

Nitzavim 5779
Heaven and Earth
Rabbi Betsy Forester

TINY THINGS by Judith Heilizer

August 2019

I have been wondering about the tiny things
those
we barely see or even know of
no, not those tiny within our body things, those we cannot know of
except for the help
from the eyes we manufacture
those nameless X ray glimpses of our inner landscape
which give us entry into a world not meant for our intruding
which are more capable than we who make them
which we borrow from the land of magic
no, this is about the tiny black dot
that is moving in a straight line
on my white window sill
the smallest speck imaginable
just one blink away from invisibility
had I breathed a bit closer to it
I would have blown it away
I carefully place my finger tip into it's path
it stops a small distance from it
leaves just space enough to find a way around it
and moves on
I am uneasy, apologetic
I had not meant for you to be a laboratory specimen
you have eyes I think and maybe ears and also legs
you have children and you make decisions
and you live by their consequences
and maybe you are even immortal in one shape or another
I can't fathom it because I am not
and all the while you are barely visible
I wonder what is your purpose
could it be, perhaps, that on your shoulders
the Universe balances?

how am I to know?
but then
I am not willing to take the risk of finding out
by doing away with you
in an imperceptible sigh
or a wipe of my sponge
so tell me, little one
did you come to teach me
that power is not an aggregate of size
that each bit of universe contains all of the universe
am I to learn
that this infinite universe
is balanced
on the tiniest welcoming smile
the barest opening of the heart
the smallest bit of care for others
the barely visible gift of love
then let there be gratitude
for your taking a chance for all of us, tiny one
calling us to you
trusting that we will hear your message
trusting us with
All
there is

Sometimes I feel like that tiny bug in the universe. Do my choices really matter? Does anyone really care if I move in a straight line, if I stop, or if I run? Then Beth or Deb or Elissa will hear me running through the building and call out, "Walk, Rabbi!" and I realize that my choices may actually affect many people, not the least of whom is myself. So I walk back to my office contritely and sit down at my desk where my computer sits with 10 different tabs open and I try to clear as many as I can before it's time for Talmud Torah or evening minyan. But I have so many ideas and so many projects needing my attention so I end up with 12 tabs and a few books open on my desk, and I'm out of time. I shove my laptop into my backpack, trying to believe I accomplished something in all those hours with all those tabs. And although I know I've made progress, I wonder if the world will really be different if I ever clear those tabs or not.

The *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer that Rabbi Diamond will recite on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur seems to underscore the insignificance of human life. We are like withered grass, faded blossoms. We are passing shadows, vanishing clouds, blowing winds, floating dust. We are a dream that will fly away (translation by Rabbi Joel Hoffman).

I have taught many classes on the *Un'Taneh Tokef* but I never focused on that part. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer recently shared insights on this section that I would like to unpack with you today. He wants to understand what the text comes to teach us by laying out our ephemerality in such discouraging terms. He focuses on two verses in the prayer, seeks their sources in earlier works, and offers a message that I would like to teach find moving and helpful and to which I have added other sources to develop his ideas further.

I have provided the texts so that you can follow along. The first text is the poem I started with, and then you have the excerpt from *Un'taneh Tokef*.

“A person is like breath, his days like a passing shadow.” (Psalm 144:4)

This verse seems to mirror what we see in *Un'taneh Tokef*. But look at what comes next in the Psalm:

“O LORD, bend Your sky and come down; touch the mountains and they will smoke. (6) Make lightning flash and scatter them; shoot Your arrows and rout them. (7) Reach Your hand down from on high; rescue me, save me from the mighty waters, from the hands of foreigners.”

(Psalm 144:5-7)

Here, the Psalmist is asking God to change nature, to merge Heaven and Earth, as it were, to save one person--even though the human is like a passing shadow.

This changes the message! Our being mortal does not mean that we are worthless. In fact, the opposite is true: one person is worth being saved by God's own hand.

Now, let's look at the other verse:

“A person's origin is from dust and one's end is to dust...But You are Sovereign, the living and everlasting God” (*Un'taneh Tokef*).

