

Yom Kippur Morning 5783  
We Are Not Sheep  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

On the evening of June 14, 2018, I moved to Madison to become your rabbi. On the morning of June 15, as we waited for our moving van, my phone rang. It was a colleague, calling from Camp Ramah. She asked if I could meet a staff member who was coming to the UW Hospital here in Madison. The patient's parents would arrive in a few days, and the camp hoped that I could provide support until then. I asked my colleague if she could tell me anything about the medical issue, and she said the patient would tell me herself.

I went to the hospital to meet the patient. She was a young seminary student and she was fighting for her life. The medical team surrounding her welcomed my presence amidst the lifesaving measures underway. I introduced myself to the patient, who appeared terrified. Despite being attached to a ventilator she was able to communicate that she wanted me to be with her and to pray. I drew close, took her hand in mine, and began to sing, or chant. I felt her fear and her desire to survive the ordeal. I also perceived that the voice coming from my body did not belong to me, as if I were merely giving contours to a presence that held me there. As the physical drama I never could have imagined played out inches from me for what might have been an hour, I was aware that something spiritual was taking place in which my presence had become part.

The patient survived. In fact she left the hospital healthier than before. I left the hospital having witnessed for the first time, outside of birthing my children, the reality that our fates do not lie in our own hands, yet our essence does lie in our hands, and in our voices, and it matters. I had been a rabbi for nine days. That was my first pastoral call. Over the past four years, I have become more accustomed to experiencing that presence, although I remain every bit as awed by it.

On this day we unabashedly address God from the depths of our human condition. Hoping to renew our lives, we pick up a machzor that will guide us through the journey of this day. Today we are going to study a quintessential prayer of this season together, the *Un'taneh Tokef*.

Before we poke around in this prayer I want to acknowledge that it is a very difficult prayer for many of us. It says that our fates are sealed on this day, and for many of us that is frightening. I want to tell you from the outset that I do not believe the anonymous

author of the prayer intended to scare us and that it is worth trying to understand what the *Un'taneh Tokef* is trying to help us do.

Let's take a look at the text, shall we? You can find it in your machzor beginning on page 315.

Now, as we study this text it is important for us to understand three things. First, we are about to study a prayer. That's the setup. Second, as we study the prayer, we need to know that many of the words in the prayer are drawn from Biblical sources, and the contexts of those sources bear on our reading of this text. Third, this is poetry. As such, its structure informs its meaning. With all of that in mind, we are ready to explore the prayer together.

The *Un'taneh Tokef* has three main ideas and they work concentrically. That is to say, the beginning and the end create a container for what is inside. Within that container, there is an inner frame. And then there is the middle.

The outer frame celebrates a great, holy, and majestic God Who is interested in the life of each human being. The beginning introduces God as King and the ending asks God to use us as the vehicle by which the Divine presence is manifest on earth. The ending reminds God that God has linked the Divine name with ours. We are essentially holding God accountable to our relationship, even as God is holding us accountable to it.

Key words tell us more about God's investment in us and offer a subtext. The most important idea in the outside container is that God rules with *emet*, truth, on a throne established with *chesed*, love. That is to say, God sees the truth of who we are from a perspective of love. God loves us in the reality of who we are. Think about how that works. When you love someone, you want to see them thrive, and if they hurt you, you hope for reconciliation, if possible. We are not talking here about a judge who is out to get us, or even a judge who is impartial. This is not a god who is about power. It is a God who is about truth and love. We are talking about a God who is rooting for us and that is very important for us to keep in mind.

This loving God has a book called Sefer haZichronot, the Book of Remembrance. God is going to open that book, read about us, and hold us to account.

We need to know more about this Book of Remembrance in order to know if we should be afraid of it or not. As it turns out, in the entire liturgy of this season, the Book of Remembrance only appears only here, in this prayer. We look to our Bible for clues and find there two Books of Remembrance. One belongs to God. The other belongs to King

Ahasveros from the Purim story. The Book of Remembrance that belongs to God is found in the prophecy of Malachi. And guess what is in God's book: God's book is a record of the *good* deeds of decent people (Malachi 3:14-20). God has seen that good people have noticed what we see all around us: the quality of a person's character does not seem to figure into our fates. Good people suffer and wicked people prosper. So God sends Malachi to reassure them that God sees them, and their virtue matters. An appropriate message for today. Conversely, King Ahasueros's Book of Remembrance is written by a foolish and capricious King who reads his book on a whim, when he cannot sleep. The entire Book of Esther has the reader on edge because the fate of the Jewish community seems to ride on chance. This Book of Remembrance evokes our fear that nothing we do matters.

