

Unetaneh Tokef: Articulating the Inevitability of Uncertainty Rosh Hashanah Day I

I.

I remember February and March, just over six months ago, when we were brainstorming and planning all sorts of program ideas to keep the shul active and lively. We were working to create a vision that would make the shul an attractive destination for Jewish life in the community. Shul School was just getting off the ground again, and we were setting dates for the Sisterhood *tefillah* talks.

I remember thinking out the details of the *mechiras chametz* schedule, picking the right time to hold the Pesach Q&A *seudas shlishis*, and selecting a relevant and meaningful topic for the Shabbos Hagadol *drasha* that would take place as normal in the main shul.

I remember that on Shabbos, March 4, we were discussing at kiddush the fate of our scholar-in-residence program to take place one week later. Concerns raised included: “what happens if we find out later in the week that we can’t serve food, or that we have to cancel altogether?” And I vividly remember feeling “why are we creating this panic? What could possibly happen one week from now?”

Everything I described above constituted routine planning at the time. In life as we once knew it, the notion that all of these different initiatives would be canceled would have been absurd. Who would have thought to say, “beware, there is a strong chance none of this will happen, at least as you planned it?” Sure, “man plans, God laughs,” but that’s occasional. Of course there is in-person *mechiras chametz* and the Shabbos Hagadol *drasha* every single year! Only in very unique circumstances do you cancel a scholar-in-residence the week before because people will not be able to come to shul (would even a blizzard stop that?)!

Except that now we know, if we did not before, that whatever is a “given” is a maybe and an uncertainty. “Im yirtze Hashem,” if Hashem wills it, is not a platitude but a truth. A relatively less severe casualty of the novel coronavirus was knowledge and certainty.

II.

What is like to say “Unetaneh Tokef” this year?

This *piyyut* (poem) is one of the most climactic points in all of Yamim Noraim davening in the Ashkenazi tradition. It begins by declaring the sanctity of the day and Hashem’s role as both king and judge. The *piyyut* invites us to imagine the Heavenly court and Hashem’s assuming the throne to carry out our judgment; it paints the scene of each human being passing by Hashem one by one, each of whom will receive a decree. I invite you to read the *piyyut* in English to remind yourself of the intensity of this description. But I need not convince anyone that this piece is one of the most famous of the Yamim Noraim and perhaps most emotional. As Professor Reuven Kimmelman writes, “the impact of U-n’taneh tokef is due to the bluntness of its message, the density of its language, and the simplicity of its poetics. All our anxieties and

apprehensions on this day of judgment are mediated through its rhythm and images with horrifying exactitude.”¹

The “anxieties and apprehensions” are not merely present in the description of Rosh Hashana as an “awesome and dreadful” day, nor in the shofar that announces impending judgment, causing even the angels to present. But rather, it is in the blunt rhetorical questions that follow that bring out the “anxieties and apprehensions” of this season. The piyyut says:

Who will live and who will die? Who will die at his predestined time and who before his time? Who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by storm, **who by plague**, who by strangulation, and who by stoning? Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be degrade and who will be exalted?

While we are used to feeling control in many areas of our lives, Unetaneh Tokef reminds us that our very own life is out of our control. Based on the Gemara, we are told that “average” individuals, most of us, are assigned a fate on Rosh Hashanah that is sealed on Yom Kippur. We are standing in shul, thinking back to a year ago, but also thinking forward a year from now: what will transpire? Is there something that I cannot anticipate that can happen? How similar or different will my life look at this time next year? However, many years can pass by relatively uneventfully, and while we accumulate experiences over time, there is a certain familiarity that we may be accustomed to from year to year as we stand in shul. The fates described in the poem may not have seemed to transpire in a way that dramatically alters our lives, and therefore it is abstract. We may suppose that things can happen, but last year was not so different from this year, and maybe next year will not be so different from this year. Furthermore, the piyyut does not guarantee that bad things will happen – perhaps some of us will grow in our fortune and will enjoy tranquility. Year after year goes by, and we live!