The contrast between humans and God is highlighted in a midrash quoted here from *Eichah Rabbah*. The speaker in the midrash is the matriarch Rachel. Rachel is speaking

to God in defense of the children of Israel. God wants to punish them, and Rachel tells God to follow her example. She tells God a story about what really happened when Jacob spent his first wedded night with Leah. In the midrash, when Rachel learns that her father is going to put her sister Leah in Rachel's place so that Jacob will marry Leah instead, Rachel, of course, is very upset and wants to keep Jacob from consummating the marriage. So she makes a set of private signs with Jacob by which he will know which woman he is marrying. After she gives Jacob the secret signs, though, Rachel regrets it, because she realizes that it will put Leah to excruciating shame when Jacob finds her in the marital bed instead of Leah. Rachel has compassion for Leah, and in her mercy she not only tells Leah all the signs, but she also hides under the bed and coos to Jacob so that he will not realize that he is in bed with Leah.

So Rachel's spirit recounts all of that to God many years later, when God wants to destroy the Israelites. She says:

"If I, a person of flesh and blood, dust and ashes, did not have jealousy for my sister, and I did not cause her shame, then You, eternal, living King Who is merciful, why should You be jealous about idols, which have nothing to them? Immediately, God's mercies were rolled forth, and God said, "On your account, Rachel, I will return Israel to its place..." (Eicha Rabbah Introduction).

This is the connection Rav Elie makes: The comparison between a person of dust and ashes and God found in the *Un'taneh Tokef* is meant to remind God not only of the difference between humans and the Divine; it is also meant to recall how Rachel's compassion motivates God's mercy. God is asked to act as Rachel does, with unbounded compassion and mercy, to care tenderly for us, even though we are only human.

Rav Elie's point in exploring these lines from the prayer is to show that human beings matter to God. We possess a dignity and a value that call God to account and move God to lift us up in mercy and in love.

There can be found additional rabbinic views of the value of human beings in motivating God's goodness or improvement, such as Source # on your sheet, where human *t'shuvah* motivates Divine *t'shuvah*.

Our *parashah* tells us that Heaven and Earth are our witnesses. The two are juxtaposed in an unusual way, made equal in bringing testimony. More typically, especially at this season, we Heaven and Earth refer to two distinct realms: one, the province of God,

and the other, the created world in which we live. With the second, more typical, understanding in mind, I want to suggest that there that Heaven and Earth are symbiotic, overlapping, yearning toward each other, and shaping one another. We are very small, yes. We don't have all of the answers. But perhaps neither does God, and perhaps that is one reason God yearns to raise us up.

May the coming days of reflection and soul-searching lift our spirits and awaken God's presence within each of us.

And now I would like to offer a gift to Rabbi Diamond from the kahal. There is a poem by Rav Kook that we have sung together in the past year and I hope it may serve as parallel to what we have learned together today and bridge today's Torah with the Torah he plans to share with us on Tuesday. The message is that God is invested in us and wants us to raise ourselves up. It is on the last page of your handout (and below).

Ben Adam בן אדם

דרוש אותם	בן אדם
דרוש בן אדם	עלה למעלה עלה
וימצאו מיד	עלה למעלה עלה בן אדם
	עלה למעלה עלה
כי כוח עז לך	
יש לך כנפי רוח	בן אדם
יש לך כנפי רוח	עלה למעלה עלה
	עלה למעלה עלה בן אדם
	עלה למעלה עלה
כנפי נשרים אבירים	
אל תכחש במ	כי כוח עז לך
פן יכחשו לך	יש לך כנפי רוח
דרוש אותם	יש לך כנפי רוח
דרוש בן אדם	
וימצאו מיד	כנפי נשרים אבירים
	אל תכחש במ
בן אדם	פן יכחשו לך
עלה למעלה עלה	
עלה למעלה עלה בן אדם	
עלה למעלה עלה	

Ben Adam, Aleh l'ma'alah aleh

Aleh l'ma'alah aleh ben adam

Aleh l'ma'alah aleh

(2X)

Ki ko'ach az l'cha, yesh l'cha kanfei ruach

Yesh l'cha kanfei ruach, kanfei n'sharim avirim

Al tikachesh bam pen yikachashu l'cha

D'rosh otam, d'rosh, ben adam, v'yimatzu miyad.

(2X, then return to first stanza)