By invoking those two Books of Remembrance, the prayer invites us to be radically honest with ourselves and with God—to say that we want and need to be held accountable by a God who sees, knows, and love us, *and* that it is awfully hard to believe that God cares what we do, because we often experience life as a game of chance. We do not know how we are meant to fit meaningfully into a larger reality we cannot grasp.

The Book of Remembrance in the *Un'taneh Tokef* contains a unique feature. The author of this prayer imagines that we sign this book with our own hands: "*v'chotem yad kol adam bo.*" We co-create our fates by the moral quality of our lives. If we choose to lie, cheat, and steal, then we become scoundrels. If we regularly extend ourselves in kindness and compassion, then we become what we call "good people." People who are somewhere in the middle, which is most of us, must be on guard to keep the balance in our favor—and God is rooting for us.

We now understand that the framing of this prayer is that we have a loving God who is on our side, and a subliminal admission that we struggle to find evidence for that reality based on what we see.

Let's look now at the inner frame. This begins with "The great shofar will be sounded" on page 315, and on the other side of center, with "Each person's origin is dust" on page 316. This inner frame points out the contrast between God and us. God is great, boundless, and all knowing, and we are small, mortal, and limited in perception. Leading toward the middle, the prayer leads us to an abject confrontation with our mortality on the front end, and then, after the middle, we hold ourselves a bit longer in that humble acknowledgement. In this inner frame, the subtexts make all the difference.

We'll focus first on the "Great Shofar" and the "still small voice"--the *kol d'mamma daka*. The Great Shofar has an Biblical source. It comes from the prophet Isaiah, who speaks of a great shofar sounding at the end of a period of exile--which never actually came to be. By the time of the writing of *Un'taneh Tokef*, probably in the fourteenth century, the rabbis had transferred the setting of the "Great Shofar" to a vision of a final judgment at the End of Days. Astoundingly, the author of *Un'taneh Tokef* transfers that vision to this day.

Be that as it may, I think something else also is going on. I think the author wants the inner frame to reinforce the outer frame's big idea of *chesed v'emet*--love and truth and that may be why he juxtaposes a great shofar with the *kol d'mama daka*, the still, small voice, which I prefer to translate as the "soft, murmuring voice." Our Bible has a source for a shofar sound emanating from God, and a soft, murmuring voice, and each happens at Sinai.

When God reveals the Law to our ancestors, "the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder (Exodus 19:19). That is our foundational moment of Emet, truth. God is truth and God's Torah is truth. And it terrifies people. While the shofar blowing at Sinai is not described as "the great shofar," I think that "the great shofar" in Isaiah is referring back to the shofar at Sinai,

The soft, murmuring voice emerges much later, when the prophet Elijah climbs up to stand on the rock where Moses stood, and God asks Elijah, "why are you here?" God sees that Elijah is off course, and God speaks in a tone of *chesed*, lovingkindness, murmuring gently and repeatedly asking Elijah, "why are you here?" (I Kings 19). I believe we reenact this scene when we stand and tap on our hearts in *Vidui*, acknowledging that we have gone off course and asking ourselves why.

We have now embellished the inner frame by adding Torah, or Law, to the notion of Truth, and adding the soft, murmuring voice to the notion of love. Love becomes a channel for connection and not just a feeling one may have for another. This will be important as we move on.

Enter the sheep. The sheep metaphor is based on an early rabbinic text (Mishnah Rosh HaShana 1:2) which says that on Rosh HaShanah, all creatures pass before God "*kivnei maron*"--like sheep. It turns out that "sheep" probably is a mistranslation of that early text, but the author of this prayer doesn't know that and he uses the metaphor of sheep. We picture these sheep passing beneath the staff of their shepherd and our first feeling is fear.

Now, the prototypical Biblical shepherd is David, who literally waxes poetic over his love for his flock and his delight in their antics. He especially loves when his sheep raise themselves up, lifting their horns in the exuberance of being alive. What a lovely metaphor for us and God.

But, of course, the shepherd also knows what the sheep do not know: which sheep will be plucked from the herd, and when. Like sheep, members of our human flock are plucked out never to be seen again. Like sheep, we do not know the broader reality of our lives. We do not know our fates.

But we are not sheep, and what happens in the life of a sheep is completely different from what can happen in the life of a person. They are hapless; we are not. They are not used to reflect God's presence on earth; we are. That difference, I believe, is the point of this entire prayer.

