

Judgment
Rosh HaShanah 5770
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At the start of a new year, we ask ourselves questions. In fact, they are the biggest questions of them all: who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall live and who shall die? When we hear these questions, we know they are not just poetry, not just liturgy. In our own lives, they are real.

The Unetane Tokef, which we are about to pray, asks us those questions. And it provides an answer as to how they will be resolved. God, it says, is “Judge and Arbiter, Counsel and Witness.” It sounds as if we stand before a God who weighs our deeds from the past year. God then either rewards us with health and well-being, or punishes us with illness, suffering, even death. In this model, God is a being who is far away from us, a judge who is strict, harsh, even merciless.

This understanding, however, is only one particular theology, one possible description of who God is, and what God does. And there is a big problem with this theology. We all know that wonderful people, who do good in the world, sometimes become ill and die at too young an age. We know that people who cause others harm sometimes prosper. We see this in the Bible, and we see it in our own lives and in the world around us.

So we may need a new theology to help us understand the words of the Unetane Tokef, and resolve the challenging questions of our lives.

I was introduced to such a new theological approach by my teacher at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, Rabbi Nancy Flam. I offer it now in the hope that it can help alleviate some of our suffering, and deepen our sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves, even when things are not easy in our lives.

In the Unetane Tokef, God is called judge. Yom Kippur, coming up next week, is also called Yom Din, the day of judgment. But in order to say that what happens in our lives is not an individual judgment on us, we have to see judgment, *din*, not as reward or punishment. Rather, judgment is the setting of limits, the creating of boundaries that we need for life to exist. A judge, in a court, decides what falls within the bounds of the law, and what is outside the bounds. When God created the world and all life, God did so by setting limits. God separated light and darkness, land and sea, the types of plants, animals, and finally, humans. We are what we are. We are not what we are not. God’s judgment, in this new model, is morally neutral. It simply defines life, and makes it possible.

In this way, illness is not a punishment, and not an individual decision upon us. Rather, it is simply a reflection of the limits of our physical being that is part of Divine judgment, of limit-setting. Our bodies are limited. We all experience illness, and we all die. Similarly, there are limits to our own personal capacities, limits to the financial system

we live within, and limits to the resources of our world. Living within these limits is hard; it sometimes causes us pain, sometimes even unbearable pain. But the fact that our bodies are susceptible to illness, and that our lives are vulnerable, is not an individual punishment for us; rather, it is a fundamental category of existence that makes us the same as every other person who has ever been, or ever will be.

When we hear any bad news, including the news of someone's death, we are told to say the blessing *Baruch atah Adonai, eloheynu melech haolam, dayan haemet*. Blessed are you, Adonai our God, the Judge of Truth. In this new definition, we are not calling God the Judge who decided that this person deserved to die right now. Rather, we are acknowledging God whose judgment made us all finite, because nothing, except for God, is infinite.

And fortunately, judgment, *din*, is not the only force with which God created life. There is also *rachamim*, mercy. In fact, there is a midrash that says that God originally thought to create the world with *din* alone, but then realized that the world would not stand without the softening affect of *rachamim*, mercy. Mercy is what makes it possible for us to endure the suffering that judgment sometimes brings us. We bring mercy into the world when we visit the sick, comfort the mourner, and clothe the naked. Our job as human beings, and as Jews, is to continually weight the scales more and more to *rachamim*. In the words of Unetaneh Tokef, that we will soon pray, we *ma'avirin et roa hagzera*, we "temper judgment's severe decree." Judgment is morally neutral, but how we respond to it, with mercy, can be morally good. We can't overturn the limits of *din*, but with *rachamim* we can soften their effects, and even push against those limits too.

There is also a challenge in this new theology. It says there is no intended message in our troubles, and that may be hard to accept. When we have an illness, we may wish to find its silver lining, for example, what it can teach us about our priorities in life. But if illness is just an instance of our being limited, and not a specific Divine message, then even if being ill may be a profound time for us, it is inherently no more meaningful than being well.

Two years ago, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She required multiple surgeries, and heavy chemotherapy over much of a year. It was a tough time for her and my father, and we all worried about her. Thank god, now, she's doing fine. And the experience did cause her to appreciate much in her life in a new way. But this theology says that her cancer was neither a punishment nor an intentional opportunity. We are neither more connected to God, or to meaning, nor are we less connected to God, or to meaning, when we are sick, or struggling. This new theology, with a new definition of judgment, means that we don't have to add to our suffering a layer of questioning what I did to deserve it. And even if illness does prompt a new appreciation or awareness, that is not an explanation why we were given an illness either. We didn't get sick for a Divine reason. We got sick because of biology.

So if we don't see intentional meaning in our illness or our other struggles, where do we find meaning? Where do look for connection to something deeper, perhaps, to God?

All talk about how God works is speculative, is strictly an intellectual exercise, until we hold it up to the lens of our own life experience. What we can know for sure about God and how the universe works, all we can know for sure, is what we sense, and what we feel. It is the kind of knowing we do with our whole being. To know what we sense and feel, we have to be present, and allow ourselves to fully engage in what is real, as opposed to what we hope, or fear, may become real. What do I smell, see, and touch, right now? What am I feeling, in my heart, right now? It might have been different yesterday, and it surely will be different in the future, but no matter. That is not now. We can make a choice to be present to what is real, to all that is real, right now.

That means being present both to *din*, and to *rachamim*, to judgment and to mercy.

Being present to *din* means feeling the results of life's limits, however painful. What are the limits of my body? What are the limits of the length of my life? We also can try to be present to all of *rachamim*, of mercy. How are we supported by others in our struggles, right now? How do we feel connected to others by reaching out to them in their struggles? How do we perceive the presence of beauty, and of love, in all their wondrous forms?

The way to feel well, to be okay, no matter what is going on, is to be whole. That means being in touch with all that is real in our life, and not cut off from anything, even from what is hard. We try to be really present to the wonderful moments, and enjoy them fully. We also try to be present in the painful moments, and let ourselves feel that, too. The hope is that with this kind of awareness, pain will be more tolerable, and pleasure will be greater. That's why I say there is no special message in illness. That is because there is just as much message, and meaning, potentially, at all times.

A model that Rabbi Flam offers for this kind of spiritual openness is that of being a parent. So if you are a parent, consider your own child for a moment. If you are not, consider any child whom you have cared about. As parents or adults who care about children, we strive to be present to all the experiences of our children, not just the pleasant ones. We hope to be fully with them when they experience joy, and equally so when they feel frustration, disappointment, or pain. We know that a life of pleasure alone is what we might wish for our kids, but it is not reality. We want to help prepare our children to experience everything fully, to endure and even thrive, no matter what will come their way.

So too we must try to be present to the variety of our own experiences, to pain and to pleasure, not seeing some as good and some as bad, as reward or as punishment, but rather, all as part of the whole of our lives. Our tradition teaches us that all experience comes from the same source. The Zohar, the essential text of Jewish mysticism, says "There is no place where God is not." In this theology, God is not far away, powerful, sending us reward and punishment. God is right here, in every experience, at every moment.

And when, no matter how hard we try, we just can't find that kind of presentness to all that is going on in our lives, we can still try to help others find it. We can still turn to the people we love and help them feel that their suffering is not a punishment, and that it is okay to feel all that is real in their lives. Every experience is a way to feel connected, to feel meaning, to be fully alive. When we allow ourselves to be open to more of life, we are open to more of the reality of the Divine.

We turn now to the Unetane Tokef.