind a sick person that he or she is not alone. *Tefilah* can avert the severity of the decree.

Prayer creates community; that's why we need a *minyan* for certain prayers. Community helps us feel part of something bigger, something that transcends our own challenges and dramas. Prayer connects us to divinity, and helps us remember that we are not the center of the universe. Everything that happens is not about us. Even bad

things, even challenges. Not “Why me?” but rather “How do I respond to whatever is happening... happening to me, happening to other people, happening to our world?”

Tefillah changes our perspective and so it can avert the severity of the decree.

Third, *teshuvah*: turning, returning, how can it avert the severity of the decree? The rabbis offer a startling image. They suggest that *teshuvah* begins with the circumcision of the heart. God will circumcise your heart... and then you can return to God.

Circumcision of the heart...what an image! Imagine... that our hearts are covered in a hard shell, protected, defended against being hurt, defended against feeling -- that the first step toward averting the severity of the decree is to remove the protective covering from our hearts, to break our hearts, so our hearts can open.

Tomorrow’s Torah portion describes that God has set before us a choice, life and death, blessing and curse. Choosing life begins with circumcising our hearts.

Sounds counter-intuitive at first, doesn’t it? One would think that the best way to protect yourself from a world in which some will die from fire and some by earthquake is to harden our hearts, to be really tough, to try not to feel.

But, no, the way to avert the severity of the decree, the way to write ourselves into the Book of Life, whatever might happen this year, is to open our hearts.

How? It is actually quite easy. We need to bring words with us...specific words we are about to pray in the *Amida: Modim anachnu lach*, “We are grateful to You.”

We need to bring these words into our prayer, into our consciousness, into our relationships, into the book we write with our lives. With these words comes the awareness that life is a gift... whatever it brings us.

You know sometimes when kids get mad at their parents they storm: “I didn’t ask to be born!” Strange that that insight often comes out of anger, but it is an important insight. None of us asked to be born. We just were. We didn’t do anything to deserve to be born. We just were. The givenness of our life is just that: given. And like everything given, it is a gift. No matter what challenges we have, no matter what problems... life is a gift. .

Sounds simple, but it really isn’t. Gratitude isn’t something that comes naturally to us, we who have so much. We often feel we have earned what we have; we’re entitled to it; in fact, we should even have more. So why should we feel grateful? Because if we admit that something is a gift, then we have to admit our dependence on the giver. A gift is something we can’t give to ourselves. We could buy the same thing; we could do the same thing for ourselves... but then it wouldn’t be a gift. By definition, for something to be a gift, it has to be given to us.

Maybe that's why it is hard. We want to be autonomous, not dependent on other people's help, not obliged to anyone.

About a year ago, a woman I had met a few times committed suicide. She was in her early seventies. As far as anyone knew, she wasn't sick. She wasn't even depressed. Her life was good. She had a husband who loved her, successful children, a wonderful career, even a house in the country. She had always said that she would commit suicide when the right time came in order that she would never have to be dependent on anyone else.

It was her choice... and maybe even her right... but she was wrong. She already was obliged to other people, her husband and children who were devastated, her friends who each felt somehow that they had failed her. She was already part of a web of belonging, of receiving as well as giving. But she couldn't say thank you. How sad...

None of us really is independent. There are claims on us -- from the people we love -- our parents, our partners, our children. There are claims on us -- from our tradition, our people, our country. There are claims on us -- and responding to those claims, being grateful for the gifts that come from those claims, is actually the source of our joy. We who have so much sometimes think that it is our possessions, or our accomplishments that make us joyful; but it isn't. It is gratitude that makes us joyful. When we say thank you, we are really saying: we are connected to each other. This interdependence is the source of joy. It is like being in love. And when you are in love, your heart is open; you are responsible for your beloved; you feel what he feels; what hurts her hurts you. You are vulnerable...and you are blessed.

Teshuvah begins with a circumcised heart... vulnerable, unprotected, a heart that can be broken... a heart that recognizes the amazing gift of life.

U'netaneh Tokef... the words mean: "Let us give power to the holiness of this day." We give it power by paying attention to what it demands of us, to accept the truth of our vulnerability -- that everything we love will eventually die, that everything changes. Everything changes, except the truth that life is a gift. We can respond to that gift with a circumcised heart, by being grateful, by giving back, by belonging, by *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*. That is what it means to choose life.

Tradition teaches that it is at this very moment, on Yom Kippur, that Moses came down the mountain the second time, carrying the second set of tablets, bringing with him, words. It was in reference to this time, this moment, that the verse from Proverbs refers when it says: "Write them upon the tablets of your heart."

Your words... bring them with you, as we enter the *Amida*, first in silence, then in shared song. Your own words, inscribed upon the tablets of your open hearts, the words that write the story of your life... your words... mingling with the words of our tradition.

Let them challenge, move, and remind you... of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*... and of being grateful for the gift of life.

Please rise, if standing is not too difficult for you, and bring the words of your heart to pages 260 to 268 for the silent *Amida*.