The other side of the inner frame, the section starting with "Each person's origin is dust" has an important subtext. Here, the author brings a series of Biblical quotes to describe the human condition and underscore that we are small, mortal, and limited. We are dust and will return to dust. We are "like withering grass," "a passing shadow," "a vanishing dream." I find it fascinating that half of these metaphors draw from Biblical sources where God always loves us, never loses faith in us, helps us reshape our lives, and saves the faithful—if not now, then at some future time. And half of these metaphors come from Job, who epitomizes the human condition at its most tragic: Even the faithful may encounter loss after loss, without knowing why. The prayer presents these metaphors in a jumble, not arranged in any sort of balance, as random as life on earth often seems to us. The inner frame thus situates us in an extremely humble place, while acknowledging that from our limited perception, ultimate reality can feel arbitrary, God has created us with that limited perception.

From this stance of deep humility, we now confront our most essential vulnerability. We have arrived at the center of the *Un'taneh Tokef*, which has two parts: a claim and a response.

Here is the claim: "*B'Rosh Hashanah yikatevun, uv'Yom Tzom Kippur yeichateimun.*" "On Rosh Hashanah is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many will pass on and how many will be born, who will live and who will die," the individual circumstances of each person's death, and the quality of life in store for those who live.

The claim is that our fates hang on the work of this day. Where does that come from? Does the Torah say so? Not really. The Torah tells us that this day is profoundly important for atonement. No other day is given in the Torah for this purpose.

Very early on, our sages calculated 40 days from the Sin of the Golden Calf to Yom Kippur—the first 30 making up the month of *Elul*, during which we take account of our lives, and the final ten beginning on Rosh HaShanah and ending on this day. Over many centuries, our sages developed a detailed theology around the idea that our fates are sealed on Yom Kippur. (By the way, although our biblical ancestors are punished severely for worshiping the golden calf, God forgives them and does not condemn them to perish for that sin.)

Now, I want to tell you something. The idea that God seals our fate today, I believe, is a human invention. The closest God comes to weighing in on a timeline for saving ourselves is found in the words of our prophets. They prophesy over and over that God will always take us back, at least communally. Nowhere does God make Yom Kippur a zero sum game.

As for our sages, most say what Maimonides later codifies: Yom Kippur is the apex of forgiveness and pardon, both individually and communally. But they also say many other things that complicate the picture. For example, this day does not atone for wrongs we have committed against other people; for those, we must seek forgiveness from the people we have wronged. And, they say that even if we are wicked our entire lives and repent only in the final moments before we die, God will forgive us and grant us atonement. They also tell us that some of our sins will take longer for us to work out, and we should take the time we need. As you can see, the business of atonement is not at all simple.

It is possible to read the rabbis and conclude that our fates are, in fact, sealed on this day, even if God grants us atonement later. But I don't think we need to believe that our fates are sealed today, for three reasons. I'll tell you two of them now. First, as I mentioned, I believe this is a human idea, and it is abundantly clear that either our understanding of Divine reward and punishment is limited, or there is no Divine reward and punishment (God forbid). If either of those is true, then we do not need to accept the idea that our fates are sealed today.

Secondly, other voices in our tradition that argue to the contrary. The Talmud records a dispute in which Rabbi Elazar says that once God's sentence is issued, there is no breaking the seal, and Rabbi Yitzchak disagrees. He says: "Crying out to God is effective for an individual, whether before or after one's sentence has been issued. God

will rescind the sentence even after it is sealed (Rosh HaShana 18a). The fifteenth century Spanish rabbi, Isaac Arama, maintained that the judgment given at this season does not contravene the forces of nature. While he allows for the possibility that there may be deaths that will come as direct punishment for certain sins, the natural trajectory of illness is built into Creation itself—*"Olam k'minhago noheg"* and does not depend on our character or deeds. That means that if we are in danger from illness, our best help lies in medical intervention. That makes a lot of sense to me. But the author of *Un'taneh Tokef* goes hard on the idea that our fates are sealed today.

It is reasonable for us to ask why. Why do we have this prayer that places this very scary idea at its center? What is going on here? I am going to offer two possible explanations that I think are reasonable.

The first is that we make this line scary. This entire prayer is framed in the assertion that God is on our side, sees us for who we are and loves us, and wants us to represent God's presence on earth. And we get to *this* line and we say, "*Oh, no!*" Why do we do that? I think we make this line scary because the stakes are so high. We want to live! And we don't know how God works, we don't know our fates, and we feel as helpless and hapless as sheep.