In most shuls, the chazzan sings these lines in a slow, solemn, melancholy fashion. It is as if the thought of these potential fates is haunting, scary, but maybe not imminent. We hope we can hide from such fate, avoid it.

Yet, I was listening recently to the version of Unetaneh Tokef composed by Yair Rosenblum after the Yom Kippur War, as sung by Avraham Fried. You can find it on YouTube when it is not yuntif. In that version, the music that accompanies the word **מי יחיה ומי ימות** has one’s heart racing like that point in an action movie where you are caught off guard at a major turn of event. Something consequential is coming. It is dooming. The music here feels exactly like this year, when all is happening so fast and is so worrisome. We do not know from day to day what tomorrow might bring.

Here we are: **מי במגפה**? Who by plague?

One year ago, did we have any idea that a plague would alter our lives in every way possible? Did we have any idea that a plague would ensure that many dear, precious souls would die before

¹ Reuven Kimmelman, “U-Netaneh Tokef as a Midrashic Poem,” in *The Experience of the Jewish Liturgy*, 114.

– ותשובה, ותפילה, וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה – We can also find hope in the distinguished ending of teshuva, tefillah, and tzedakah will overturn the harshness of the decree!

There are two notes of hope that can be found in this passage. First, as my venerated teacher Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter explains, the decree may not be entirely overturned, but we pray the harshness of the decree be overturned. This is of particular relevance to us this year. *Mi-derech hateva*, as far as nature's course goes, the novel coronavirus will likely not disappear tomorrow no matter how hard we daven and how good our teshuva is. But there is some uncertainty in the positive sense: maybe it will mutate to be less dangerous and fatal; maybe we will discover a vaccine; maybe we will become increasingly adept in curtailing its spread; maybe we will adapt to the “new normal” in a manner that allows us to resume our routines with some peace of mind. Hashem can mitigate the harshness of this decreed disease.

Kimmelman further writes, “not only is everything not foreordained, we have a hand in the outcome.”³ Our repentance, prayer, and charity can play a role. Perhaps one will wonder if this is sufficient response to our crisis? Is that really what will make the disease disappear? My response would be, what else *can* we do? Our commitment to repentance demonstrates our sincere case that each extra year we have is a new opportunity to live better. Our prayer is one of our only tools in moments of great powerlessness. In merit of our having stayed home from shul when we needed it most, and in merit of many of us having returned to shul following protocol to ensure safety, may our prayers be accepted! And our charity at this time should be of help and assistance to those who were negatively impacted by the pandemic. May we have the wisdom to find those in most desperate need at this time and give what we can wholeheartedly. Additionally, we see in these three elements our relationship with ourselves (teshuva), our relationship with Hashem (tefillah), and our relationship with others (tzedakah). “Putting ourselves in order, repairing our relationship with God, and working on improving our relationship with others *help overcome our isolation*, cushioning the impact. By enhancing our capacity to withstand the vicissitudes of life, we are able to muster the fortitude to believe *this too will pass* (emphasis added).”⁴ May it be so!

Some have commented to me that as a young rabbi, I must be well prepared for the rest of my career. After this, it has been said, I can handle anything! While that sounds quite wonderful, I have to take it with a grain of salt, if only not to set myself up for disappointment. However, there is one thing that I have felt that COVID-19 prepared me for: nothing is certain. Plans can change instantly. It is therefore important to be agile; ready to adapt; flexible in accepting unexpected changes to the playbook.

But with that said, while there is some uncertainty, I still have hope that this year, at some point in 5781, we will find ourselves ready to experience Yamim Tovim as we love them, that we will launch new and enthralling programs that do not involve sitting in front of a screen, that everyone who is at home for davening will rejoin us safely, and that even with some recognition of uncertainty, we will return to a familiar pattern of life. Im Yirtze Hashem.

³ Kimmelman, 134.

⁴ Kimmelman, 137.