

DRASH FOR UNETANEH TOKEF

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Tradition holds that the וּנְתַנֶּה תִּקְוָה prayer was written by a 11th century German Rabbi by the name of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz (pronounced Myintz) who lived during a time of great Jewish persecution. The Sefer Or Zarua, a 13th Century collection of halachic legal rulings and decisions based on Talmudic passages written by Rabbi Yitzchak of Vienna, explains that a local bishop demanded that Rabbi Amnon convert to Christianity. When he resisted, he was subjected to cruel punishment, to such a severe decree, that it was clear that he would die of his wounds. It was now Rosh Hashanah and Rabbi Amnon sensing that his life would soon be over, asked to be taken to the synagogue. When he arrived, the congregation was about to recite the kedusha and Rabbi Amnon asked the chazan if he could stop so that he, Rabbi Amnon could sanctify god's most holy name. He then addressed God by saying "may this sanctification ascend to you" inferring that with his severe suffering he had sanctified God's name. Then he began to recite the וּנְתַנֶּה תִּקְוָה which describes the awe of Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgement. He said the words - אֱמֶת אַתָּה הוּא דִין וּמוֹכִיחַ - true that you are judge and admonisher, the Rabbi accepting God's divine judgment. With the words וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֵר דִּינָם – and you recorded the decree of their judgements, he accepted his belief that his fate had been determined on Rosh Hashanah. As he finished the prayer, he passed away. Three days later he appeared in a dream to Rabbi Kolnymus ben Meshullam teaching this prayer and asking him to introduce it to all congregations as a testimonial and memorial for him. The rest, as they say, is history.

So what are the main ideas behind the Netana Tokef? The first section establishes the idea of God as King focusing on the balance between mercy and justice. The next part is the judgement which is complete as God has seen all our imperfections and knows every detail of everything we have done. But then we are reminded that Judaism is a religion of hope and that all is not lost if we engage in Tshuvah (repentance), tefillah (prayer) and Tzedakah (charity or giving to others). God will forgive us if we truly repent and engage in acts of lovingkindness. The prayer concludes with a reminder of how God is eternal and we, human beings, are fragile in comparison. Dust we are and to dust we will return, however God is life forever.

Given this unprecedented year, it is difficult to not reflect on perhaps the most recognizable part of the וּנְתַנֶּה תִּקְוָה which begins with these words: On Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die. And then the details. Who by sword? By fire, by water? By strangling? By stoning? Who by hunger and who by thirst? When I would read these words in the past I would think about how archaic they all sounded. These were certainly the types of deaths that were experienced in Jewish history but who died this way

today in our modern world, in the world that most, the great majority of Jews resided? But after the horrors of October 7th who can possibly hear these words and not think about that day when many of these unimaginable deaths, actually happened. When innocent people were murdered and tortured in so many horrific ways?

When reading this section two other questions haunted me. Who shall be tormented and who shall be at peace?

Who shall be tormented – survivors of 10/7? family members of hostages? families of fallen soldiers? families of wounded soldiers? anyone with family and friends in Israel? those with strong feelings of connection with Ahm Yisrael? The overwhelming majority of Jews worldwide?

Who shall be at peace? Is anyone in our community and anyone connected to the greater Jewish community worldwide remotely at peace at the moment? Is this terrible new normal ever going to subside?

And perhaps the biggest question of all is: who could have imagined that when these famous words of the וַיִּתְּנָה תְּקֵף were recited last year, they were really serving as a premonition of what was to come.

Dr. Daniel Gordis writes a fascinating multi-weekly Substack column called “Israel from the Inside” which I highly recommend subscribing to. He often looks at cultural happenings within Israel that reflect on the current moment. As of late he has been posting songs and interviews with poets and writers reacting to the post October 7th world in which they find themselves. Recently Gordis cited the late Leonard Cohen’s classic “Who By Fire” which took the וַיִּתְּנָה תְּקֵף and used it to quote “raise timeless theological questions” by rewriting the prayer. As Matti Friedman writes in his book “Who By Fire? Leonard Cohen in the Sinai,” Cohen’s inspiration for this song came about during the course of an impulsive trip to Israel during the Yom Kippur War during a low period in his life. He arrived in Tel Aviv, without anything, not even a guitar, but was recognized by a group of Israeli musicians who convinced him to perform with them at the front. His performance in Sinai and even across the Suez Canal in several locations were so meaningful to the soldiers. This experience served to turn Cohen’s life around in a highly positive way and he went on to release his 1974 album “New Skin for the Old Ceremony” in featuring “Who By Fire”. The inspiration for his song, in addition to Cohen’s time spent with the IDF, it turned out, was the וַיִּתְּנָה תְּקֵף prayer that Cohen recalled hearing as a boy growing up in an Orthodox Jewish family.

His song begins...

and who by fire, who by water,
who in the sunshine, who in the night time,
who by high ordeal, who by common trial,
who in your merry merry month of May,
who by very slow decay,
and who shall I say is calling?

Cohen stated that the line “who shall I say is calling” was his way of stating his experience of a break from faith in God. This song became a personal prayer for him because of his inclusion of this element of doubt. It is indeed interesting to reflect that he wrote this song after his experience of war in Israel. He was already in the midst of a personal crisis involving family life and career, but looking at the bigger picture of the continued existence of the State of Israel seemed to test his faith further.

After the current war began Gordis notes that an Israeli musician, Tzachi Gatzek, posted a reworking of Leonard Cohen’s song altering the lyrics to ask the questions that were plaguing Israelis.

It begins by listing many of the places where atrocities and abductions took place

...Who in Be’eri? Who in Kfar Aza?
Who in Kissufim? Who in Kibbutz Sufa?
Who in Ofakim? Who is dancing next to Re’im?
Who in Netiv HaAsara? Who at the division headquarters?
And then it asks the haunting question...
And who will have mercy on us?

It continues in a similar vein listing more places where atrocities took place and asking the difficult questions: Who will protect us? Who will call out in our name? Given the current reality on the ground it is difficult to listen without being completely overtaken by a feeling of despair. Wasn’t it enough for our brothers and sisters to suffer unimaginable horror on that terrible day? Now we have to deal with a politically ignorant and prejudiced world that can’t even recognize the most vicious terrorism against innocent civilians, if those civilians happen to be Jews or living amongst Jews. And of course, that is without even touching on the greater effect the war has had on the proliferation of anti-Semitism worldwide during this past year. Who will protect us Tzachi Gatzek sings? Only ourselves ultimately and we can never let our guard down again.

So where do we go from here? Today we have linked painful Jewish history from one thousand years ago to the present time and we have seen that in some ways, things have not changed for us. Our story is like the ocean tide with times of great persecution and hatred followed by times in which we think we have moved beyond being “the other” followed unfortunately by times in which we recognize that things have not changed for us at all.

However, the *תְּפִלָּה וְנִתְנָה תְּקֵף* prayer ends with a positive message. There is always a way out. If you have done negative things, all is not lost. Repentance, prayer and charity will help turn things around. As it says in Leviticus true teshuvah is when one is confronted with a familiar situation in which you made the wrong choice in the past, but this time you don't make that same mistake. So perhaps the bigger takeaway is that we hold onto the precious Jewish community that has become much more closely aligned in these difficult times. We need to recognize what we have as a united community, perhaps what we were close to losing and where we need to reinforce to ensure that future generations of our people continue to thrive despite many negative forces from without. This is what Jews have always done for thousands of years and this is what we must continue to do as we ask these unimaginable questions and look within to answer them as best we can with repentance, prayer and charity guiding the way.