The second reason—and I am going to say something bold here (shocking, I know)—is this: what is going on here is Religion. Religion is something we construct to help ourselves thrive. Our sages created this religion, Judaism, in which we can and do repent every day. Some of them came up with this particular timeline within which God seals our fates, and most went along with it, for the following, very good reason: We need a sense of urgency to motivate us to do the work that we really and truly need to do. They knew, and we know, that if not for this day, we might never bring ourselves to the point of humility, our mortality laid bare, that moves us to say, "But wait! We are not sheep. We are people, invested with purpose, and we have a job to do here. Let us transform our lives so that we can build a world that reflects God's dream for us here on earth."

Moreover, they knew, and we know, that not only might we never get around to doing the hard work of transforming our lives, but we would never come together in sanctuaries like this one, all around the world—now also via technology—to do this work together. And they knew, like we know, that we need each other for this work.

We need to do this work together because we hold each other up, and because being in one another's presence gives us a setting from which we generate our response, which is: *Ut"shuvah, u'tfillah, u'tzedakah ma'arivin et ro'ah hag'zeirah.*

*Tshuvah, t'fillah, and tz'daka* transform the harshness of our destiny. This idea comes from both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds,\* but here, with a crucial change. Both Talmudic versions assert that we can annul a bad decree against us, but this prayer says something different: that no matter what travails we face, our lives have meaning. We are here for a reason and our effect on the world is eternally important. There will be people who die in the coming year, and there will be suffering. We cannot change that. What we can do is live with purpose and integrity and know that the entire world order is affected by that choice. *T'shuvah, t'fillah, and tzedakah* are our compass.

(\*See: *Jerus. Taaniyot Ch. 2 fol. 65b: "Three things annul the evil decree— to wit: t'fillah, tzedakah, and t'shuvah," also in Breishit Rabbah 44:13; and BT Rosh HaShanah 16b: "Four things tear up the verdict against a person, to wit: tzedakah, shouting (=prayer), changing one's name, and changing one's actions.)*

I want to tell you what these three terms mean because I think we tend to misunderstand them.

- *T'shuvah* is a constant process of recalibrating to our true north—a process which reaches its climax today and is a necessary part of every day.
- *T'fillah* means self-reflection, in which we attempt to engage the Divine, through the voice of our tradition and our own inner voice.
- *Tzedakah* comes from "tzedek," justice. *Tzedakah* means giving of our resources to create a more just and compassionate world, because that is how God's presence manifests on earth.

And now I can tell you the third reason why I don't think we need to let the "now or never" aspect of this prayer's claim frighten us. The third reason can be found in the prayer itself, at the end of the response, on page 316. Here, we remind God that God is slow to anger and easily appeased. We tell God: "You do not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that we change our ways and live. You wait until the day of death, and if one returns, you accept that person back immediately." Those words ought to put us a bit more at ease and help us focus on the essential message, to wit: *We are not sheep.*

But we *are* dust.

We are dust, yet somehow we are on a path to eternity. We have a compass to help us find our way, and path paved with *Chesed v'Emet*, love and truth. We have the soft, murmuring voice to connect us to one another and to God, and the shofar—Torah—to signal our particular way of walking in the world. We cannot choose the length of our



days, however much we wish we could. But we do choose how to respond to the great gift of being alive.

My beloved teacher and advisor, Rabbi Alan Kensky, has a young grandson named Simon. Simon loves to see his Sabba, and he really loves when his grandfather blesses him. After a recent visit, Simon wrote his Sabba a thank-you note. And this is what he wrote to his Sabba: "I want to bless you with all my care." "I want to bless you with all my care." Knowing that we are seen and loved motivates us to open our hearts and pour out goodness as a gift and a blessing to others. You can imagine the effect of little Simon's words on his Sabba. I believe that young Simon articulated the soft, murmuring voice—the *kol d'mamma daka*. It was that same voice that allowed me to help the frightened woman in the hospital.

I stand firmly in our tradition when I say that this is a day on which we strive to hear that soft, murmuring voice and on which we are especially receptive to what it wants to tell us. It is the voice of love that draws us near to one another, that allows us to feel more alive when we sing out together in fervent prayer. It is the voice that coos to us in synagogues and study halls and gently calls us toward the truth of our lives. It is the voice that renews our hope of thriving in a world that often feels confusing and disappointing. That voice is the voice we need to hear today. Let us not get trapped by words on a page. Let us instead open our hearts and listen.

May we inscribe ourselves for good in God's truth and love, and may God steady our hand.

G'mar chatimah tovah.