

Unataneh Tokef D'var Tefillah

Ada Beth Cutler

My grandchildren are at the age where they frequently ask, "Is this a true story, did it really happen?" Well, even grownups ask themselves that question sometimes. Are we to take the "Unataneh Tokef" prayer literally and believe that God knows and even decides by Yom Kippur who shall live and who shall die in the next year? That who will suffer, or descend to poverty, or be tormented in the coming year is preordained? And are we gullible, or rather human enough to want to believe that repentance, prayer and good deeds can keep us safe and alive? If we were to believe that, how could we reconcile it with the reality of the death of an innocent child let alone with the magnitude of the Holocaust?

I do not believe that is the lesson of this stirring piyyut. I do not believe in a vengeful God of judgment, and I do not believe being a good person can aid in averting any manner of disaster or mishap. I do not believe in a God who decides on or ordains the course of history or individual lives. Instead, I believe these powerful images help us see and take advantage of the awesome power and possibility of the High Holy Days, while remaining mindful of the fragility of life and the importance of how we conduct ourselves in life. Unataneh Tokef can even comfort us with the notion of an exalted, eternal God who is ready to embrace us and direct us toward meaning and menschlichkeit, a God who is waiting for our repentance with never-ending love and forgiveness.

Will some of us suffer in the coming year? Surely, yes. Will some of us die in the coming year? Sadly but surely, yes again. My friend Barbara figured she was going to die soon when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer seven years ago and she set about getting her affairs in order so she could die in peace. First one year passed after her treatment without a recurrence of the cancer and then another year. Barbara said she had an epiphany at that point. It was time to stop dying and just live because, as she puts it, she realized we are all dying. Some of us may have reason to know it will happen sooner rather than later, but regardless, all of us **are** going to die and for any of us it could be tomorrow as easily as it could be 20 years from now. Barbara has spent the last five years living life to the hilt- focusing on what gives meaning and joy to her life and loved ones. She, like many cancer survivors, now views her cancer diagnosis as a blessing, a turning point in her life that enabled her to give up her bitterness over an ugly divorce and the mental

illness of her son and appreciate her blessings. The cliché life is too short is so apt. In the spirit of the Yomim Noraim, the High Holy Days of Awe, Barbara took stock of her life, set herself on a more peaceful, more forgiving and more meaningful course, and is living her life to the fullest. I try to remember Barbara's wisdom and learn from it.

And then there is my friend Josh Stein z"l, who died ten days before Rosh Hashanah in 2012 after a valiant 18-year battle with cancer. I thought of him immediately when I began to prepare this dvar t'filah back in 2012 just two days before his death. I was acutely aware that Josh was going to die very soon and I knew how mightily he had bargained with God for more time. Who shall live and who shall die. He did not get one more Rosh Hashanah, but he eked out every ounce of life possible in his last years. Even in recent months, when no treatment was working anymore and he knew he was dying, he was determined to spend what was left of his time living to the fullest rather than dying. He had a constant stream of visitors while under Hospice care at home, including Chuck and me a few weeks before his death, and friends and family came again and again because Josh, although mostly bedridden, was cheerful, funny, erudite, gracious and grateful to all. Visiting him at his deathbed was sad, but it was also an uplifting, spiritual experience.

For many years, Josh sent a long list of friends, family, acquaintances and colleagues a weekly email on Friday he entitled Shabbatshalomagram. It was filled with his musings, news of his beloved Red Sox, his activities, and his opinions, but every week, he ended with the same words. They were, "As always I wish you a week filled with love and joy, peace and prosperity, good health and the wonder of discovery. Be strong and resolute, Haverim."

As we experience this God-given period of reflection, introspection, and repentance, may we all find a path that brings us closer to God, closer to our best selves, and may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. In Josh's words, I wish you a year filled with love and joy, peace and prosperity, good health and the wonder of discovery. Be strong and resolute, Haverim.

Shanah tovah u'mitukah to you and your loved ones.