



Days of Awe

A time for reflection and a call to action

THE UPCOMING holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – also known as the Days of Awe or the High Holy Days – will be very different this year, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. In Jerusalem, where I live, it appears that attendance in synagogue in large numbers will be prohibited.

Reform and Conservative synagogues will hold services via Zoom, which will be very strange since they will lack the power of crowded synagogues with their feeling of intense community.

Orthodox and many Conservative synagogues will not use Zoom on these holidays, but will have small gatherings of limited numbers of participants, mostly outdoors.

In this year of the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be much on our minds for personal and communal reflection. Foremost will be issues of life and death, sickness and health, in the light of so much illness and mortality in the world during the past several months.

Will any of the prayers and poems that we recite on these holidays help us deal with these issues? Will they stimulate us to think about our lives as human beings on this fragile planet, where hurricanes, tornadoes, heat waves and wild fires are happening more frequently and with more intensity?

In my mind, there is one prayer which will ring true with so many of us this year on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is actually a poem, a *piyut* (Hebrew for a religious poem from the Medieval period). It is known as “Unetaneh Tokef” prayer, loosely translated as “The Sacred Power of This Day” (see the Mahzor Lev Shalem of the Rabbinical Assembly).

This poem is usually sung with seriousness and sensitivity by the cantor, often with a choir, or by the *shaliach tzibur* (the person leading the service). There are many popular melodies for this prayer, including one that we hear in Israel on the radio for weeks in anticipation of these holidays, which have helped make this liturgical poem well known among secular as well as religious Jews.

In a majestic metaphor, the Jewish poet of the Middle Ages imagined God is like a shepherd and we, the Jewish people, are his flock. This intensely religious poet wrote:

“As a shepherd examines the flock, making each sheep pass under the staff, so you (God) will review and number and count, judging each living being, determining the fate of everything in creation, inscribing their destiny.”

I do not take this poem literally, any more than I would try to understand any other poem word for word. Like many good prayers and poems, it is mainly symbolic, laden with meaning. I don’t really think that my destiny is actually inscribed during these High Holy days. But I do think that this prayer – and others during these days – help me think about my place on this earth as a human being and as a Jew who has a responsibility to myself, my family, my community, my people, the human family, and to the earth.

And then come the really serious verses that I believe resonate

with us so much every year, and especially this year:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the fast of the Day of Atonement it is sealed.

How many will pass on and how many will be born?

Who will live and who will die?

Who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end?

Who will perish by fire and who by water? Who by sword and who by beast? Who by hunger and who by thirst? Who by earthquake and who by plague?

Wow! It is almost as if this poem was written by someone living today. Without doubt, these are the central questions that are uppermost in our minds this year as we are mindful of so many people becoming ill and dying during our current plague. At the same time, we are painfully aware of the massive fires in California and other places, and the terrible rain storms of recent years, which get worse and worse as climate change deniers prohibit the necessary environmental legislation that is vital to save our Earth. In addition, we are witness to more and more severe earthquakes in the world, as well as the current plague of the coronavirus!

So many people during the current coronavirus plague have come to an untimely end. Moreover, all too often this has happened as a result of the irresponsible mishandling of the plague by so-called leaders in many countries, including the one I live in, Israel, and the one I used to live in, and am still a citizen of, the US. So many lives could have been saved by quicker and more intelligent science-based action! I sometimes think that our most serious plague is the one of self-centered, immoral leadership in today’s world.

The first part of this prayer lies in the existential questions that it raises for us to think about. But there is more.

The second half suggests a powerful and poignant way for us as Jewish human beings to improve our lives, to make the best of them, even in these difficult times.

Teshuvah, T’fillah and Tz’dakah have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.

According to a creative responsive reading in Mahzor Lev Shalem, the real meaning of this punch line is:

“Repentance, prayer and good deeds have the power to change the character of our lives.”

I have purposely used this new translation, since I think that it is better than the older ones in previous prayer books. The most common translation – the one that many of us grew up with – which was based on medieval Hebrew, read: “Repentance, prayer and charity cancel the harsh decree.”

It was as if we could somehow avoid illness or death. While some sickness in our lives and death are both inevitable, we have within our human power the abilities to deal with these challenges in new ways, with great resilience, that were not possible for previous generations. Some people live lives of continual suffering; others find



A man blowing the shofar at the Western Wall days before Rosh Hashanah

ways to deal with pain and injuries creatively and with fortitude. Some people face death only with fear and trembling; others find ways to die with dignity.

The message of this prayer – and of the High Holy Days as a whole – is that we have within us the capacity to change, to be better people, to create a more just and fair society, for all of God’s children. In addition, it is clear that repentance and prayer alone are insufficient. Showing up in the synagogue and worshipping on these days is not enough. Rather, these days are designed to help us become better human beings, to care not only about ourselves but also about our family, our friends, our community, our people and our planet.

At this time, this means that we will act responsibly and ethically by wearing masks, observing social distance and washing our hands regularly. This will demonstrate that we care not only about ourselves but also about other people, about public health, the health of our communities and societies.

In addition, it will mean that we join with others around the world to protect our planet from extinction, and urging our governments to pass responsible environmental laws. It will also mean that we act responsibly by voting for ethically sensitive leaders who are neither narcissistic nor corrupt, but who have the genuine interests of their countries and their people in mind.

Yes, repentance – going through a genuine process of change – and prayer and good deeds contain within them the power to change the character of our lives. They can give us some reliable resources to transform the harshness of our destiny as responsible, ethical,

caring human beings.

The “Unetaneh Tokef” prayer is chanted on Rosh Hashanah before the blowing of the shofar: “The great shofar will be sounded and the still small voice will be heard.”

When I was growing up, my father, Rabbi Leon Kronish, who served as the rabbi of Temple Beth Sholom in Miami Beach, Florida, for more than 40 years, prepared a special supplementary booklet for Rosh Hashanah, which included “Unetaneh Tokef.” I bring it with me every year to synagogue on this holiday. I remember learning from him that the still small voice is the voice of conscience. In this service, he talked about the meaning of the blowing of the shofar. Among other things, he wrote:

“The shofar reminds us of the Biblical command: ‘Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof.’ The shofar once again sounds the clarion call to freedom. May the republic of Israel herald humanity’s redemption from oppression, injustice and war.”

When we hear the shofar this year – whether in person or via Zoom – let us be mindful of our destiny and our ability to shape it for the betterment of our societies in the here and now.

Shana Tova! May it be a good year, a better year, a healthier year. ■

*The writer is a retired lecturer, educator and interreligious peace activist. His most recent book is *The Other Peace Process: Interreligious Dialogue, a View from Jerusalem* (Hamilton Books, 2017). He is currently working on a new book about peacebuilders in Israel and Palestine. For more about him, see his website <https://ronkronish.com>*